

Restorative Circles

Restorative Circles, developed by Dominic Barter & the favela communities in Brazil, enables communities to choose a nonviolent response to conflict that involves the whole community in creating community spaces for conflict that are safe and constructive. RC does this by creating a forum through which communities dialogue with empathy thus enabling them to reach agreements that sustain effective and nurturing relationships, both interpersonally and throughout the different levels of society.

Supported by a specific dialogue format and guided by a facilitator, RC empowers conflicted groups to meet in a way that can create mutual understanding; invite self-responsibility; and support shared agreements. The dialogue process enables each person in the circle to be deeply heard leading to discovery of the shared meaning held within the conflict dynamic of the community. In this way individual as well as systemic causes of the conflict are brought into awareness.

RC has two elements: **I. Restorative System** and, **II. Conflict Process(es)**

I: Creating a Restorative System

A Restorative System (RS) is a dynamic, proactive set of agreements a community makes regarding how they would like to work with conflict within their community. These agreements are developed by people from all sectors of the community and outline in detail the processes and steps that will be taken when a conflict arises within that community. It is created in order to support and maintain integrity to the values that the community hopes to embody, even when facing challenging situations or when maintaining connection is very difficult, as happens during conflict.

Initiating a Restorative System

To begin developing a RS, explore the following questions with the whole community; or a representative group from the community (chosen by the community):

- a) What happens when conflict occurs in this community? What do you actually do?
- b) What works well in the ways that this community works with conflict? What does not work as well as you would like?
- c) What is your dream or vision of how you would like to see conflict handled in this community? What are the qualities and elements of your ideal conflict process that would need to be a part of your system?
Try to describe this in very concrete terms giving examples.

Once the 3rd question has been answered then a small team chosen from/by the community can take those answers and make them concrete. Once completed these guidelines for the RC process would need to be agreed to by the whole community (or all those participating in the RS) prior to initiating the system.

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II: Conflict Process (based on Restorative Circles)

The restorative system established by the community will determine what conflict process(es) (individual empathy, mediation, RC, etc) will be made available by the community for its members to utilize when conflict arises.

1. Summary of Three Phases of the Restorative Circle Process:

The Restorative Circle process consists of a series of three structured, sequential meetings or phases guided by a facilitator and using a specific dialogue format. These 3 meetings will happen separately often with days and occasionally even a week or two between each meeting.

A. Pre-Circle Phase:

In this phase the facilitator will meet with the various groups (including the wider community) impacted by the conflict separately to identify and listen to the meaning of what happened for the participants, and to clarify the dialogue process.

B. Circle Phase:

This is a meeting of all the various groups to the conflict together in a circle. There are three rounds of dialogue and each round has one guiding question (see below). Everyone in the Circle will be given an equal opportunity to speak their truth and to choose someone from within the Circle to hear them until they are complete.

Three Rounds of Dialogue

- i) *Mutual Comprehension* – In this part of the Circle each person speaks and is heard about how they are right now in relation to the conflict. This phase begins to enable people to talk about who they are and what is important to them, thus building a bridge of human connection.
- ii) *Self-Responsibility* – In this round each person shares the needs that were motivating them to act in the way that they did or the needs that led them to make the decisions they made about the conflict. This phase creates understanding between all participants regarding the deeper reasons and meaning behind their actions.
- iii) *Agreed Action* – In this section the Circle explores what they would like to see happen next in order to restore or create wholeness within this group. This often begins by each person offering some action that they are willing to do to restore what has been 'broken' (people, relationships). The end result of this round is a set of agreements that each person will accomplish in a given time frame. The focus here is on strategies that produce mutual benefit or collective well-being, and may offer some type of systemic response to the situation, not just an immediate response.

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C. Post-Circle Phase:

In this phase all the participants from the Circle meet again in a circle to revisit their agreed actions by exploring together: what actually happened since the Circle; the meaning 'what happened' has for each person; how satisfied we are with the consequences of 'what happened'/ our agreed actions. The purpose of this phase is to explore our satisfaction with what we have accomplished in transforming the conflict.