

Circle of Accountability



BEING IN CIRCLE OUTSIDE OF CIRCLE

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Peacemaking circles are a method of communication and problem solving derived from aboriginal and native traditions. This summary highlights how circles are used at Roca—a multicultural, youth, family, and community development organization—to open up new possibilities for empowerment through learning how to be accountable to themselves and their community.

“To be in a good way with yourself, is really to practice what you say in the circle.” (Vichey)

Sitting in circle has taught participants at Roca a great deal about the many kinds of accountability that young people and communities need to thrive. Justice requires accountability to self; to others; and to the wider community. The circle is about practicing a different “way to be” in the world based on values. Over and over being accountable for one’s actions is modeled within the circle process. Acting in a “good way” is understood as a gentle process of continually trying to be in “harmony” with others and self and continually trying to act in alignment with your values. Rather than a “state of perfection” used to castigate

and beat down young people, accountability becomes a part of everyday life as adults model their own daily struggle to be accountable to values.

In circle, the lessons of accountability have been demonstrated in concrete changes in behavior, attitude and interaction within the organization and within the community. The phrase, “being in circle” at Roca is less about the physical act of sitting in circle and more about a “way to be” in relationships with self and others. The more people sit in circle, the more they are aware of their own accountability for their actions.

Accountability Beings In Circle

One key element of accountability is practicing the values expressed in the guidelines. Most young people experience the “rules” of society as being imposed and enforced by adults. At school and at home they are generally told what to do or “else”. For young people, accustomed to being held accountable through threats and punishments, the first powerful lesson of circle is that it is up to them to follow the guidelines. In circle, the guidelines only “work” when people in the circle choose to “be” that way with each other: the circle is a place of respect if people are respectful; the circle is confidential if people preserve confidentiality; everyone will be heard if others listen. The achievement of the circle itself is a practice of accountability on the part of every person in the circle toward each other.

“So we created that gentleness and that place finally to a point where it was comfortable to talk to each other...”



“There’s already accountability in coming to circle...of how you’re gonna be...and there are all these values that you always have to hold and try to live by...so there’s already accountability there.” (James)



“What I have found when I have circles with young people is that when people don’t hold the guidelines, there is always somebody else to be like, “Well, we came up with this...” and they hold each other accountable and we’ve been able to take that and use it in the center.” (Victor)

An Incremental Shifts in Habits Outside the Circle

The circle is a place of support and non judgment but it is also a place where participants are gently challenged to be “who they really want to be”. The circle helps people in the change process because it helps them understand what they want to change about their lives and makes that statement within a group willing to help them. The circle gently holds people accountable to what they have agreed to do for themselves.

At Roca change is understood to be a process: one step forward and several steps back, the process of transformation is a gradual shifting of habits and patterns. It takes a great deal of support and encouragement and the circle offers that in a gentle way. As James says, everyone has responsibility in the circle and nowhere else do we offer that kind of help to people in the process of personal growth and change.

We have a young man...he is going through so much;he’s going through that change process right now. .He sat through a circle about three or four weeks ago...it was a circle about street life and the about difference between you and the street...what’s the difference, is there a difference...how can you make your community better. After the circle, he says, I have to change...I’m gonna get locked up if I don’t change..I know it, I... I have to go back to school, you have to help me get out of it...(Angie)

“And at the end of the day you know that the only person you can change is yourself”

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Only You...

I look at myself two or three years ago and I'm handling myself better and that's because of circles. And I know its ok now to live cause life can be positive and be ok and be allowed to make mistakes and forgive and forgive yourself...And at the end of the day you know that the only person you can change is yourself...I think circles have helped me understand that. (James)

This lesson, more than any other, has led to a profound shift within the organizational culture at Roca. Through being in circle Roca staff have realized that all they can do to influence others is to hold themselves to the values of the circle. In the past, Roca staff embraced a confrontational, in-your-face style of interaction with a variety of agencies in the community and, at times, with young people who were putting themselves in harms way. Yet the circle teaches accountability for ones own pattern of interaction with others and too often the values of respect, tolerance, understanding, compassion and listening were discarded in the passionate fight to defend young people. The lesson that one is accountable for one's conduct and that it is not possible to get to a good place through negative or disrespectful conduct profoundly affected Roca staff and their style of interaction within the community. This not a process that is

done once and for all, but a way of life: it means constantly working to "be in a good way" with oneself and with others. And by changing themselves they open a path for others to follow.

"Once you learn Circle values, you can't just go back"

The Real Challenge...

With hundreds of circles taking place within the organization, staff have noticed accountability to the values of the circles extends far beyond the physical space of the circle process. Young people are more respectful in their speech with staff and each other, more willing to own up to negative conduct, admit mistakes and listen to each other. Staff are aware of changes in their own behavior: they feel they are more patient, less judgmental, more disciplined about keeping their temper in check. Conversations among staff and with young people are more respectful, more joyful and appreciative of each other. For everyone concerned, the reason is the conscious awareness of being in circle when they are not in circle.

"I've seen young people learn how to be gentle with each other..."

I see young people being more respectful of others, more open to what others have to say...more patient. Circle is tied to a vision so people are thinking more about the well-being of everyone, interactions and dialogue is more respectful which usually leads to a positive conclusion. ...Something we try and promote among the youth is : if you guys see something that's not right, don't wait until an adult staff comes and says something, you guys can say it too cause this has to do with all of us. And I think the circle promotes that particularly because of the values that it holds, people go about it in a good way...they are holding each other accountable but they are also holding each other accountable with their values in mind...I don't want to say that circles brought that about but it started happening in the Center about the same time circles started happening. (Victor)

Checks and Balances

A key challenge for accountability is how to hold those in positions of authority and power accountable for their own behavior. Young people, as Sayra notes, have a keen sense of justice and injustice: they are quick to call people on things they see that are wrong. The frustration of witnessing injustice by those in power is a source of anger that is often dis-empowering leading to negative or self-destructive behavior. The circle process offers a way to speak the truth about injustice in a way that does not undermine the values of the circle.

When a young person in Project Victory asks Angie to arrange a circle with his teacher at school, he is using the circle as a healthy way to hold an adult accountable for his own behavior. The young man felt that the teacher treated him unfairly ignoring him and stereotyping him for his prior involvement in a gang. The circle offered a respectful way to share those feelings with a powerful adult in an environment where the young man believed he would be fully heard. It also offered a safe place for the teacher to acknowledge the young man's feelings without being attacked, accused or blamed. The "we" of the circle process and the recognition that everyone is accountable for a positive future, shifts the process from one of negative finger-pointing, and opens an avenue for mutual accountability.



Accountability Equals Transformation & Growth

Vichey's journey

At the age of 21, Vichey was charged and convicted of assault with a dangerous weapon. For this conviction, he served time in the Suffolk County House of Correction. In addition to the formal justice process, Vichey agreed to be accountable to himself and his community through a circle process. Before the sentencing hearing, Vichey participated in a series of circles to address the harm he had caused to others and to hold himself accountable to his victims and his community. Vichey's willingness to offer himself and his experience to others was a profound learning experience for all who witnessed his growth toward accountability for his actions. The capacity of people in circle to acknowledge the truth of harm and simultaneously support offenders with compassion and respect as they seek to make amends is the greatest hope for bringing restorative justice to the community.

A Different Justice

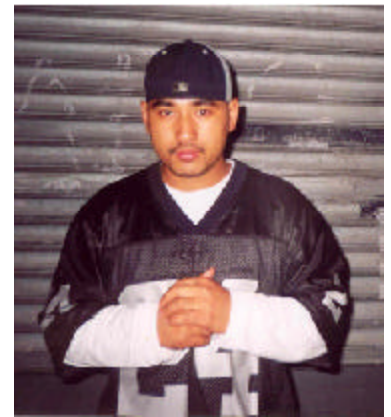
In its preparation work for holding court-related circles, the Community Involvement Project held a series of talking circles about harm. These began by sharing people's experiences as victims of harm opening up what it feels like to be harmed with each other. Then a talking circle was held which focused on what it feels like to cause harm to others. In these circles, people shared deeply about their own victimization from serious harm, to losing loved ones to suicide, to the guilt of causing harm, in some cases, serious harm, to others. It was only after these circles that the group turned to questions of accountability - how can we hold people accountable for harm in a way that does not itself violate the values of the circle? What does it mean to reconcile? What does it mean to forgive?

The capacity to partner with these agencies so that the response to young people who cause harm will not create more harm to them and the community is a long term goal and hope of the CIP. The criminal justice system - the police, courts, probation, the department of youth services, jails and prisons - are powerful institutions in poor communities. Most interactions between young people and the system are negative: young people fear and mistrust the police and police feel under-appreciated and isolated from the community. Roca has made huge strides in building trust and relationships with these agencies and building the capacity for a restorative justice response to crime in the community.

Accountability in the context of caring is an important part of the journey toward justice. Most offenders never acknowledge or fully comprehend the impact of their actions on others. Nor are they offered the kind of support that would give them the courage and the self-respect to stand up and be accountable to a community that passionately believes in them and wants them to succeed. For most people in our nation's jails and prison, punishment is a passive experience imposed on them by the powerful criminal justice system. Most feel only anger and resentment toward the system for punishing them; few feel responsible for what they have done. And few are given the opportunity or the means to begin to change.

For Vichey, his time in jail was a act of genuine accountability that has been part of a life-changing transformation. The circle opened a path toward healing and accountability that truly changed this young man's life. And his change has opened a path for many other young people to begin their own journey of healing and transformation.

"you know, I went to jail for what I had done...I done some pretty serious stuff" and he went into details..."and when I got to jail, I was the only person there who knew why I was there. I went to court, I didn't talk...the lawyers talked, the judge sentenced me....and I went to jail. And everybody in jail was either innocent or wrong place, wrong time. But nobody really owned what they did. I know what I did. I knew why I was there."



*I had a circle myself before I went to jail...circle didn't lessen my time or help my case. I was meeting with the circle just on my own and that is the circle I really didn't want to be in very much cause it was so hard... you yourself acknowledging the harm... what you've done and the need to talk about it...who I've harmed, what ripple effect it had...To be able to be in conversation about that stuff, then to understand and be aware, and then you yourself, hold yourself accountable.
(Vichey)*

***"I think circle helped me become who I am today."
- (Vichey)***