

## CHAPTER 1

# What Is a Corporate Circle?

*There are no problems we cannot solve together, and very few we can solve by ourselves.*

—Lyndon B. Johnson

*One does not discover new lands without consenting to lose the sight of the shore for a very long time.*

—André Gide

*In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity.*

—Albert Einstein

## Corporate Circles

**T**HIS BOOK INTRODUCES a method for resolving workplace conflict quickly and easily. It shows you how to hold a Corporate Circle – an effective, efficient and long-lasting way to resolve any corporate conflict. You will learn a step-by-step, proven strategy for creating conversations that resolve conflict, enhance trust and lead to mutually acceptable action plans for any difficult situation. This strategy can be used by executives, human resources people and managers in almost any group situation.

Each year corporations spend billions of dollars to try to resolve workplace conflict, yet many workplaces still harbor deep cultures of mistrust, where disputes are daily fare. Conflict surfaces as endless gossip, disagreements, uneasiness and disrespectful behavior. Unresolved conflict slowly erodes productivity and creativity and causes headaches at all levels of an organization. Although conflict is normal and can be productive, most is destructive and can cause a ripple effect across an organization. This is because most people avoid confrontation and are afraid to say what they really think.

Unlike other conflict resolution methods, Corporate Circles get to the real root of the problem – quickly. Through a candid conversation, the hidden rivers of lava that spark many volcano-like disputes are uncovered. In just a matter of hours, even the most dysfunctional group will be able to share opinions and perspectives and move past negative feelings, so they can begin to move forward.

This chapter describes what Corporate Circles are and how Circles can help you. At the end of the chapter is a list of questions and answers about Corporate Circles.

## What Is a Corporate Circle?

A Corporate Circle involves a group of people having a courageous yet compassionate conversation. Unlike other meetings, in a Circle participants feel safe enough to talk about what is really important. They are able to move past any bad feelings so the group can become truly productive. A group will usually hold a Circle for one of the following reasons:

- to deal with ongoing or repeated issues at work
- to resolve a dispute between two or more people
- to rebuild damaged workplace relations
- to create a more cohesive and effective team

During a Corporate Circle participants sit in a circle and discuss the problems that are occurring in the workplace and the difficulties they are having in relating with others. Each person is given an opportunity to speak openly and candidly. Participants share their perceptions, opinions and feelings. The group specifically discusses what has been happening, how best to repair any harm and how to prevent future conflict. Each issue is canvassed through open dialogue. The Circle ends with the group creating an action plan. Although a group can participate in more than one Corporate Circle, one is usually sufficient for groups of less than twenty people.

## How Corporate Circles Can Help You

The process sounds simple enough, but it can have powerful results. Using Corporate Circles in your workplace will help your organization do the following:

- transform conflict
- create trust and heal damaged relations
- build strong teams
- empower individuals and enhance personal accountability
- facilitate creative problem solving

Here are some of the reasons why and ways in which Corporate Circles achieve these results.

### *Circles Transform Conflict*

Circles are effective at transforming and not just resolving conflict for all of the following reasons.

- **All those impacted by a particular conflict diagnose and resolve the problem.** Conflict is rarely just a dispute between two people. Indeed, most workplace conflict is supported either directly or indirectly by many people. The most common support is through silence, or simply not acknowledging that there is a conflict. Therefore conflict can only be resolved effectively by the participation of everyone involved in or

impacted by it. This is the reason why so many two-person mediations fail. Even if these two people settle their differences, remnants of the conflict often linger that can be a catalyst for future conflict.

- **Hidden causes of conflict are disclosed.** Conflict is rarely what it appears to be. What you see on the surface usually does not reflect the deeper causes of conflict. These causes often emerge over a period of time and are completely unique to the individuals involved and the particular context. No two conflicts are identical. In a Corporate Circle, perceptions are uncovered and hidden issues are raised and resolved. This happens as the group begins to formulate a *shared understanding* about what is happening, how people are impacted, and why they respond in certain ways.
- **Emotions can be expressed safely.** Many people are afraid of emotions and do not know how to deal with them personally or in others. Thus they try to hide their feelings. This squelching of emotions causes people to bottle up their feelings, and although it may seem useful in the short term, this has the potential for exacerbating the situation. Often these feelings linger and impact behaviors long after an event. Most organizations do not support or encourage the open expression of emotions. We are all expected to be extraordinarily rational and objective. We are expected to check our emotions at the door, regardless of our so-called personal situation. Corporate Circles work because they pay attention to the emotional and psychological

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aspects of conflict. A key component of a Circle is to allow participants to express their true feelings, especially when negative. The process almost always results in an apology or two and recognition by everyone in attendance that people have feelings. In essence, it allows people to vent.

- **Participants learn how to resolve future conflict.** Because Circles allow whole groups to work together to resolve conflict, each person learns how their behavior impacts others so that future conflict is prevented or resolved without outside help. In other words, Circles empower employees to resolve future conflict. In addition, during a Circle each person learns many interpersonal skills. This happens by watching the facilitator and by actively participating in the dialogue. Each person has the opportunity to immediately practice the skills they are learning. These skills include empathetic listening, using the body to communicate understanding, staying silent, paraphrasing and mirroring, among others.

### ***Circles Create Trust and Heal Damaged Relations***

Many workplaces harbor deep cultures of mistrust. Without trust, workplaces become fragmented institutions where individuals are only interested in protecting themselves and their jobs. This lack of trust destroys cooperation, negates the possibility of teamwork, and ultimately interferes with the effective operation of any organization. Ann Coombs in her book *The Living Workplace* suggests that this mistrust

causes lethargy, absenteeism and a fear-based workplace. She believes that erecting a barrier between feelings and “real life” causes many of the problems and “[r]efusing to admit natural human feelings, and tolerating the negative on the grounds that it is the only way to survive, deadens the human spirit.”

The lack of trust comes from a loss of confidence in others or in the organization as a whole. It usually results from a number of situations that happen over an extended period of time. Sometimes the dissolution of trust is so slow and subtle that suddenly people wake up and realize they don’t trust anyone around them.

The only way to rebuild trust is to reestablish connections between co-workers and engage as an organization in activities that will demonstrate trustworthiness. Although this can take months and sometimes years, a Corporate Circle can speed up this process enormously.

The following analogy demonstrates the similarity between personal relationships and organizational relations in building trust.

**The piggy bank model.** Most relationships are like piggy banks. Each person in a relationship can make deposits or withdrawals from the relationship. Deposits are the activities that enhance a relationship. Withdrawals are activities that take away from a relationship. Like piggy banks, relationships can range from being full to being completely empty. If a relationship is full, it is resilient and can withstand a good number of withdrawals before it will begin to fail. If

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the relationship is empty, one or both people must make deposits to keep it nourished. Dysfunctional relationships are like empty banks. If neither person is able or interested in making a contribution, the relationship will remain cold and distant. Ideally you want to keep a high level of deposits in those relationships you value. Indeed, you probably do this naturally. If you want to reestablish an injured relationship, you must start by making a deposit, no matter how small.

In order to reestablish relationships and build trust you must do three things. You must communicate in some way with the other person, you must get over any hard feelings, and you must engage in activities that will rebuild the trust you have lost. All three things happen in a Corporate Circle.

The first step – opening up communication – is often the most difficult, and Corporate Circles provide a place where this communication can happen. Circles also allow for the processing of any bad feelings. In Corporate Circles individuals talk about the impact of events and actions on themselves and others. They stop blaming and develop a sense of empathy that enables them to appreciate how other people think and feel. As they become more open to other perspectives, they feel more comfortable describing their own. This level of comfort and safety builds momentum toward a new common understanding. This common understanding is the necessary foundation for building trusting relations.

The learning that occurs in the Circle extends well beyond the immediate discussion and often has a long-term impact. People tend to treat their colleagues better and in some situations begin to treat their families and neighbors better as well. Like the ripple effect of conflict, there is a positive ripple effect.

### ***Circles Build Strong Teams***

When people begin speaking to each other a number of things happen. First, people recognize others as fallible human beings – with needs and wants. Even individuals who do not like each other tend to relate on a fundamental level when they begin to converse. Second, by sharing information about themselves, they become more attractive and as a result others grow more curious. This curiosity and resulting understanding are the very things that build relationships and ultimately a sense of belonging. Without conversations, relationships are pretty much impossible.

As we learn about others we also begin to see a bigger picture and how we are connected at some level. This prompts a sense of caring and the entire relationship shifts. The relationship not only becomes more productive and easier but also more enjoyable.

### ***Circles Empower Individuals and Enhance Accountability***

The modern corporate structure is one of partnership rather than hierarchy. The older models of command and control are being replaced by systems that empower individuals and

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teams. Author David Gergen calls the new approach the influence model of leadership: “Instead of picturing a leader at the top of pyramid, we envision her in the middle of a circle with spokes extending outward. Instead of hurling thunderbolts from atop Mount Olympus, the new leader persuades, empowers, collaborates and partners.”

In this system every individual must become more responsible and accountable than ever before. Each must have a better understanding of their role in the group and their contribution to the organization.

This understanding is enhanced through a Corporate Circle. During these conversations, people sit in a circle where there is no top or bottom. Each person faces each other person and engages fully in a conversation with everyone else. They talk about what they do and how it relates to others in the Circle. Each person notices who is speaking and who is not. This causes shy people to step out and causes overbearing people to step back. It causes each person to be more accountable for their actions both in the Circle and outside the Circle.

There is no place in the Circle to be condescending or arrogant. The energy of a circle is by nature equal, and there is a natural tendency in a Circle to move toward harmony and balance. If one person tries to take control, the Circle responds in intriguing ways to neutralize that force.

**Real life.** Several years ago I was asked to facilitate two Circles – one to transform a long-term conflict among nine employees and the other to help the group design a strategy for moving

forward. The first Circle went very well and everyone participated actively. The group compiled a list of ideas to be discussed in the next Circle. In the second Circle the manager, who was somewhat outspoken, spent most of the first hour explaining the problems with each of the proposed ideas. Finally one junior employee spoke up and shifted the entire conversation, prompting all of the others to join in. She said, “Jim, you have been talking about the negatives for some time. It seems to me that whenever we suggest something you tell us why it will not work. Is it possible to just listen and keep an open mind to what we have to say?”

### ***Circles Facilitate Creative Problem Solving***

Because Corporate Circles provide a safe place for a conversation, creativity is permitted to surface and usually does. Through the course of the conversation people let go of their inhibitions – of saying something silly or offending others – and are more willing to canvass solutions that might not be articulated in a less safe place.

Near the end of a Corporate Circle, participants are asked to make suggestions about how to move forward. The ideas that pour out are amazing. This is partially because the group has engaged in a candid conversation and has developed a sense of security that supports risk taking.

This creative problem solving, like the improved employee relations, also has a lasting impact. By simply engaging in the process of a Corporate Circle, much like

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team-building exercises, people are more inclined *outside* the Circle to voice creative ideas. In essence, the group learns how to take risks.

By being part of a Circle, each person leaves with not only an experience of a powerful conversation, but also a confidence that these types of conversations can happen and are productive. Therefore, those who have been involved in a Circle will often suggest other ways to come together in conversation long after the Circle has passed. In other words, Circles foster more dialogue.

## Corporate Circles at a Glance

Here are some frequently asked questions and answers about Corporate Circles.

### ***What Is a Corporate Circle?***

A Corporate Circle is a meeting of a group of people who wish to resolve work-related issues or enhance working relations.

### ***How Does a Corporate Circle Work?***

During the Corporate Circle individuals share their thoughts, opinions and perceptions about what works, what does not work and how to make improvements. During a Circle many perceptions, which could be causing disagreements, are brought to light.

### ***What Is the Process?***

A facilitator is selected to manage the Corporate Circle process. The facilitator interviews those who are involved and selects those who will be in the Circle. A meeting date is set, the Circle is held, and the facilitator follows up afterwards. In some cases more than one Corporate Circle is necessary.

### ***What Happens at a Corporate Circle?***

At a Corporate Circle the group sits in a circle and discusses what is happening in the workplace and any current conflicts. Each person is given an opportunity to speak openly and candidly. Each is invited to describe what has been happening, its impact on them and what they would like to see happen in the future.

### ***What Types of Situations Are Most Appropriate?***

Work situations that benefit most from a Corporate Circle are those where conflict keeps arising, where old issues have not been resolved, where decision making seems impossible, or where recent events have damaged relationships.

### ***Who Should Attend the Corporate Circle?***

Any person who contributes to the effective working of the group or who is impacted by a situation or conflict should attend. This can include employees, managers, executives, CEOs and other stakeholders.

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### ***How Long Does a Corporate Circle Last?***

The length of a Corporate Circle depends on the nature of the situation and the number of participants. The facilitator will be able to assess the time needed after some initial interviews. A Circle usually lasts several hours.

### ***What Is the Role of the Facilitator?***

The facilitator's role is to help the group discuss issues and consider solutions while keeping the conversation on track. At the end of the Circle the facilitator will help the group work out the details of how things can be improved, usually in the form of an agreement.

### ***What Are the Results of a Corporate Circle?***

A successful Corporate Circle can have the following results:

- transform conflict
- create trust and heal damaged work relations
- build strong teams
- empower individuals and enhance personal accountability
- facilitate creative problem solving

The next chapters discuss how to create, prepare for and facilitate a Corporate Circle.