Circles of Change

By Tracy A. Thompson

ILLUSTRATION BY EDA AKALTUN

Lending circles, self-help groups, and study circles are all examples of one of the oldest and most effective tools for creating personal and social change. Although Circles offer many benefits, employing them effectively is not easy. Leveraging the potential of Circles requires a clear understanding of what they are and how they work.
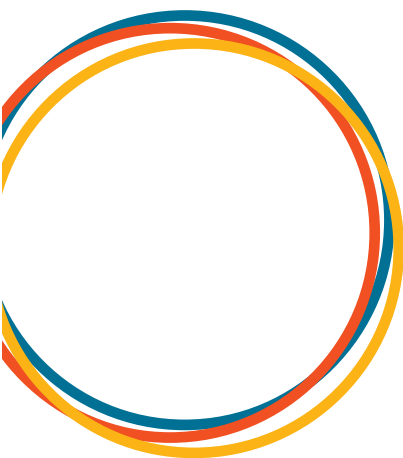
ne of the oldest, most widespread, and effective tools for creating personal and social change is the Circle. This organizational form is used for an array of purposes and appears under different names in a variety of contexts and cultures in countries around the world. In Sweden and Norway, study circles are an institutionalized part of the adult education system, with millions of participants coming together in small groups to learn and engage with one another. In the United States, millions of people form self-organized literature circles, otherwise known as book clubs. In Japan, hundreds of companies like Toyota and Honda invite employees to join quality circles, a kind of self-managed work team, to develop employees' talents and contributions and improve organizational processes and products. And in India, NGOs and banks regularly create lending circles to deliver financial services to the poor and to encourage community development.

Why are Circles so widely embraced? Because their very structure creates the conditions for personal and group growth and empowerment. As an archetype the Circle represents an ancient form of meeting that encourages respectful conversation. It stands in contrast to the Triangle, an alternative archetype of social interaction that reflects hierarchy and reminds people of their place within a power structure.

In a well-functioning Circle, members experience a strong sense of belonging, a compelling commitment to shared goals, a high level of accountability to themselves and to the group, a robust climate of joint problem solving and learning among peers, an intense feeling of involvement, and high trust relationships. Everyone sees herself as an equal part of the whole. The nonhierarchical nature that is the foundation of Circle interaction encourages every member to be a facilitator and a leader by sharing her knowledge and skills.

Consider the dramatic changes that a group of 20 women have undergone through their participation in the Saranayalaya Group in Pasumathur Village, Tamil Nadu, India. The current leader of the group, Krishnaveni, remembers an earlier time when many of the group members were hesitant to become involved in community

action programs because by tradition women were generally not supposed to come out of their homes without the permission of their husbands or parents. Now, after participating in a Circle, all 20 women are enthusiastically engaged in community projects. They have successfully lobbied for a number of projects to improve the village's infrastructure, including installing a bore well that supplies drinking water, paving roads in and around the village, installing trash cans on every street, cleaning public drains, separating drainage and drinking water, and constructing concrete platforms under village taps to prevent water stagnation. And by networking with similar groups in their area, they have organized a day when more than 250 villagers in the district receive eye checkups and medical treatment.

Circles such as the Saranayalaya Group are an attractive social technology because they offer a potential solution to what political economist David Ellerman has called the fundamental conundrum of assistance, namely the problem of how helpers can help doers in a way that doesn't override or undercut the ability of the doers helping themselves. All too often, attempts to socially engineer development at an individual or a collective level fail because the methods used override doers' or recipients' will and motivation. Helpers supply an answer, a service, or a program and do everything possible to motivate doers to follow the prescribed process. By externalizing both the motivation and the knowledge, however, helpers end up engaging in Triangle-like group interaction that overrides, rather than develops, doers' individual and collective abilities.

In contrast, interventions that are built on the archetype of the Circle harness the power of intrinsic motivation and the power of a group to develop knowledge and skills, to solve problems, and to take action. Although Circles offer many benefits to both individuals and groups, employing them effectively is not easy. Leveraging the potential of Circles requires a clear understanding of what they are and how they work. This knowledge can help those interested in implementing Circle technologies avoid the most common pitfalls that lead to failure.

WHAT ARE CIRCLES?

There are many types of Circles, and in such a pervasive phenomenon, there is a great deal of variation in how they are structured and operated. Nonetheless, four characteristics describe the purest forms of Circle interactions and distinguish them from Triangle-like interactions: egalitarian participation, shared leadership, group-determined purposes and processes, and voluntary membership.

Egalitarian Participation. The horizontal and collegial interaction of a Circle stands in contrast to the vertical and authority-driven interaction of a Triangle. In a Circle, people literally form a circle when they interact. Standing or sitting in a circle encourages conversational, peer-oriented, and respectful group dialogue in which members engage as equals. Often, Circles employ additional practices that further foster and reinforce these egalitarian norms, such as formalized systems for taking turns talking, reminders to listen without judgment, and methods for handling interpersonal

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conflict. Such practices help members to feel safe and to contribute, and they create mutual expectations for broad-based participation.

Shared Leadership. In contrast to Triangle interactions that vest leadership in one person by virtue of her authority, unique skills, or social power, Circles treat leadership as a set of functions that can be divided and shared. Moreover, Circles assume that these functions and the skills to execute them can be nurtured in any member. How leadership is developed, decentralized, and shared varies, depending on the particular Circle methodology being employed. Some Circle manuals present formalized practices to explicitly divide and rotate leadership into distinct roles, whereas others encourage leadership roles to emerge and rotate in a more informal fashion. (See "Guides to Creating Circles" on opposite page.)

Group-Determined Purposes and Processes. The egalitarian principles that underpin Circles mean that all members are viewed as having the capability to contribute in meaningful ways. In the most extreme case, Circle members collectively articulate and develop shared goals or purposes, determine how the group operates, and set the ground rules for group interaction, including how problems and conflict are handled. In other Circles, particularly those employed in microfinance, the group's purposes and process rules might be suggested by a third party, such as an NGO facilitator or bank employee. Even in those contexts, however, members are encouraged to own and modify these purposes and processes, for example, deciding how much money to save, what the repayment rules are, what constitutes delinquency, who gets loans, what the interest rates are, and the expectations for member interaction.

Voluntary Membership. Participants join Circles based on their interests and desires rather than being obligated, required, or forced to join by an authority figure. In Tacoma, Wash., women responded to fliers posted in the community and self-selected into one of seven WE-CAN Circles offered through an alliance of several nonprofit organizations. When forming quality circles, employers typically ask for volunteers. In other types of Circles, such as self-help groups and village savings and loan associations, participants are often invited to join by an NGO representative, family member, friend, or neighbor.

THE BENEFITS OF CIRCLES

Circles help individuals and groups to develop and exercise autonomy, helping them to solve their own problems and take action. But autonomy can be a loaded term, especially when we look across cultures. Autonomy is often seen as a Western concept that highlights independence and individualism, and thus it has often been assumed to be irrelevant in more collectivist cultures. But as Cigdem Kagitcibasi, professor of psychology at Koc University in Istanbul, argues, such a view confounds autonomy with separateness or individuality.

Autonomy is better thought of as agency, the degree to which an individual is able to engage in intentional and noncoerced action toward a desired outcome. The opposite of autonomy is heteronomy, where action is ruled or controlled from the outside and not willingly undertaken. Autonomy and heteronomy should not be confused with relatedness, the degree to which an individual sees herself as a separate

entity or, alternatively, as part of an undifferentiated whole, where the boundaries of separate selves are fused with others. Separating autonomy from relatedness allows for the possibility of autonomy in more collectivist cultures. Mila Tuli and Nandita Chaudhary, both at the University of Delhi, India, use the term "elective interdependence" to describe the intersection of agency and interdependence, and their work highlights the relevance and distinctive characteristics of autonomy as it occurs in more collectivist cultures.

Many Circles target the individual and her development. For example, in more individualistic, Western cultures, book clubs and study circles enable adults to take control of their own learning and education. Other kinds of Circles, such as Alcoholics Anonymous or Simplicity Circles, help individuals learn new ways of thinking, interacting, and making decisions by themselves. WE-CAN Circles focus on enhancing women's self-leadership, helping each to identify and overcome the barriers to her educational and personal goals.

In more collectivist cultures, Circles are used to empower women, but how women express and enact their autonomy may vary from their Western counterparts. For example, in the United Nations Development Programme's 2002 study of the impact of the South Asia Poverty Alleviation Program's interventions on women's empowerment in the southern states of India, women reported that through their experience in the self-help group they were able to exercise greater choice and control in a variety of areas of their lives—engaging in nontraditional employment-related tasks, visiting new places, traveling without male support, and having a greater say in reproductive choices such as the timing and spacing of children, use of contraceptives, and abortion decisions.

In addition to enhancing the autonomy of individuals, Circles also work to enhance the autonomy of groups. They encourage a group to identify and solve its own problems and in so doing, enable a group to produce better ideas, products, or programs. For example, many businesses leverage the intelligence of groups by employing quality circles, a kind of self-managed team whose focus is to work together to improve productivity and quality. Those interested in empowering disadvantaged groups and creating social change commonly employ Circles as a tool for community mobilization. NGOs and community organizers encourage the development of study circles as a means of helping groups develop novel solutions that address community-wide problems related to racism, the educational system, and health. Research on individual self-help groups like the Saranayalaya Group document how these Circles have overcome the constraints facing women to take action on social issues in their communities, for example starting a school, helping a community member in need, providing health care education, or closing down a local liquor outlet.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AND GROUP DYNAMICS OF CIRCLES

What happens inside a Circle that helps individual women such as Krishnaveni to change, or helps an entire group of women such as the Saranayalaya Group to take action in their community? Social psychological research on adult learning and group dynamics reveals two main mechanisms that lead to enhanced well being, development, and autonomy of both individuals and groups. First, Circles create the conditions where intrinsic motivation flourishes and offer individuals the support necessary for change, and second, they generate a group's collective capacity for action.

Two University of Rochester cognitive psychologists, Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, have long argued that all individuals have the potential to become more self-determined and that intrinsic, rather than extrinsic, motivation is a key ingredient to this process. Individuals are more likely to be intrinsically motivated to learn and change when they experience an environment that feeds three basic and universal human needs: relatedness (being connected to and experience caring for others), autonomy (voluntary, motivated action toward a desired outcome with a sense of efficacy), and competence (being effective in dealing with her environment). Circle processes help to meet each of these needs and in so doing foster both the motivation and ability to learn and change.

That is why the basic design of the Circle is so important. Having people stand (or sit) next to one another and treat each other as equals feeds universal needs for relatedness and connectedness to others. Moreover, a Circle's emphasis on conversational, respectful, peer-oriented dialogue enhances strong and trusting relationships among members. Building strong social connections and intimacy helps to sustain a person's engagement in the Circle, providing support for continued growth and development. In particular, the highly relational nature of Circle interaction explains why they are so effective with women.

Feminist adult education research shows that connectedness and relationship are central to women's learning. Methods that expand consciousness, encourage capacity for voice, and enhance self-esteem facilitate a woman's personal transformation to change her

Guides to Creating Circles

There are several resources available to help people create a Circle.

WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP: The WE-CAN Circles are based on the Berkana Institute's Women's Circle Starter Kit, an instructional resource that includes a how-to manual, discussion topics, inspirational videos, books, and articles on women's leadership. www.berkana.org

MICROFINANCE SELF-HELP GROUPS: India's National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development provides a handbook for how to start and run a self-help group. http://www.nabard.org/pdf/publications/manuals/formingshgs.pdf

COMMUNITY CHANGE AND STUDY CIRCLES: Everyday Democracy (formerly the Study Circle Resource Center) offers a number of downloadable guides for forming Circles. http://www.everyday-democracy.org//en/HowTo.aspx

ORGANIZATION CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT: *The Circle Way: A Leader in Every Chair,* by Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea (Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc., 2010), describes the basics of Circle processes in groups, illustrating how they can be used to flatten hierarchy and increase collaboration in formal organizations.

life. According to Elizabeth J. Tisdell, a professor of education at Pennsylvania State University, women learn best when their own learning is connected to the learning of others—that is, when they get the chance to understand other women's perspectives and build on one another's ideas rather than only being told what to do. When asked about her WE-CAN Circle experience at the Tacoma Urban League, Tina (one of the women in the WE-CAN Circle) stated she most appreciated "the support [I] felt, the ability to share with others who were willing to actually listen and not tell me what I should do or who would overwhelm me with their own problems. Everyone shared and everyone listened." Women, in particular, value and respond to learning contexts that not only offer opportunities for connected learning but also foster personal and meaningful relationships.

The relational dynamics of Circles transcend both gender and culture. In Egypt, Sekem, a complex organization composed of biodynamic farms, food trading companies, a medical center, and schools, regularly employs Circles where male and female employees discuss what happened the previous day or week and what the plans are for the current day or the next week. By transforming the economic, social, and cultural reality of people living in nearby communities, Sekem's ultimate goal is to change Egyptian society to be more sustainable, equal, and just. Sekem uses Circles as a subtle but powerful socialization tool for fostering new norms and beliefs around punctuality, planning, and equality.

Ibrahim Abouleish, Sekem's founder, explains the relational dynamics generated by employees standing side by side and holding hands, regardless of gender or position, and how that leads to greater respect for others, self-efficacy, and a sense of personal responsibility. "The Circle is a very social form," says Abouleish. "We form a circle and people can see each other. But the equality and the equal opportunity is something we have been missing for a long time in this culture. Not everyone here is having comparatively equal opportunities—girls and boys, women and men. Also there are all levels of workers standing together in a circle so that they can experience that they are equal. Equality is very, very important for everybody in order to feel their dignity as human beings. I see people in Egypt—they go to their offices and to their companies without having experienced that dignity."

Circle interventions not only create a strong sense of connection, they also foster autonomy and independent action, a second factor that leads to the intrinsic motivation necessary for lasting personal growth and change. Membership in a Circle is voluntary. Although a tacit, social obligation to participate may emerge as a result of the relational dynamics, no one forces, tells, or provides external incentives for an individual to join a Circle, to talk in the Circle, or to commit to a new action or behavior. Psychologists have long known that voluntary decisions and commitments are a much stronger means of changing behavior than are those that are imposed from the outside. In addition, it's a lot easier to learn from one's peers than from being told by an "expert" what to do, how to think, or what the solution is. By design, Circles employ autonomy in a way that allows members to learn how to take action in forms that are culturally relevant and meaningful to them.

Circle practices also foster intrinsic motivation to learn and change, by feeding the universal need for competence. In Circles, the members share a purpose, and together they work to achieve that purpose. For example, microfinance self-help groups almost always incorporate training to help women master rudimentary business skills and knowledge, including learning how to sign one's name, how to evaluate business ideas, and the concepts of savings, interest, and loans. As they discuss their work together, members discuss problems and, over time, they begin to experience success in their efforts.

Geeta Prajapati's experience in her self-help group in a village in Uttar Pradesh, India, illustrates these dynamics: "Before I joined the samooh, I had no idea about banks and paperwork. I was scared to go there. But I have learnt through the samooh. Now when I go to the bank, the manager tells me to sit down and asks what work I have. I have taught the other women how to handle the work. I went with them for the first few times and showed them what to do. Now they handle it themselves without problem."

In addition to generating the intrinsic motivation that leads to individual well being, growth, and change, Circle dynamics empower groups to take action. The strong interpersonal ties and the encouragement of self-determination foster a group's belief that it has the collective power to produce desired results. Circle practices enhance a group's capacity to act. Social movement theory argues that a group's capacity to act depends in large part on the group having shared interests, a strong social infrastructure, and effective processes for mobilizing and using needed resources. (A fourth factor, a supportive political and economic environment, is environmental in nature and not directly influenced by Circle interventions.) Through the dialogue of a Circle, members identify and discuss their common interests. As they work together to articulate issues and develop their intentions, the group develops social capital. Such strong, trusting ties between members enable the sharing and deployment of resources, knowledge, and effort needed to take action on social issues in the community. Developing and strengthening social capital, in particular by increasing the trust in horizontal networks that extend beyond the constraints of family, gender-based, and other institutionalized patronage ties is an important component of enhancing the collective power of disadvantaged groups.

LEVERAGING THE POWER OF CIRCLES

Circles offer a seductive promise. Who wouldn't want to employ a method that helps others to help themselves? As with any other highly attractive practice, however, Circles run the risk of falling prey to exaggerated expectations that fuel their unthinking adoption. Indiscriminate and incorrect application of Circle practices can lead only to disappointment. To avoid these problems, Circle design should be contingent on the nature of the desired objectives and the people involved. One should also be aware of the typical dysfunctional patterns that can destroy a Circle's effectiveness and be realistic about the resources needed to establish and sustain a Circle.

One of the most important issues to consider when designing a Circle is the composition of the Circle's membership. Although an individual's decision to participate is voluntary, the invitation to participate is determined by the person or entity sponsoring the

Circle. In combination with the cultural context, the composition of a group shapes how members are likely to interact and therefore influences the implementation of additional design elements needed to create healthy Circle interaction. In general, Circle behaviors are harder to create in cultural contexts characterized by hierarchy and authoritarianism, which are manifested by the presence of unequal gender relationships, rigid caste distinctions, and well-defined socioeconomic status orderings. These sorts of dynamics are why many NGOs place great emphasis on forming women-only, single-caste, or equal income self-help groups in Southeast Asia and elsewhere. Even when some of these factors are considered, groups still run the risk of being "captured" by elite interests, where a member, often the group leader, is able to dominate the group.

The cultural and institutional context and the desired objectives are also important considerations in designing a Circle. Some Circle practices maximize the degree of egalitarian participation, shared leadership, and group-determined purposes and processes, whereas others mix in more Triangle-like design elements. For ex-

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ample, participation in Sekem Circles is voluntary, but the purposes and the processes are determined by management, and the most senior person present runs each Circle's discussion. Incorporation of Triangle-like design elements is appropriate given the goals of the Sekem Circles and their more subtle use as a socialization tool to encourage greater personal responsibility, punctuality, and respect for others in the workplace.

One also needs to pay attention to the process and group dynamics that emerge during the Circle's formation and development. Triangle dynamics are pervasive in human interactions, so the roles that Circle organizers and facilitators play need to be carefully monitored. Circle facilitators need to be acutely aware of how easily Triangle behaviors can slip in. The helper-doer relationship is rooted in Triangle logic. It implies that helpers have more knowledge and skills than the doers or are superior in some way. Because they are helpers, facilitators run the very real risk of becoming a needed expert or source of information. In such a situation, the knowledge and skills needed to run and sustain the Circle are externalized, and Circle members never develop the competence and skills to solve problems themselves.

Ford Foundation program officer Ajit Kanitkar's research on self-help groups in India provides a good example of the tendency for facilitators to become experts and the importance of training to overcome those tendencies. In an experimental effort to increase the speed and frequency of self-help group formation, the NGO Pradan selected eight "promoters," local members of the community who had one to two years of experience in successful self-help groups. The promoters, who were believed to be conversant in group dynamics and have good communication and organizing skills, were given

one day of training. The promoters, however, had difficulty letting go of Triangle-like behaviors, which had negative consequences for the Circles. For example, the promoters would correct an accounting mistake themselves rather than explaining the mistake to the group's accountant and getting her to make the correction. Pradan ended up canceling the program, concluding that additional training and monitoring would be needed.

The detailed training manuals and handbooks that accompany Circle practice represent attempts to codify the skills and information necessary for ensuring that facilitators and internal leaders don't become the sole expert. They also attempt to help groups develop ways to discuss internal group dynamics so that problems can be openly discussed, even in the face of resistance by some members. Susan Johnson and Namrata Sharma's longitudinal research on the challenges faced by microfinance groups in Kenya reveals the power of participatory training materials that can be used by facilitators and even group members themselves.

In one mixed-gender group, the male chairman dominated meetings and the treasurer had misappropriated group funds. Initially, members reported being unhappy with the leaders, saying there was a misunderstanding between them, but they were clearly uncomfortable talking about the issues. Over time, more people began attending the meetings, and at the meetings members were questioning other office bearers on the status of accounts in the group. By the end of the study, the members were explicitly using one of the provided training tools for assessing leadership qualities, and they had their first election. After being taken to the local chief, the treasurer was made to sign a contract to repay the money he misappropriated. Group attendance and participation had dramatically increased, and the group had moved beyond borrowing from the NGO to develop new practices, such as mobilizing their own funds and lend them out and instituting a policy of pledging assets before giving out a loan. The participatory training materials clearly helped the group to evolve into a better functioning Circle, one that has a greater chance of thriving over time.

As these examples show, Circles are not a quick and easy way to create personal and social change. The inherent problems in helping others to help themselves and the degree to which many human interactions are guided by the Triangle make Circles difficult to engineer. The hallmark of a true Circle is that it is self-sustaining. Instilling Circle practices that truly generate—not override, deplete, or destroy—autonomy requires a great deal of sensitivity, support, and skill. Competent facilitators and participatory training manuals can help a group to embrace the egalitarian norms and behaviors of Circle interaction. But as the examples above illustrate, the explicit and tacit knowledge and behaviors required for effective Circle functioning do not necessarily come quickly. Creating effective Circle interventions takes time and dedication, particularly with populations that have few resources of their own to sustain them. Although challenging to design and implement, Circles remain a promising social intervention for creating personal and social change. ∎