

# Diversity Dialogue Circles: A Strategy for Building Bridges and Nurturing Change Agents

by

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**Background:** Diversity Dialogue Circles (formally known as *Diversity Tables*) were developed during the spring of 1991 by Angelo John Lewis with the support of a twelve-person planning committee at Princeton University. They have since been used at a range of institutions that include AT&T, the American Association of University Women, Creighton University, Hoechst Celanese (Summit campus), Pennsylvania Protection and Advocacy, Princeton University, and the New Jersey Supreme Court Task Force on Minority Concerns, and as part of both ongoing organizational development initiatives and one-time teambuilding or workshop activities. Diversity Circles' impetus is the belief that any structural change aimed at addressing inequities involving diversity is best accompanied by an attempt to nurture the climate for diversity, and, as such, involve as many people as possible in an ongoing non-didactic dialogue about the various issues of diversity, such as those involving race, gender, homophobia, class, ageism, and ableism.

Diversity Circles themselves are open-participation discussion groups in which participants are encouraged to speak in a heart-to-heart matter about their own experiences of diversity. To stimulate personal, non-intellectual dialogue, one central "rule" is observed during the course of the discussions: Participants are encouraged to speak, insofar as possible, from their own experience of the topics at hand, rather than presenting theories, ideas or generalizations about diversity. A secondary, and more subtle rule, is that the format of the Diversity Circle should be geared exclusively to generating discussion; it should not be structured in such a way as to be a problem-solving or goal-setting forum. (However, Diversity Circles can and should be used to precede problem-solving sessions and will enhance their effectiveness). Other guidelines for dialogue are generated by the group. Reviewing the guidelines or norms often precedes the actual Diversity Circle. Sample additional guidelines include: "Listen and speak without assumptions," and "Focus on the learning: yours and the group's."

The format is simple. Each discussion is facilitated. Optionally, people with special experiential expertise on the subject of a particular Circle are invited to begin the discussion. To encourage maximum involvement in the process (and to symbolically signal commitment to seriously engage in honest dialogue), some institutions ask participants to contribute a modest fee, which can be waived for any economic reason. At the conclusion of each Circle, participants discuss 1) the process aspect of the preceding dialogue session, e.g. how did it feel to participate? did we observe the ground rules? what might we have done better? and 2) leftover issues or clarifications regarding the content of the session, e.g. did you mean to say x or did you mean to say y? and 3) the implications of the preceding dialogue session for the organizational or community situation. Participants ideally should represent a broad, cross-section of the organizational community, but can be representatives of a particular group (such as a diversity task force). Circles have been constructed around topics that include race, class, age, gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity and identity.

## Diversity Training, Dialogue, Diversity Circles

Diversity Circles are distinct from Diversity Training efforts, which are and will likely continue to be the linchpin of most diversity-driven organizational development initiatives. They are a type of "dialogue" group, a term recently brought into prominence by quantum theorist David Bohm and learning organization theorist Peter M. Senge. According to Bohm, dialogue groups share three basic conditions:

1. all participants must "suspend" their assumptions, literally to hold them "as if suspended before us";
2. all participants must regard one another as colleagues
3. there must be a "facilitator" who "holds the context" of dialogue.

The difference between Diversity Circles and other forms of dialogue methodologies is the use of experiential-based conversation, or personal storytelling, as a means of organizing the discussion.

In addition to their use as an organization-wide community building activity, Diversity Circles work especially well as a pre-meeting activity for Diversity Task Forces. This is likely because they accelerate the process of group learning and provide participants a safe space in which to explore the rich, complex, and at times ambiguous nature of the diversity challenge. As has also been shown through the practice of dialogue in other settings, pre-meeting use of Diversity Circles enhances the quality of decision making while promoting group cohesion.

## **Diversity Circles: Procedures (Basic Form)**

1 -- The moderator greets participants, introduces guest speakers (if any), and explains the "golden rule" of the diversity circle: i.e. s/he asks participants to speak from their own experience rather than from a theoretical, hypothetical, or intellectual point of view. Additional norms are suggested, e.g. that the group seek the next level of understanding about the topic raised and/or that assumptions be temporarily put aside. If the facilitator is working with a group that is meeting for the first time, s/he may alternately begin by helping the group establish its own guidelines or norms. These may be revisited and revised periodically by the group and altered, as appropriate.

2 - (Optional) If the group is sufficiently small, the moderator asks everyone around the circle to introduce themselves, perhaps saying something about their experience with the topic. As an additional option, the group may begin by reviewing its guidelines or norms.

3 - The facilitator begins the dialogue session by some clear means of marking the passage from regular conversation to dialogue. This might consist of a moment of silence, a period of reflection, or many other means.

4 - After the opening (see accompanying article, "Forging the Container."), the moderator continues by relating something of his/her own experience with the topic or by reading a relevant quote related to the topic.

5 - If speakers are present, they share their experiences with the topic.

6 - The moderator inaugurates open discussion by asking anyone who wishes to respond to an open-ended question about the topic, i.e. a question that invites a reflexive, rather than yes- no answer.

7 - The moderator introduces additional open-ended questions, as necessary.

8 - At the conclusion of the event, the moderator sums up the points that have been raised. S/he then closes the dialogue in some way, perhaps by simply declaring that the dialogue session is concluded.

9 - After the Circle is over, participants debrief a) process, b) content and c) implications. Process has to do with feelings about the process of participating in the Circle; content refers to leftover, clarifying questions about the content of the discussion; implications refers to the shared, group-level meaning of the dialogue circle for the life of the committee, organization or shared community.

10- (Optional) The group is given a simple homework exercise, e.g. asked to have lunch with someone of another ethnicity or sexual orientation.

11 - (Optional) After the Circle concludes, the group moves on to its regular business and decision making agenda.

## **Diversity Circle: Variables**

**TIME:** 30 minutes to 1/2 hours. Generally, at least an hour. An experienced group can conduct a dialogue session in less time

**SETTING:** Ideally, participants should sit around an empty circle, although seating around a table is an alternate arrangement. The dialogue circle may take place after a shared meal.

**NUMBER  
OF  
PARTICIPANTS:**

6-40, although around 8-20 is optimal. Larger groups can be accommodated by using several facilitators and breaking the larger groups up into smaller "circles" after the opening presentation. After the individual groups meet and go through a pre-planned series of open-ended questions, they are brought back into the larger group for summing up and closure.

**TYPES  
OF  
PARTICIPANTS/  
SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS:**

The circles can be used by task oriented groups, such as diversity task forces, or by an entire organization as a community-building exercise. Circles are also effective as "one-shot" activities that serve as community-building activities during conferences or other special occasions. If used as an ongoing community-building activity, an effort should be made to attract a cross-functional group that cuts across hierarchical and/or class lines.

ADMISSION

& FEES: The group is self-selected, i.e. anyone who wishes to come may come. A fee to cover costs may be requested.

## *References*

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