

Concentric Circle Arrival Exercise

“The Circle of Friends”

The Circle of Friends is symbolic of working together for a common goal and the strength derived from an inclusive and welcoming learning community.

Concentric Circle Arrival Exercise Process Guidelines

“Your opening needs to be a kind of pleasant shock therapy. It should grab people. And in grabbing them, it should both awe the guests and honor them. It must plant in them the paradoxical feeling of being totally welcomed and deeply grateful to be there.”

Introduction

The “Concentric Circle Arrival Exercise” outlines an introductory group process to allow the students on the first day of a course to meet and introduce themselves to their fellow students. In many situations, the students enter a group where they meet several fellow students for the first time. For work teams, the arrival group process facilitates a deeper connection with work colleagues. The process allows the group to meet the program facilitator(s) and this may also be the first time that they are meeting the group leader(s).

This process initiates the participants’ orientation to the program content and the learning objectives for the program. The process supports the transition from one’s personal life to arrive at the beginning of the day ... to become fully present and ready to engage in a day of learning with peers (Kabat-Zinn, 2005).

The process initiates the establishment of connection and the building of group trust in the “forming stage” of group development (Charteris, et al., 2024; Cohn-Vargas, et al., 2021; Agazarian, Gantt & Carter, 2020; Gibb, 1978; Tuckman, 1965).

Group members have a desire for acceptance by the group and need to know that the group is safe (McQuaid & Williams, 2023; Birmingham, et al., 2022). The arrival process engages the group participants to co-create an inclusive and welcoming learning community (Phillips, Melim & Hughes, 2020; Taylor & Dearybury, 2021; Reinstein, 2006; Schweitzer, et al., 2004). Each participant gathers impressions about the similarities and differences among themselves and to see how they “fit” into this new group and what each participant may contribute to the conversation and the learning. At this point, group members are dependent on the group leader(s) for guidance and direction as they get oriented to the program and its goals.

The arrival exercise process begins the creation of the learning community that is nurtured by an emerging group sense of belonging, inclusion, and psychological safety which stimulates everyone’s innate curiosity and the

desire to learn (Boyd, et al., 2024; Cohen, 2023; Plett, 2020; Edmondson, 2019; Garrison, 2015; Donohoo, 2013; Kolb, 2014).

Equipment

- Name tags for the participants.
- Power point and LCD projector.
- Flipchart and markers (optional and supplemental).
- Online music selection (iTunes or Spotify) with speaker or boombox with CDs.
- Chimes or bell.

Group Size

The ideal group size is 12-30 participants.

Time Required

30 minutes.

Attention to the Learning Environment

Arrange physical space to support the purpose of the session. Ideally, the group sits in a circle. The circle process is a gift to us that has its origins in indigenous cultures from around the world. The circle has served as an archetypal and foundational method that has brought individuals together to discuss their different points of view, problem-solving, and reach consensus on decisions and to move forward on decisions (Pelech, et al., 2016; Starhawk, 2011; Baldwin & Linnea, 2010).

Consider how you can enhance the physical setting of the space where your program will take place. Is the room large enough for the group to comfortably move around. Does the space allow for small breakout groups, physical movement, and other interactive activities? Ideally, the room has windows allowing sunlight and/or full-spectrum lighting which is more conducive for a calming environment (Morrow, 2018).

Consider bringing a tapestry for the registration table and perhaps a vase of fresh flowers. I have used one or two inspirational quotes to post on the walls in the meeting space (Jackson, 2001).

Have fun sharing a small selection of toys and interesting objects to engage tactile and playful interaction (e.g., koosh balls, Huberman domes, slinkies, etc.). Spark your creativity in thinking about how small things you can do that can enhance a welcoming environment (Erwine, 2016; Kestly, 2014; Sternberg, 2010).

A Note About Music

Music and soundscapes provide a background atmosphere to nurture a holding environment containing and supporting a variety of moods, energetic states that include relaxation, focus, creativity, vitality, self-reflection, equanimity, optimism, and joy (Sunderland, et al., 2017; Urista, 2016). Consider creating a selection of diverse music styles and genres.

I play soft music (e.g., classical pieces or ambient selections) at the very beginning of a session as participants enter the room. Soft music contributes to a warm and welcoming environment. Recall how you felt entering a sterile classroom flooded with fluorescent lighting, with no windows, with the desks and chairs in rows and all you can hear in the background is the hum of the HVAC system ... in the next few moments you would hear the noise of a group of students, many of them strangers to you and to each other entering the room ... waiting for the teacher to arrive ... who eventually showed up ... ten minutes late ... apologized ... quickly introduced themselves ... and then jumped immediately into their lecture presentation and PowerPoint ... this is the opposite of a welcoming and mindful arrival process!

For the Concentric Circle Arrival Exercise, I use upbeat music. My favorites are “Sway” by Dean Martin; “I Feel Good” by James Brown, and a variety of Beatles music always works well. Play your favorite selections!

The Focus Questions

“Human systems move in the direction of what we deeply and persistently ask questions about.”

David Cooperrider – Thought Leader in Appreciative Inquiry

For the Concentric Circle Arrival Exercise, I present no more than six focus questions.

Here is a list of the “standard questions” that I use for various workshops, courses, staff orientation programs, staff meetings and retreats, strategic planning sessions, and any other group learning event. Add your own questions to the list! Tailor the questions for the event. See a list of focus questions (pp. 12-13).

- 1 What did you need to re-schedule or “let go” to participate in today’s program?
- 2 What aspect of your work/life is currently consuming most of your time and energy?
- 3 Do you have a learning goal or expectation for today’s program?
- 4 What are the necessary ingredients of a successful learning experience for you personally?
- 5 This will be a meaningful learning experience for me if I achieve ...
- 6 Is there anything you want to avoid today?

The Concentric Circle Process Flow

“When we hold space for other people, we open our hearts, offer unconditional support, and let go of judgement and control. We show we are willing to walk alongside another person in whatever journey they’re on.”

1. Introduce the purpose of the “Concentric Circle Arrival Exercise” to the participants. Describe how this activity will involve the creation of two concentric circles of all the participants standing in the center of the room.
2. Invite each participant to find a partner and form a Dyad. They will introduce themselves to each other.
3. Ask one participant in each Dyad to be “#1” and the other partner to be “#2”.
4. Invite all the “#1 participants” to come to the center of the room and form a circle.
5. Ask the “#1 participants” to turn around and face outwards.
6. Now, ask the “#2 participants” to get up from their chairs and join their “#1 partner.”
7. We now have two concentric circles. If there is an uneven number of participants, there will be one group of three.
8. Each Dyad will have 3 minutes to discuss Question #1. Here are two questions for you to consider:

What did you need to re-schedule or “let go” to participate in today’s program?

Why did you choose to register for this program?

9. Provide the group with a “30 second warning” to wrap-up their conversations and then ring a bell or chimes to bring the large group back.
10. Now ... inform the participants that in a few moments they will hear some music that will start to play. When they hear the music, the inner

circle participants will walk in a “clockwise direction” while the outer circle participants will walk in a “counterclockwise” direction. When the music stops, they will have a new partner.

11. The new Dyads respond to Question #2 on the power point. They have 3 minutes for their discussion.

What aspect of your work/life is currently consuming most of your time and energy?

12. Provide the “30 second warning” ... ring the bell and then re-start the music ... when the music stops ... everyone now has another new partner. They have 3 minutes to discuss Question #3.

Do you have a learning goal or expectation for today's program?

What are you hoping to learn in this program?

13. Provide the “30 second warning” ... ring the bell and then re-start the music ... when the music stops ... everyone now has another new partner. They have 3 minutes to discuss Question #4.

What qualities support a sense of safety, belonging, and learning for you in a group context?

Is there anything you want to avoid today?

14. Provide the “30 second warning” ... ring the bell and start the music ... when you stop the music ... everyone now has another new partner. They have 3 minutes to discuss Question #5.

What are the necessary ingredients of a successful learning experience for you personally?

This will be a meaningful learning experience for me if I achieve ...

15. Provide the “30 second warning” ... ring the bell and start the music ... when you stop the music ... everyone now has their final partner. They have 3 minutes to discuss Question #6.

How does the work that you do connect to your core values?

What experience, skill, or aspect of yourself do you bring to this group as a gift right now?

The last Dyad will have 3 minutes to discuss the sixth and final question.

Closing and Group Processing

When all the participants return to their seats ... the group is usually quite energized and there is often a lot of laughter in the room. In the plenary discussion I ask the following questions ...

“How was that?”

“Any surprises in your discussion?”

Participant Introductions

Following the “Concentric Circle” group discussion, I invite the participants to introduce themselves to the group.

- Share Your Pronouns.
- Who are you?
- Describe your recent journey that has brought you to this point in your life?
- What are you looking forward to in this course?

Group Agreements and Participation Guidelines

Following the “Concentric Circle Arrival Exercise,” the teacher will introduce the Group Agreements with collaborative input from the group members. These agreements, often referred to as “group norms” provide participation guidelines and will define the values and principles that serve as the foundation of a welcoming learning environment that supports psychological safety and transformative learning (Nelson, et al., 2020; Plett, 2020; Uneman, et al., 2020; Edmondson, 2019; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009; Dirks & Ferrin, 2001).

Learning Outcomes

Following the Group Agreements, we typically introduce the Program Agenda for the course or workshop. This is followed by introducing the Learning Outcomes and then it is time for the Morning Break!

“Participant Guidelines are less about what we shouldn’t do and more about what we should do in all of our relationships, including ourselves. Instead of representing specific rules to be enforced, guidelines express important values to be practiced and expressed.”

Parker J. Palmer – Founder and Senior Partner Emeritus of the Center for Courage and Renewal

Participation Guidelines

- Session Start Times / Breaks / Mini Movement Breaks / Lunch / Adjournment
- Confidentiality and Privacy

- Cultivating Presence – no active cell phone use in class
- We honor diversity on all levels ... everyone brings value and wisdom.
- Self-monitor your participation. You control the depth of disclosure and mode of participation.
- Speak your truth in ways that respect others' truth.
- "Beginner's Mind" – opening to curiosity and seeing with *fresh eyes* in each moment ...
- Maintaining a Personal Journal to support self-reflection and learning.
- Enjoy learning and sharing our collective insights in a community of students, colleagues, and fellow learners.
- Experience the Joy of Life-Long Learning!

Additional Focus Questions for Groups

"You can tell whether a man is clever by his answers. You can tell whether a man is wise by his questions."

Naguib Mahfouz – Egyptian writer who won the Nobel Prize for Literature (1911-2006)

Over time, groups and teams can reflect on a question that has strategic relevance or is timely based upon the issues that the group is facing at a particular time (Wise & Littlefield, 2017; Strachan, 2007). The chart below highlights the qualities of powerful questions.

Attributes of Powerful Questions
▪ Generates curiosity in the listener. ▪ Stimulates reflective conversation. ▪ Thought-provoking. ▪ Surfaces underlying assumptions. ▪ Invites creativity and new possibilities. ▪ Generates energy and forward movement. ▪ Channels attention and focuses on inquiry. ▪ Stays with participants. ▪ Touches a deep meaning. ▪ Evokes more questions.
"The Art of Powerful Questions," http://www.theworldcafe.com

Below you will see a list of sample questions that you can consider using and adapting to your groups and work teams. Notice that some questions are potentially more evocative and require a higher degree of trust and psychological safety. The dividing line between the "Lower Self-Disclosure Questions" and the "Higher Self-Disclosure Questions" is subjective and will be different for each group. However, consider the unique qualities of your group and its current level of evolution, diversity, and unique history.

Low Self-Disclosure Questions

- What would this workplace be like if it were the kind of place, you looked forward to getting up and coming to every morning?
- What aspect of your work/life is currently consuming most of your time and energy?
- What's going on in your life right now? How does that connect with why we've come together?
- Can you tell a story about one of your grandparents, aunts, uncles, or mentors – whoever comes to mind?

- Can you tell a story about something completely unexpected that happened to you recently?
- What do you do outside of work that helps you relax during stressful times at work?
- What interests do you have outside of work that contribute to your effectiveness at work?
- How does your organization show that it cares about its employees?
- In your experience, what part of being a supportive team member requires courage?
- Most people want to work in an environment where they feel happy about what they do. When do you feel happy at work?
- Think about this group. What words would you use to describe us?
- What is unique about the work that you do?
- When it comes to *communication*, who is your most important teacher? What is one important thing you learned from that person?
- When you consider what it feels like to work in your organization, what song or movie comes to mind? What made you think of that?
- What is one helpful thing that you learned about working with others that have stayed with you? How could that learning be useful for how we work together during this session/meeting?
- What needs to happen during the next three months to ensure that you are fully committed to the outcomes?
- If you could change one thing about how this company rewards employees – other than increasing financial rewards – what would it be?
- If you could accomplish one significant thing over the next year, what would that be?
- What key incidents in our history have helped shape how we are organized?
- What is one aspect of how we are structured that works well for us? What can we do to ensure that it continues to work well?
- Think of your team as a growing person. How mature is it? Is it a newborn, a young child, an adolescent, a young adult, a mature adult, or an older person? Explain your response with specific examples.
- Think about a positive future, that is a realistic stretch for your team. What do you see going on?
- Who are your ancestors? Share something about your lineage.
- What experience, skill, or aspect of yourself do you bring to this group as a gift right now?
- What is birthing, growing and living in you right now? What is dissolving or dying?

Higher Self-Disclosure Questions

- What conversations have been suppressed on our team or in our organization?
- What has inspired you this week?
- What question is at the heart of your work?
- What are you passionate about? What legacy would you like to have in the world?
- What about your organization and the work that you do that causes the most irritation?
- What feeling, pattern of behavior, or aspect of yourself do you want to let go of right now to be more present in this group?
- Is there anything about this group or its purpose that makes you uneasy?
- What is the greatest obstacle to feeling good about yourself right now?
- What is your greatest fear right now?
- What is the risk you feel comfortable taking that others whom you know might feel awkward in taking?
- What is one bad habit you have broken in your lifetime?
- What is one aspect of your work environment that is stressful to you and your team? If you were in charge, what would you do to reduce the distress? How do you think this situation came about?
- To what degree is information a source of power in our team? How is information shared or guarded?
- What kinds of information do you consider as private in your team, that is, not to be known within the wider organization? Why should this information be kept private?
- Think about how this group works together. In what areas are we most comfortable being candid with one another? In what areas are you least comfortable? How could you expand the degree of candor in the group?
- You have been assigned as a mentor to a new employee who will be taking your place as you move to a new position. This person has asked you what they should do to build positive working relationships with co-workers. What would you tell the new employee?

Questions that elicit a response revealing personal vulnerability during the meeting move the group to greater self-disclosure and a more profound quality of engagement (Wise & Littlefield, 2017; Berger, 2014; Baldwin & Linnea, 2010). This needs to be done carefully, and in so doing, we can help individuals in groups to build psychological safety in the group and grow individual and collective trust (McQuaid & Williams, 2023).

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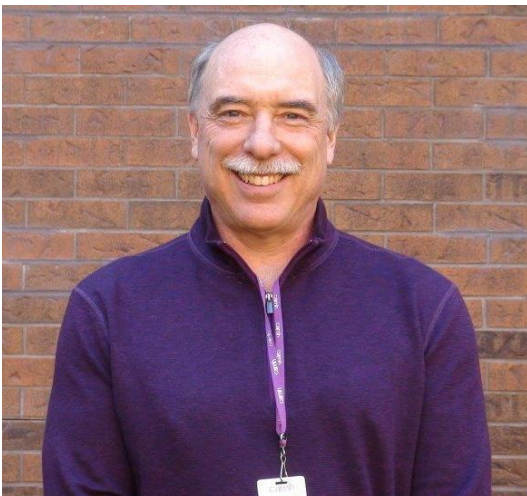
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