

Peacemaking: An Overview

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What is Peacemaking?:

Peacemaking is a dispute resolution process which is rooted in Native American/Indigenous values, traditions, and community. It specifically focuses on healing and restoring relationships. Most commonly, these practices have been used within tribal communities to provide alternatives to the adversarial court system. These methods are also frequently used outside of the court system in disputes where guided resolution would be useful. For example, Peacemaking processes have been held at schools, universities, living/residential environments, and community centers.

For more information on the development of Peacemaking throughout North America, please visit: <https://peacemaking.narf.org/>

Elements of Peacemaking:

In my experience, the two core tenets of Peacemaking are its ability to be:

Community-Based:

Peacemaking relies on community inclusion in the resolution process. Not only do we incorporate those who have directly engaged in the conflict, but we also include the members of the community who can either help the Peacemaker discover the root of the conflict or can provide support to disputants during and after the Peacemaking process.

Example of Community Inclusion:

Sara has been rebelling against her parents, not completing her homework, and missing curfew. Her parents try Peacemaking as a means of overcoming the conflict between them.

Who are some relevant parties that the Peacemaking process might include?

- Sara: directly involved in the conflict
- Sara's Parents: directly involved in the conflict
- Sara's best friend: may understand the root of the problem. For example, Sara is acting this way because she is being bullied by another classmate. However, the Peacemaker might not have learned this without this friend's support and input.
- Sara's teacher: can provide support afterwards and may understand the root of the problem
- A counselor/therapist: can provide support after the conflict is resolved

Culturally-Competent:

As previously mentioned, Peacemaking is based in indigenous practices and values. In a tribal community, this may include speaking the Indigenous language during the Peacemaking process, using traditional teachings to guide the process, or including culturally important objects/talking pieces in the circle (e.g. baskets, pottery, objects from nature).

In a setting where people are from multiple cultural backgrounds, Peacemaking can be culturally competent by:

- Noting the Indigenous roots of Peacemaking and the Indigenous lands on which the Peacemaking process is taking place.
- Providing time and space for people to introduce themselves in their native languages.
- Using prayer or spiritual practice to open and close the Peacemaking process as appropriate.
- Incorporating representatives from cultural centers in the supporting parties, especially if the conflict directly relates to cultural differences, cultural insensitivity, or a lack of support for marginalized individuals.

Peacemaking Objectives and Types of Conflicts:

The objectives of Peacemaking include:

- Creating a better understanding between disputants and opening up pathways of communication between parties.
- Building or rebuilding relationships between parties in conflict, especially those with continuing relationships.
- Bringing parties together in an organized and open way to discuss the problem.
- Providing a space and time for parties to voice their concerns and be heard not only by the person they are in conflict with but by a third-party (Peacemaker).
- Guiding difficult conversations with the participation of the whole community.
- Working one-on-one with individual parties to better understand the support/aid these individuals need.

Some examples of conflicts handled in Peacemaking include:

- Arguments between peers/colleagues/roommates/neighbors.
- Rebuilding community relationships after a traumatic situation or after members of the community have broken the trust of the group.
- Communicating between students and the university administration.
- Building individual/family/group/community support systems, even before a conflict arises.
- Conducting group conversations about self-care, mental health, and well-being.
- Specifically navigating conflicts related to cultural differences, marginalization, or disempowerment of individuals/groups.

The Peacemaking Set-Up:

Who:

Peacemaker: The Peacemaker is often a trusted member of the community or an elder. While they may have a formal role, anyone who has the trust and respect of the community/group can act as a Peacemaker. Some examples include grandparents, teachers/principles, and trusted friends/colleagues.

Parties in Conflict/Disputants: In some cases, it will be obvious who the parties in conflict are (e.g. when two friends have had a breakdown in their relationship). In other cases, the 'parties in conflict' may be whole groups (e.g. a conflict between students and the faculty of a certain academic department) or whole communities (e.g. a breakdown in the communication between an entire workplace community). When in doubt, it is best to invite any parties you feel are impacted by the conflict.

Supporting Parties: As mentioned above, Peacemaking is community-based so even when a party isn't directly involved in the conflict, they may be invited to provide support during or after the Peacemaking process. Examples of supporting parties include: friends/family members of the disputants, counselors/therapists, mentors, or teachers.

When:

While Peacemaking typically occurs after the conflict has already begun, it can also be used as a preventative measure, especially to strengthen community relationships.

Optimally, the Peacemaking process is given no time limit. It's difficult to tell how long a Peacemaking process will take because there may be more concerns beneath the surface than originally anticipated and it might be difficult to help people find consensus/agreement. However, in practice, it can often be unrealistic to have a meeting with no predetermined end time. In order to practically apply Peacemaking, practitioners may consider:

- Giving themselves as much time as they can reasonably schedule to work on the conflict.
- Planning follow-up meetings if the conflict cannot be navigated in a single meeting.

Where:

Find a comfortable space to hold the Peacemaking process. Some considerations for the space will include the following:

- Typically, the Peacemaking process will occur with all participants sitting in a circle. This sitting arrangement helps reduce an 'us' versus 'them' mentality and any sense of hierarchy in the group. Keep in mind that sitting in a circle might require you to choose a larger room/location. Prepare for this is at all possible.
- Additionally, it can be very nice to sit in communal spaces or outside. However, if one of these settings will easily allow outsiders into your space/within earshot of the process, consider finding a new location. You want to create a secure and safe place for your participants to share without reservation.
- Remember to take into consideration the accessibility needs of those in the Peacemaking process. Can everyone reach and enter the Peacemaking location with ease? Will the seating arrangements (e.g. chair height, sitting on the floor, etc.) be comfortable and possible for everyone?

How:

Below is an example itinerary for a Peacemaking Process.

1. *Welcome and Purpose of the Session*
2. *Opening Moment of Reflection/Prayer*
3. *Setting the Space and Explaining Rules*
 - o ***While the rules can change depending on the needs of the Peacemaker and participants, below are some suggestions.***
 - o *Be tough on the issue, be gentle on the person.*
 - o *A talking piece will be passed around the circle clockwise starting with the Peacemaker after each question is asked. Please only speak when you have the talking piece.*
 - o *While we can bring thoughts and ideas out of the circle, please leave peoples' identities and experiences in the circle.*
 - o *Speak with care and respect.*
 - o *Listen with care and respect.*
 - o *If you're not ready to speak or do not want to share, passing is okay--- we can come back to you if you'd like to speak later.*
4. *First time around the circle: Introductions*
 - o *What is your name? What are your pronouns?*
 - o *What is your role/position in this circle? OR why are you here?*

- o *What is one value that is important to you and who gifted you that value?*
 - *Example: "Hello! My name is Carson, and I use she/her pronouns. I am here as one of Sara's friends. I've known her since we were five years old! One value that is important to me is a connection to community. My grandma taught me this by always inviting family over after church, having family nights/game nights, and serving the local community throughout her life."*
- 5. *Second time around the circle:*
 - o *Ask each person to discuss the conflict in their own words and what issues they feel are important to discuss.*
 - o *What does each person want to get out of the circle?*
 - o *After this round and each subsequent round the Peacemaker should try to summarize what they've heard and mention points that may be in contention with each other or points that were mentioned multiple times.*
- 6. *Third time around the circle:*
 - o *During this round you can focus in on one topic that was brought up during round two and ask each participant to discuss it.*
 - o *Alternatively, you can ask participants to respond to the thoughts of other participants which they heard during round two.*
 - o *Subsequent rounds should follow this pattern until the final rounds.*
- 7. *Final 1-2 times around the circle:*
 - o *The final time(s) around the circle should be used as a means of deciding and/or clarifying next steps.*
 - o *OR this could be used as a way to see if anyone has final thoughts before closing out.*
 - o *In some cases, it may be useful to ask all participants to share one word that summarizes what they took away from the Peacemaking session.*
- 8. *End with a moment of reflection or prayer*

Please note that each Peacemaking process will be different and should be flexible to the needs of the participants.

Empowerment:

Peacemaking can be an effective tool of empowerment by intentionally:

- Creating spaces for cultural identities and marginalized ways of thinking, being, or understanding.
- Weaving in conversation on historical marginalization, oppression, and colonization.
- Embracing conversations related to personal well-being and what is needed to develop support systems for all participants.
- Allowing for group Peacemaking sessions where collective experiences can be shared. A concern with some alternative dispute resolution processes is that they will separate and placate individual grievances so that members of the same community cannot demand substantive change. However, in a group setting, collective grievances can be better explored, mechanisms for accountability and change can be developed, and individuals who wouldn't have felt comfortable sharing their experiences before may find themselves empowered by the similar issues/concerns of their colleagues.