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# Using Circles to strengthen Staff Culture and Environment



# USING CIRCLE PRACTICE

## Background/History of a circle

*To gather in a circle is an ancient tradition used by different peoples around the world when there is a need to talk and find solutions that have occurred. Our forebears gathered in circles for many purposes: around the campfire to share the day's hunt, when important decisions were to be made or when conflicts needed to be resolved. In other words, there is something natural about this way of organising a meeting, but for various reasons modern man has in many ways forgotten or chosen not to conduct meetings in this way.*

*“Using Restorative Circles in Schools” by Follestad and Wroldsen - page 22*

The circle format emphasises CORE VALUES such as;

- Equality
- Safety
- Trust
- Responsibility
- Justice
- Democracy

*To participate in a circle gives a sense of belonging. In the circle everyone can see everyone else and takes turns in speaking, and what everyone says everyone can hear. To meet and communicate in a circle increases the possibility for positive safe relationships and a psychosocial atmosphere best described as a collective attention- a sense of ‘we’.*

*“Using Restorative Circles in Schools” by Follestad and Wroldsen - page 22*

The circle promotes a sense of we, a building of strong relationships amongst circle members.

## Why do we use circles?

- Build community - feeling connected, sense of belonging
- Engage everyone in the group
- Promote a sense of shared ownership
- Promote equality
- Build trust
- Encourage development of empathy
- Promote and practise use of emotional language
- Develop problem solving skills
- Develop and promote staff voice



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# USING CIRCLE PRACTICE

## What circles can be used for

- **Relationship building** through check-ins/outs, “go-arounds”, share experiences, explore opinions, exchange ideas.
- **Reinforcing norms**: plan and discuss expectations, behaviours and procedures.
- **Informative/Academic**: explore content, evaluate work, set goals, monitor progress, give feedback.
- **Problem-solving**: addressing issues, reflecting on incidents, staff problem-solving.
- **Responding to an incident** to promote healing and give support to everyone involved.

## Types of circles

- **Go-around Circles**: in sequence, high participation, general topics, responding to prompts, introductions
- **Popcorn Circles**: less structured, no particular order, participation encouraged but not mandatory, interested parties
- **Problem-solving Circles**: structured, formal, focused

## Circle considerations

- **Shape**: Consider how to best use the physical environment so that everyone in the circle can be seen and heard. Where practicable try to have no objects in between participants.
- **Prepare**: Topics/content of the circle prepared in advance. Consider what icebreaker (game/question) you might begin with and use a layered approach to your questions for the rounds. Begin with lower order questions until trust and positive relationships are established in the group.
- **Procedures**: Introduce a listening piece and explain that only when you are holding the listening piece can you speak and that everyone else must listen to the person who is speaking. Explain/Remind all participants of the ground rules.
- **Set the intention**: Welcome everyone to the group and explain the intention of the group. Remind participants that they can pass if they wish.
- **Check-in**: Begin with an opening check-in. Sentence starter, one word whizz
- **Maintain focus**: Consider the intention and why they are joined in a circle today. Choose the most suitable circle format to explore.
- **Check-out**: Thank everyone for their participation. Finish with a check out sentence starter/one word whizz.



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# MEETING PLANNING TEMPLATE

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## 1. Welcome and Opening Circle:

- Circle Starters:

## 2. Agenda Items:

## 3. Any other Business:

## 4. Closing Circle/ Alternative Circle Activity:

## 5. Action Items to note:



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# ALTERNATIVE CIRCLE IDEAS/ACTIVITIES

## Teaching Tales

Choose a theme (e.g., "A teaching moment that changed me," "A student who made an impact," or "A funny classroom moment") and have staff share brief stories.

## Show and Share

Each staff member brings in an object or photo that represents something meaningful to them—whether it's related to their teaching journey, a personal passion, or a significant life moment. They take turns sharing the story behind their item.

## Lessons, Wins and Goals

Each person shares one thing they learned recently, one success they had, or one goal they are working on.

## Words that inspire

Present an inspiring quote about education, teamwork, or growth. Staff members take turns sharing how the quote resonates with them.

## Soundtrack of My Teaching Life

Each staff member shares a song title that represents their current mood, teaching experience, or recent classroom moment. They explain why they chose it.

## The "Ripple Effect"

Each staff member shares an example of when they saw their actions positively impact a student or colleague. This helps reinforce the idea that their work truly matters.

## Dear Future Me

Each staff member writes a short letter to themselves about their goals, motivation, or hopes for the school year. Seal them in envelopes to be opened at a future meeting.



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# PERSONAL CIRCLE STARTERS

- My first job was....
- A recent experience that made me smile was....
- A book/movie/show/podcast I've recently enjoyed is....
- A hobby or interest I'm passionate about is....
- If I could have any superpower, it would be....
- A place I'd love to visit is....
- A valuable piece of advice I've received is....
- A song that always puts me in a good mood is....
- My go-to drink order in a café is....
- My favourite children's book is....
- Something I like to do with a group of friends is...
- The best thing about where I live is...
- The worst thing about where I live is....
- If I could live somewhere else it would be....because....
- My favourite family tradition is/was....
- I'm most proud of....
- When I'm on my own I prefer to....
- An activity I like to do with my family is....
- Something I rely on my family/friends for is....
- The best day out I have ever been on was....
- The best game I have ever played is....
- If I won the Lotto I would....
- If I were President of Ireland I would....
- If I could make one change in the world I would....
- Something that brings my joy is....
- Something I am grateful for today is....
- Something I am good at is....
- Something I am not good at is....



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# PERSONAL CIRCLE STARTERS

- Something I will never do again is....
- Something I would love to do again is....
- Something I avoid doing is....
- My friends would describe me as....
- I calm myself down by.....
- My party piece is....
- I lift my spirits by....
- A time I felt afraid was....
- My favourite month/season is...because....
- My favourite breakfast/lunch/dinner/snack is....
- My favourite place in my house is....
- My favourite type of weather is....
- My favourite take-away food is....
- My favourite animal is....
- My favourite school tour as a child was....
- My favourite memory of primary school is...
- A skill/hobby I wish I could do is....
- If I had three wishes, I would wish for....
- When I was little, I wanted to be....when I grew up....
- The best holiday I've been on was.....
- My favourite chocolate bar is....
- My three desert island items would be....
- I celebrate my birthday by....
- My first best friend was....
- If I was to change career I would like to be....
- One thing I do for my wellbeing is....
- My favourite hotel in Ireland is....
- My least favourite household chore is....



## WORK RELATED CIRCLE STARTERS

- A teaching resource that I find particularly helpful is....
- A recent challenge I've overcome at work is....
- Some helpful career feedback/advice I've received is....
- A piece of advice I would give a new staff member is....
- The aspect of my job that energises me most is....
- The aspect of my job that drains me most is....
- Professionally, I want to be known for/as....
- Professional skills I would like to build are....
- If I had €1000 to spend freely in school, I would....
- My favourite way to unwind after work is....
- My favourite school holiday/time off is....because....
- A mistake I remember making in my job is.....
- If I could invent a resource/tool for school it would be....
- My best tip for staying organised is....
- My favourite moment at school this week has been....
- My favourite subject to teach/assist with is....
- My least favourite subject to teach/assist with is....
- Something I am grateful for in this school is....
- I choose this career path because....
- Before school, I like to....
- The item I can't live without at work is....
- My ideal break time at school would look like....
- My Friday evening ritual is....
- If I had a free day in school to get jobs done I would....
- An idea I like from another school is....
- The best time/way to approach me to ask for help is....
- The worst job I ever had was....
- I prefer to start the school day by....



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# WORK RELATED CIRCLE STARTERS

- Something I appreciate about this team is...
- A strength/value I bring to this team is....
- A way we can boost/improve/sustain team morale is....
- A recent work success I/we've had is....
- Our biggest challenge of the past year has been....
- The value I appreciate most in colleagues is....
- If I was given €1000 to spend on upgrading the staff room, I would....
- I would like if we could have....in the staffroom
- To me, staff wellbeing means....
- One rule at work I wish I could change is....
- If our team had a theme song, it would be....
- One word I would use to describe our team culture is....
- A team achievement or project I'm most proud of is....
- We could help each other more by....
- The key to good communication is....
- As a staff, I'd love more time for....
- I contribute to creating a positive culture in school by....
- My approach to conflict resolution is....
- A professional skill I admire in somebody is....
- We could make meetings more productive by....
- I think we should celebrate occasions/successes by....
- A new initiative I'd love the team to undertake is....
- I/We could avoid burnout and fatigue by....
- We can make new staff members feel welcome by....
- I would love more training in....
- My preferred staff social event would involve....



# CLOSING CIRCLE IDEAS

- **One-Word Whizz** - Go around the circle with each person saying one word to describe how they're feeling now or what they're taking away from the meeting.
- **Weather Check** - Staff describe their current mood as a weather forecast (e.g., "partly sunny," "stormy but clearing," "calm and clear").
- **Emoji Check-Out** - Ask each person to describe how they're feeling using an emoji, either spoken or drawn on a whiteboard.
- **Rose/Thorn/Bud** - **Rose** (a highlight), **Thorn** (a challenge), **Bud** (something they're looking forward to)
- **One Word Intention** - Everyone shares one word that represents an intention for the rest of the day or week.
- **Takeaway Token** - Ask: "What is one thing you're taking with you from today's meeting?"
- **Next Step Round** - "What's your next step after this meeting?" (useful when planning or actions were involved).
- **Deep Breath Together** - Take one deep breath together in silence. Very calming after a long meeting.
- **Silent Circle** - One full minute of silence to reflect, ground, or simply pause.
- **One Hope** - Each person shares one hope for their students or their team for the upcoming week.
- **Mindful Word Cloud** - Use a digital word cloud (like Mentimeter) to anonymously gather one-word reflections, then view the live result together.
- **Energy Check** - "On a scale from 1–10, where's your energy right now?" (optionally follow with "What might you need to recharge?")



# OTHER IDEAS FOR STAFF CONNECTION

- **Staff Breakfast once a month/term**
- **Book Club/Book Swap**
- **Staffroom Baking Rota/Pot Luck**
- **Recommendations List - Podcasts, TV, etc**
- **Walking Tour of local area**
- **Before/after school exercise classes**
- **Outdoor staffroom in good weather**
- **Teach Meet - share ideas, resources, etc**
- **Staffroom Surprise Lunch organised by leadership**
- **Volunteer for something as a group**
- **Social events**
- **Skill-Sharing sessions - teach each other hobbies or professional skills**
- **Recognition and appreciation boards - acknowledge contributions**
- **Lunch and learn - various information presentations combined with lunch**
- **Wellness challenges**
- **Boardgames staff gathering**



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