



## **Conflict Circles**

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The Conflict Circles is a method we use in HSD, modified from a tool taught by Landmark Forum. In seemingly intractable conflicts, individuals involved see the situation through lenses that are colored by their own perspectives and defenses. This concept has been explored in songs and stories throughout history, and yet it continues to cause rifts in relationships for individuals, groups, communities, and even nations. The Conflict Circles method can be used to heal those rifts, enabling the partners to come together to find mutually acceptable solutions and work toward peace and productivity.

When something happens, more than one story describes the scenario.

- First there is the story about what actually happened. As the saying goes, this story is, "Just the facts, ma'am." It describes the specific actions that were taken, the exact words that were spoken, and the resulting activities. This first story does not describe feelings or emotions; neither does it try to assign motive or intent. We refer to this as **objective truth**.
- In addition to this objective description, each person involved has his or her own story or description of the events. In these versions, people assign meaning and intent to each action and reaction. A door that blew shut was seen as having been "slammed in anger." A missed call might be interpreted as an intention to ignore or demean another person. Each person reads his or her own meaning into everything. This is what we call **subjective truth**.

The Conflict Circles is a method to help people separate what happened from their own interpretation of what happened. This enables those who are involved to engage in a facilitated conversation about the "real" story and the stories they tell themselves. Once they can get past their stories, they are able to think more clearly about the real causes of the conflict and move toward mutually acceptable agreements.

The attached protocol outlines steps to facilitate this process for people who are in conflict.

# Conflict Circles Method

## 1. Each party describes his or her reality and story.

This is generally done in writing days before a scheduled face-to-face meeting. Each person describes what he or she saw, heard, said, and felt. Often these stories come from series of events over time. The parties are asked to focus on a specific event, with the understanding that their personal stories will depict the general history as well.

## 2. Each one composes three questions for the other.

These questions are submitted with the stories. They must be real questions that explore the reality of the situation and that can be answered, and it is the job of the facilitator to ensure that this is the case.

## 3. Differences in reality are researched and resolved.

The facilitator researches to resolve any discrepancies between the descriptions of reality in the two stories so that the facts are clear and shared with each party.

## 4. Both meet together and alternate asking and answering questions.

The facilitator meets with the parties and engages them in asking and responding to each other's questions. Follow-up or clarifying questions are allowed until the person asking the question is satisfied that it has been fully answered.

## 5. The meeting ends with action planning for both.

# Conflict Circles Model

