

bouquet of local flowers donated by a parent and dozens of photos of the teachers' students played out in a colorful spiral. We conducted a brief review of the year, offered a few journal-writing exercises to ground them into their strengths as teachers, and offered the invitation—this time for checking out: "Choose one story of success you've had with a child this year." Every teacher spoke. Every teacher had a story of great heart. They all slipped into their deepest knowing of themselves as teachers. Things would be different, difficult; maybe they wouldn't be back. But what they remembered and witnessed for one another on that day was that they had made a difference in the lives of children. The check-out took ninety minutes. There was no fidgeting—not one of them wanted to miss a single story. For those ninety minutes, they celebrated themselves as the community of caring teachers they had been in a challenging year.

Pamela Austin Thompson, CEO of the American Organization of Nursing Executives (AONE) and coauthor of PeerSpirit's booklet on circle and nursing leadership, has one instruction for people interested in trying circle in organizational settings: "Practice—just start somewhere and practice," she says. "Shifting a meeting into a more circular way of being still makes my knees shake, but you just have to jump in and try it and know that sometimes it will work better than others and that everything is a group learning experience."

In an organization devoted to fostering a culture of communication from the administrative level to the direct care nurses, Pam uses some of the Components of Circle in many of the meetings she facilitates for AONE. "One of the skill sets I bring to the nursing community is how to convene people in a different way. Even if we don't formally call it a circle, I always use check-in and check-out. I tell people, 'Check-in convenes us and check-out releases us.' Some people push back on the formal methodology of circle because it feels foreign to them. So often I simply introduce a component or two in the moment it's needed and then afterward tell them, 'That's what circle is all about.'"

Adopting Circle as an Organizational Methodology

It's a business adage that "to get a better outcome, hold a better meeting." A fine thought but not very instructional in the "how-to" department. Many organizational leaders want *something* to be different: the effectiveness of meetings, the strength of relationships in teams or units, the ability to envision together, the commitment to mentor leadership development. Various components of PeerSpirit Circle Process have been successfully used as an

innovative group process shift to support these desires for different outcomes and greater success.

When Jerry Nagel, cofounder of the Meadowlark Institute, was invited to facilitate the board retreat for the North Dakota Humanities Council in June 2009, he walked into an association with a history of a revered founder who had carried a legendary vision of bringing humanities into the ranchlands. After a transition director, the council is now led by a dynamic young woman, Brenna Daugherty, who contacted Jerry with two desired outcomes for their annual board retreat: to reconnect the board with the mission of the Humanities Council and to reconnect the board and staff.

Jerry said, "The Humanities Council needed to decide what the organization is *now*. It also needed to define board responsibilities and commitments to the staff and the mission." The group met in a hotel room in the city of Minot in a hotel basement conference room. In one half of the room, Jerry set up a large circle (for three staff, twelve board members, and one facilitator), and in the other half of the room placed round tables for smaller discussions. "For opening check-in, everyone brought two objects to place in the center: one personally symbolic of the state of North Dakota and the other representing something about the humanities. The staff had created a truly beautiful center, and the storytelling that emerged allowed the group to know all its members on a more personal level. I closed by reading a poem."

It was a two-day retreat, organized as follows: day 1: circle, World Café, barbecue at the board chair's home; day 2: circle check-in with talking piece around a topical question, adjourning to small tables for strategic planning process, and closing with circle and poetry. "At the end of the business time, the board practically rushed back to circle, eager to get back into this kind of interaction. It was all new to the board members, but Brenna later reported that they all considered it the best board retreat ever and made a commitment to continue meeting in circle."

Even if only offered as a onetime experience, circle has the potential to change an organization by creating a sense of connectedness that had been lacking in the group. The host needs to be aware of this potential and have done the necessary prep work to provide support for the meaningful conversations that may be set in motion. That is why PJ, whose story was told in Chapter 3, took such a long time to go through her own preparation process before inviting other people into circle.