



Way of Council: Through the ancient practice of Way of Council groups of people come together and engage in dialogue within a communal atmosphere of non-judgment and acceptance. In Council, people sit in a circle and commit to being fully present, freed from distractions, judgements or opinion forming, listening intently and sharing open-heartedly with each other without preparing or rehearsing our responses.

There is a beacon or talking-piece (which may be a stick, a stone, a ball or whatever feels appropriate). The person holding the beacon artefact is the only one allowed to speak, everyone else round the circle listens with complete attention and presence. Then, when the talking-piece is put back in the centre or passed round the circle, the next person to hold it speaks, knowing they will not be interrupted or judged. Here are some basic ground rules:

- When speaking, we speak from our heart and gut, not from our head. We do not rehearse what we are going to say, we allow what comes up within us to come out. We talk from the 'I' perspective, about what is going on for me, not using words such as 'you' or 'they', and we do not bring in blame or projection on to others. We simply talk about what is going on for me, how I am feeling and the challenges or opportunities I am experiencing. This 'first person' speaking allows us to take responsibility for what we are feeling and saying without accusing, judging or projecting. We are also conscious of the time available for the circle, by being concise in our speech and not rambling too much or speaking for too long.
- When listening, we listen with our whole bodymind, being present in the here-and-now, so that our attention is fully absorbed in listening generously and open-heartedly to what is being said. The act of listening in such a deep and fully present way is beneficial in-and-of-itself as the act of listening to another helps us remain mindful, coherent, embodied and present. We catch ourselves when thoughts of past or future distract us, and when emotions or judgements triggered by what we are listening to form in us along with associated thought patterns. We continuously bring ourselves back to the act of fully listening each time our attention wanders. This helps keep our heart open and also helps a social field of collective wisdom to resonate within the group, which further enhances our heart-felt listening and speaking. This attentive listening is powerful and cleansing for everyone in the circle.
- There is a natural ego-tendency to wish to rehearse what we are going to say, so we come across as fluent and intelligible, our ego not wanting to trust what might emerge from our heart and gut. But, we let go of the ego-grasping desire to rehearse. This helps us build trust in our other ways of knowing beyond the rationalizing head. It also frees us to be fully present in the moment and enjoy being here-and-now, listening attentively, rather than rehearsing in our head while others speak. When we speak from this deeper heart and gut place a more cathartic and soulful sharing occurs, which enriches us personally and the circle collectively. We may well feel fear when it's our turn to take the talking-piece, our ego afraid that what may come out will be critically judged by others. This is part-and-parcel of trusting ourselves and trusting the circle of people who are dedicated to being open and attentive as



best we all can be without judging, just listening. This learning not to rehearse while having trust, is a surrendering process, a form of 'kenosis', by letting go of pre-defining thoughts to allow something deeper to emerge. It is a great way for us to practice becoming more comfortable at bringing in more of our soul-awareness into our work-life.

- The talking-piece acts as a beacon of attention. Our attention follows the taking piece and we give whoever has it our full attention.
- No criticism or judgement about other's sharing. We do not critically analyze what another has just shared when we come to speak, yet we may refer to another's comment in terms of how it affects 'me' and my feelings. So we share how what has been said relates to what is going on for 'me' without getting dragged into me-versus-you judgements or criticisms. This helps cultivate self-recognition within us; helping us notice when we are tending to blame, defend or project as opposed to open-heartedly share about what is going on for me without projecting on to others.
- Silence is always permitted while holding the beacon, and we can pass the beacon on without saying anything at all if we wish.
- What is said in the circle stays in the circle. General themes may be captured and shared by means of informing our work in general, but people's specific sharing remains confidential and not specifically quoted beyond the circle without permission. This especially relates to gossip. Learning to respect the confidentiality of the circle by holding back on gossiping about others is once again an important learning for us, teaching us to respect each other's perspectives and become more self-aware about our tendency to gossip.

As a practice, Council is applicable to all social interrelations from family discussions to executive board meetings. For indigenous cultures, where collective decisions are regularly made through this circle of shared dialogue, it is acceptance rather than consensus which is paramount – an empathic understanding of the differing views occurs even if everyone is not in agreement with the final decision. This way resentment does not build up and then corrode the community. Differing opinions are healthy and ought to be celebrated as it is diverse opinions within a community that provide for the resilience needed for long term viability.