

Facilitating the Samoan Circle

Source; Adapted by Tim Dyer, The Johnmark Extension from Ron Kraybill Facilitation Skills for Interpersonal Transformation 8 © Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management and from *The Little Book of Cool Tools for Hot Topics*.

An excellent technique for group work involving large numbers of people in the same room is the “Samoan Circle“. It is effective in enabling a large number of people to discuss a controversial issue without unleashing severe polarisation.

As a general observation the situation most hazardous to constructive group talk is one with large numbers of people offering opinions from all corners of a room. Speakers in such circumstances will rise, lob inflammatory insults at others, and then sit down, withdrawing into a sea of anonymity and safety among their fellow supporters. Rhetoric and anger often escalate rapidly in such settings. The Samoan Circle blocks these dynamics. Whereas unfettered group discussion seems to bring out the worst in speakers, the Samoan Circle seems to bring out the best.

Facilitation Process

One or two representatives for each of the views present constitute the core of the Samoan Circle. If not already clear, allow some time for the groups to select and affirm their representatives.

Surrounded by 2-4 “open chairs“, these one or preferably two representatives sit in a semi-circle for the entire discussion.

The representatives discuss the issues with each other as the larger group listens. In more complex and challenging situations this is best facilitated.

Before they begin the discussion the facilitator announces the rules.

- Anyone from the larger group who wishes to join the conversation may do so by coming forward at any time and taking one of the open chairs on either end of the semicircle.
- If all chairs are filled, those who come forward may stand behind an open chair until it becomes available.
- All are welcome to participate, but there is one ground rule: No communication is allowed except within the semi-circle; no talking, murmuring, or clapping except for those in the semi-circle.
- The facilitator secures agreement to observe this ground rule from the group, via the raising of hands or nodding of heads.

The discussion then begins with a brief statement by each representative in the semi-circle and proceeds as a conversation among the representatives, with others joining whenever they wish.

The facilitator may withdraw and watch as a silent observer or sit in the circle and actively facilitate the conversation by asking questions of the participants and ensuring everyone gets equal time to share.

Each speaker from the audience must come forward and sit in a place of engagement that is guided by the facilitator. The facilitator may indicate it is time to resume one’s seat if others wish to contribute.

If provocative statements are made, the facilitator can follow up with techniques that defuse them, asking clarifying questions, using paraphrasing skills, drawing out underlying concerns, and so on.

Two central components make the Samoan Circle work.

Empowerment is a central component, not only for each group represented, but also for each individual present. All groups are encouraged to fully express their respective views through their representatives, while individuals can also express their personal views by joining the semicircle.

Furthermore, recognition of the other, and the relationship-building that comes with it, are also central to the Samoan Circle. Because this method tends to bring out the best in participants, the quality of engagement is usually high; participants often seem to hear each other in new ways and thus gain important new insights about their opponents' views. However, even when new insights are few, a deeper form of recognition and relationship building takes place implicitly.

Participating in a structured engagement such as this is, in effect, participating in a joint ritual, a social engagement governed by a commonly accepted set of procedures with multiple layers of meaning. The procedures are minimal, of course, and the layers of meaning may be superficial and short-lived. But the result is potentially transformative: for a set period of time opponents engage each other face to face on shared terrain, jointly created by their choice to restrain their most destructive impulses and communicate with each other.