



Identity Circles: Developing Self-Awareness and Appreciation for Diversity

Overview: Identity Circles is a simple activity that encourages participants to reflect on and share the qualities they consider fundamental to their character. This activity can help people build skills of self-reflection, communication, and appreciation for diversity. This is an ideal initial diversity or team-building activity that can be used by student leaders or other facilitators for a team. This training works especially well as a precursor for more challenging forms of self-reflection or community building.

Category: Self-efficacy; reflection; interpersonal competencies; diversity

Level: Suitable for all levels (introductory to advanced)

Type: Structured activity suitable for workshop (e.g. retreat or training) or use during regular meeting structure

Focus or Goals of this Guide:

- Provide each person with a chance to share some important aspects of his/her identity
- Learn more about the kinds of diversity represented by participants while understanding that different people place importance on different things
- Provide a safe, respectful space to self-reflect and explore identity issues

Materials:

- Identity Circle handout (found at the end of this guide)
- Index cards or post-its
- Pens/pencils for all participants

How to Prepare:

Review the trainer guide and become comfortable with all information and activities. Consider creating your own identity circle in advance; this will help you focus better on the group and make it easier for you to set a tone during the activity.

In this guide, you will find steps for guiding a group of participants through the Identity Circles activity, which involves self-reflection, sharing, and discussion. While we recommend that you set aside time and space (like a special meeting) for this activity, it could also be integrated into a standard meeting structure, provided there is sufficient time. The activity should not be rushed.

If your purpose is to do a “train-the-trainers” session, you should make that explicit during your session. You should follow the outlined process, but also provide time for a more extensive introduction, a question-and-answer session, and closure with the group. This will allow the other trainers to walk away prepared to both replicate the experience and better anticipate what is involved for participants.

How to Do/Brief Outline:

Total suggested time for this session is 1 hour, 50 minutes (modify as needed):

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|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1) Brief Warm-up | suggested time 5 minutes |
| 2) Introduce the Activity | suggested time 10 minutes |
| 3) Identity Circles | suggested time 40 minutes |
| 4) Team Discussion | suggested time 40 minutes |
| 5) Final Discussion | suggested time 15 minutes |

1 Brief Warm-Up

Suggested time 5 minutes

Have everyone partner up with someone who they don't know well. Ask pairs to take turns explaining the origin of his/her full name – where it comes from, and what meaning or significance the name has, if any. For instance, “My name is Heather Field, heather like the flower because my parents were really into nature,” or “My last name is Johnson, the name that was given to my family by the slave owners in Georgia. We don't know what our African name was before that. My first name, Abe, is the name of my great-grandfather.”

You should ask a few pairs to share with the group what they learned. You can also debrief the exercise, elicit responses from the group, or use the following points:

- This warm-up provides a simple introduction to this workshop and a chance for people to articulate things that others may not have known about them.
- Even a name often has different significance to people and it can bring up questions of origin, nationality, family influences, histories, ethnicity, race, etc.

2 Introduce the Activity

Suggested time 10 minutes

Explain the purposes of this workshop:

This is an opportunity for participants to engage in structured reflection and sharing about their identity. This activity should be interesting and useful for us as a group and also as an activity we can take back and use with our teams.

Review the outcomes of the workshop:

- Self-reflection, sharing, and the chance to articulate things that are important to us individually
- Explore the diversity of this group in more depth
- Experience a safe, respectful space for exploration, dialogue, and learning about others. (You may want to set out some ground rules or briefly have the group offer ground rules for the session to help satisfy this outcome. A ground rule is a stated expectation that the group members agree to, to which the facilitator agrees to hold participants accountable).

Briefly explain the structure of the workshop:

- This workshop is designed for a small group of four to ten participants. Most of the activity calls for self-reflection and sharing. The facilitator will have the dual responsibilities of modeling the exercises and providing structure and movement throughout the workshop.
- If you are doing the activity with a larger group (e.g. at a retreat), create subgroups in advance and inform people which group they are in when they arrive. Instruct people to move into their respective teams.

3 Identity Circles

Suggested time 40 minutes

The group (or each group) should have a private or semi-private space where they can sit in chairs in a circle. You should explain the exercise and then go first, modeling a level of sharing and tone.

As the facilitator, you should:

- Explain the exercise while distributing the identity circles handout (found at the end of this guide). The visual aid will help people follow the steps of the activity.
- Instruct participants to each write their name in the middle of the circle on their paper.
- On each of the spokes that come out from the circle, participants will write something that is important to their identity. For example, it can be a word, like “Asian” or “gay,” or a phrase, like “parents divorced when I was 5” or “huge Red Sox fan.” *Participants should be prepared to share some of the qualities aloud.*
- Explain that each person makes a choice as to what he/she shares.
- Give people five minutes or so to label the spokes.

Then, guide the group through sharing:

When time is up, give each person roughly three to five minutes to share their identity circle with the group. As the facilitator, you should go first, setting the tone for sharing. This works best if you demonstrate trust, humor, and meaningful sharing. You can use the following discussion prompts to guide sharing:

- Describe the thing you are most proud of.

- Describe the thing that is most controversial for you or that you are struggling with right now.
- Describe the thing that you put down that surprised you.
- Describe two or three other things you want the group to know about you.

Give everyone a chance to share without discussion. Don't become anxious if people express a variety of emotions during their presentations. It is okay for people to expand on an item on their circle. However, you should not allow people to interrupt each other or engage in a back-and-forth discussion.

4 Team Discussion

Suggested time 40 minutes

After each person has spoken, engage the team in dialogue. Some questions to use are:

- What did you think of the exercise?
- Was anybody surprised by the words they chose for themselves?
- Was anybody surprised by the words other people chose?
- Are there words that your friends or family might use to describe you that you did not choose? Why is it that others see us differently than we see ourselves?
- What did people notice as important common factors? Is race/ethnicity a big factor in identity circles for members of this group? Why or Why not? How about gender? Why or why not? How about sexual orientation? Age? Family upbringing?
- What are some of the other ways we differ from each other? What ways are we similar? What can we learn from our differences and similarities?
- Why is learning about each other in this way important to our team/group/organization/project?
- How will your future actions change as a result of what you learned?

5 Final Discussion

Suggested time 15 minutes

You can do a few things, in whatever order you deem important:

Open the large group for discussion, perhaps by using a few questions or asking for comments about the exercises. For example, you can ask:

- Was it easy or difficult to do this? Why?
- Do people, over the course of working together, share things about themselves they want people to know? Why and how? What, if anything, seems to prevent this kind of sharing from happening?
- How can we take this exercise and/or information with us as we work together? How does this exercise provide the groundwork for other things?

Then, you can pass out blank index cards to the large group and ask everyone to answer two questions on the card. Tell them not to write their name on the card. On one side, each person should write what they learned during this exercise. On the other, write what they will strive to do as a result of this exercise. You should collect cards and read some aloud, asking for comments.

Bring things to a conclusion by thanking everyone for their participation and their willingness to share with the group. Everyone should have:

- a) had an opportunity to share some important aspects of their identity
- b) learned more about the kinds of diversity represented by participants, while understanding that different people place importance on different things, and
- c) experienced a safe, respectful space to self-reflect and explore identity issues. Identity circles are a great way to learn more about other people and also to remind oneself that “diversity” and “identity” can be construed in many different ways.

Conduct evaluations and/or suggest next steps, based on the group’s needs.

Additional Resources for the Facilitator

From the Southern Law Poverty Center: <http://www.tolerance.org/teach/>

“White Privilege” article by Peggy McIntosh: <http://www.utoronto.ca/acc/events/peggy1.htm>

Identity Circle

