

**Understanding  
Energetics in  
Circles and  
Groups**

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This booklet assumes a basic working knowledge of The Circle Way. To review those structures, see [\*Calling the Circle, the First and Future Culture\*](#) by Christina Baldwin or [\*The Circle Way: A leader in Every Chair\*](#) by Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea.

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*The majority of our communication is non-verbal, yet we, in the west, spend the majority of our effort focusing on words.*

## Why Talk About Energetics?

In western dominant culture, when we want to understand how to communicate with others, we focus on words. In school, we study communication, debate, and grammar. As adults, we attend workshops on various group processes like dialogue, circle, mediation, or open space.

Yet, all of us have experiences that remind us how much communication happens without words. We sense when loved ones are in trouble, even though they say nothing. We withdraw from situations because we feel unexpressed anger emanating from someone. Or we feel welcomed and comfortable entering a group, even before we've been introduced. We *do* understand energetics—interpersonal force fields that can be registered by others. Through energetics, we communicate our unspoken thoughts, moods, intentions, and feelings to others. Through all of our senses, we perceive the unspoken.

The world around us is composed of matter and energy. Matter is visible. We touch it, hear it, see it, smell it. It's tangible. Much of our attention is devoted to studying matter. Energy, on the other hand, is invisible. We see the results of it, but unless it's a lightning bolt, we usually don't see the energy itself. Energy has an air of mystery, and sometimes people think it takes special skill to read or interpret it. However, in recent years, as science has embraced quantum physics, much has been written about the fact that the line between matter and energy isn't necessarily clear. This is helpful information for those of us hosting and working with groups, as we create a vocabulary to help us articulate and understand the often mysterious, unspoken interactions within them.

The structure of The Circle Way lends itself particularly well to understanding the flow of energy among circle participants. The structure in a

circle creates an interpersonal container that is more intentional than the social space of a usual meeting. This container is like a bowl with people sitting on the rim. The energetic aspects of circle interaction enter the bowl and can support or erode group process just like a bowl of water can lie still or slosh around depending on how it is handled. To understand what is happening at the energetic level in a circle, we will begin by discussing personal energetics, move to understanding group energetics, and close by looking at how The Circle Way structures enhance group energetics.

## What Are Personal Energetics?

Imagine that every person is dressed in a “space suit.” This suit is the electromagnetic field produced by our bodies. All living things emit this subtle electrical charge that emanates into the space around them. Science has now verified this electromagnetic field and is actively studying it. Kirilian photography, for example, has documented the force field surrounding even a leaf. In Humans, his field extends to an average distance of one to two feet beyond our skin in all directions and has a permeable boundary.

The usually invisible space surrounding living things is called the personal energy field. Electrical charges generated by our physical functions, thoughts, moods, intentions, and feelings, fill our personal fields and create impulses that can be sensed by others. These impulses can be sensed even if we are not saying anything about these thoughts, moods, intentions or feelings.

This perception of energy is the basis of how intuition functions between people. Remember a time when someone you didn't know moved in too close? What did you feel? How did you respond? Remember walking into a room that feels “right,” even if no one is there? Remember sensing defensiveness or welcome radiating from someone? These are common perceptions of energy as we move through each other's electromagnetic fields.

Living in constant awareness of the energy

information that is constantly being exchanged would be exhausting, so we learn to close down and turn off much of it. The study of energetics helps us understand ways to re-attune to helpful energy information.<sup>i</sup>

*There are many ways to become more embodied so we can become aware of our personal energy. For some, quiet meditation works well. For others vigorous exercise or a walk outdoors is crucial. The key is to find an activity that makes us aware and sensitive to what is happening right now in front of us, that wakes us up from the automatic state we use to get through modern life.*

In the pace of modern life, we are often only vaguely aware of the exquisite energy of our bodies. We careen into meetings like cars braking for a yellow light. Our energies are still revving, waiting for the green light to race off again. If the meeting we enter is a circle, we are invited to slow down, to shift out of a mechanized sense of a body attached to a cell phone, tablet, and computer—to become aware of ourselves as energy beings. This shift in pace is often the first thing people notice about circle: it's not moving at the pace of technology, but is moving at the pace of the body. This shift requires that members of a circle understand how to reconnect to the sensitivity of being in "body space" with each other.

The boundary at the edge of our personal energy fields expands and contracts and allows other energies to enter and pass through. In First Nations traditions, people use the word "hoop" to describe a personal energy field. In circle tradition, the single most important contribution people offer the circle is to keep their personal hoop clear of energetic clutter. This means being aware of what we send out into the bowl of the circle, and aware of what we might be picking up from others. Keeping our own hoop clean requires contributing to the group's wellbeing, listening attentively, and speaking intentionally—the three practices of The Circle Way.

**Contributing to the group's wellbeing** is a continual personal check-in process. We ask ourselves to be aware of thoughts, feelings, issues, or agendas that we have carried into the circle and to notice how we are affected by the events of a session. It is important to choose what will leave our hoops, that is, how we will impact others in the circle. For example, when we have judgments about

what another is saying (and we all do) it's an opportunity to notice and catch these thoughts, to avoid sending their charge to the speaker or into the group. Unrecognized judgments may become free-floating energy and disturb other people's abilities to listen or the speaker's ability to finish his or thought.

**Listening attentively** invites us to pay attention to the non-verbal part of communication as well as the content of other people's words. If a person's words and energy don't match, those who are trying to listen will be confused, frustrated, distrustful, or withdrawn.

**Speaking intentionally** reminds us to understand our motivations and to contribute stories and information that have heart and meaning or relevance to the situation in the moment. If a person is speaking out of a need for attention, rather than having something genuine to contribute, he or she may be energetically discounted or ignored.

Practicing clear personal energetics is common sense. We can help each other remember the following good circle practices.

- Come to circle rested and with a clear mind. This may seem obvious, but if we're tired, we're more easily knocked off center by other people's energy. It's helpful to avoid the use of alcohol and moderate the use of sugar or caffeine.
- Establish an ongoing personal energy practice and use it to connect with that small voice of inner wisdom before entering circle.
- During a circle gathering, avoid becoming agitated or wandering in attention. If that happens, take deep breaths or engage in any other quiet practice that helps you refocus.
- Ask for a stretch break. If you're fidgeting, the chances are others are doing the same. Call the group into an activity that moves energy around and releases it: stretching, applause, singing or exercise.

As we pay attention to our own hoops, we can better understand how the larger hoop of the whole group is functioning.

## What Are Group Energetics?

In the section on personal energetics we spoke about the energy field of one person—what it is and how to keep it clear and healthy. In a group,

personal energy hoops interact. Everyone perceives these interactions to some degree. We speak of good vibes, high energy, or being drained by a group. We say that a group has a good feeling, or that a group is giving off so much negativity that we don't want to be in the same room.

*Group energetics are a magnified version of what happens between two people. Try this exercise with a friend. Stand facing each other three feet (one meter) apart. Explain to your friend that you would like to enter his/her personal energy field. Ask if this is okay. Step forward until his/her face is about a foot (30 centimeters.) away. Then return to your original position. Talk to each other about the experience. How is this exercise different from an uninvited encounter? How is it similar? What did you like or dislike? Try this exercise with three or more people.*

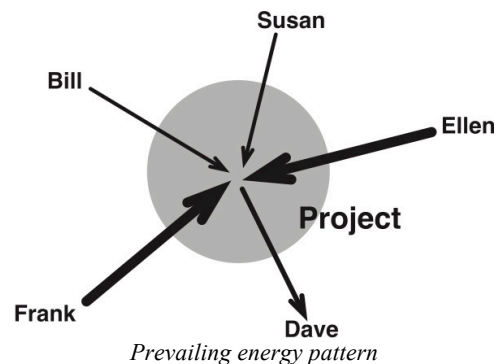
We understand one-on-one interactions. Whether with friends or strangers, lovers or enemies, we've spent a lifetime building knowledge and sensitivity to understand these encounters at the non-verbal level. In a group of people, however, energetics become vastly more complex. The form of circle lends itself particularly well to understanding and enhancing group energetics. Let's look at a scenario that helps us understand what we already know about group energetics.

It's the Monday morning staff meeting of a company. This staff has been together for one year. Susan arrives tired from a weekend of hosting her family. Ellen and Frank are chipper and ready to roll—the "on task" staff. Dave always has his own agenda. Everyone gets along with Bill.

This staff of five has been considering the question of allocating funds for a pilot project to design a new product.

Before anything is spoken in this meeting, we already know the prevailing energy pattern. Ellen and Frank are holding things together. Dave is drawing energy towards himself. Susan and Bill are lesser energetic presences than Frank, Ellen and Dave, but how they choose to contribute will greatly affect the decisions the group makes. Any number of possibilities present themselves for outcome depending on the strength of energetic input (indicated by the darkness of the line arrows) that Susan, Bill and Dave choose to exert. Granted, their influence will certainly be verbal, but the

overall effect of their words will largely hinge on the energy and enthusiasm they bring to bear.



When any group is functioning, members come and go from its sessions feeling clear and energized. The articulated common good is served and interactions are generally harmonious. In the diagram there is a balance, so most group energy flows into the betterment of the project. That does not mean participants are afraid to disagree. It means they understand how to disagree and how to seek the best alternatives given all their options. From an energetic perspective, the members of such a group have enough awareness and skill to promptly and effectively process whatever energy enters their personal and collective fields. Since a circle is organized as a rim to contain energy, it is a group form that generally facilitates a healthy collective field.

When a group is not functioning, members resist attending and energetically withdraw from the articulated goal. Interactions may appear harmonious, but there is a sense of lip service without intention, dedication, or interest in how things turn out. Individuals may withhold their energy and/or shut down their boundaries, creating a drag on the collective field. Again, referring to the diagram, if Dave pulls too much energy toward himself, he can pull the entire group off its intended focus, which is project betterment. The energy in the collective field can also lose vibrancy if individual members continually maintain poorly defined boundaries or if the group's norms have developed in such a way that the collective field won't allow dissension.<sup>ii</sup>

The Circle Way structure is designed to facilitate helpful group energetic interactions. We move now to look at those structures and how circle energetics is different from other meetings.

## Using The Circle Way Structure to Enhance Group Energetics

In the personal energetics section, we wrote about the importance of personal preparation. While each person strives to arrive at circle rested and centered, the host of the gathering can do a number of things to the meeting room that will ease the transition from everyday social space to the consciously held space of circle.

Begin by clearing away clutter. Clutter around the periphery of a room can create a chaotic environment. On the other hand, natural elements (vases of flowers, interesting stones, etc.) and pictures can soften a sterile meeting room. When possible, choose natural or indirect lighting.

If the meeting is in a public place, it's especially helpful to clear the room of the built-up energy that's been unconsciously left there by many previous meetings. One simple technique to clear a room is to open windows or doors to create a flow-through of air. Another technique, if possible, is to clap or rattle in the room to clear away energetic cobwebs. Incenses like sage also clear a space. To invite new and helpful energy, scents like sweet grass or sandalwood and sounds like music, chanting or drumming can be used. All of these preparations can be made well before participants arrive, but when people walk into the room the space will feel well tended and ready.

In addition to clearing the energy of the room, you can take steps to create the ambience of a welcoming space. Surprise helps: flowers where the environment is usually business only, or a bowl of oranges when people might be hungry, or music to set a different rhythm as people arrive. There are many variables in creating ambience, no recipe works for every situation. Take the aroma and presence of brewed coffee or tea. Some circles find that arriving to a cup of something warm helps them settle in. Others find that it provides a means to avoid the transition to more meaningful matters. The key with any of these activities is to hold a clear intent, and to act in accordance with the focus and needs of the group.

## Creating and Tending the Center

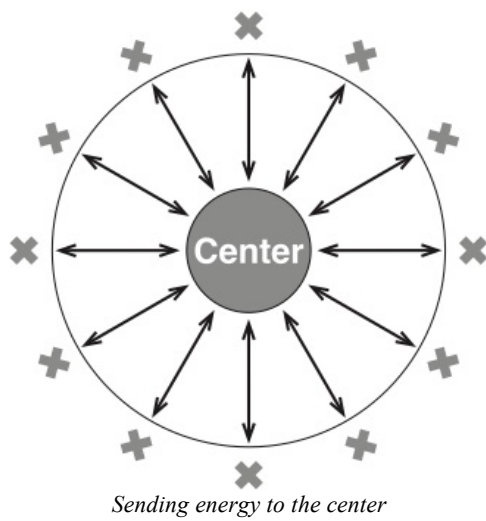
In The Circle Way, a visual center holds the circle in place by providing an energetic focal point; the hub around which everything turns. Each circle creates a center appropriate to its purpose. A school group might have photos of children in the center. A hospital staff might have its values printed on placards. A men or women's group might simply have a candle in the middle.

The center is the place where the group's highest intention resides. Creating the center in an agreed upon, formal way gives each person a physical reminder of the reason for being together and a stake in maintaining a clear interpersonal field. Once created, the center needs to be tended. Ways to tend and establish the center include lighting a candle, having each person place a check-in object in the center, and/or bringing in natural objects such as fresh flowers, stones, leaves, etc. The elaborateness or simplicity of the center of a circle is dynamic and its appearance evolves as the circle evolves. Once in place, center serves the energetics of the circle. Center is a place where people's attention can energetically rest and refocus.

An energetic practice that involves the use of center is the practice of sending energy through the center to neutralize it. In many meetings there is a kind of energetic rating system or popularity contest going on non-verbally. For example, if people like what one person is saying, they use verbal cues, positive body language and direct energetic support to show their approval. And, if people don't like what someone is saying, they use silence, negative body language, and direct energetic withdrawal to show their disapproval. We all know what it's like to be at either end of this spectrum. However, in a circle with a well-established, visual center, people are invited to send their thoughts, intentions, feelings, judgments and support into the neutral space of the center rather than to any person. The center can then function as an energetic clearinghouse which people can contribute to or take from, as they need—kind of an energy bank.

The advantage of sending energy through the center rather than directly to individuals is that the highest intention or spirit of the group, which resides in the center, literally cleans up and neutralizes energy. If there is a lot of support for a statement, the speaker doesn't get all pumped up by

suddenly receiving too much energy; and if there is lack of support for a statement, the speaker doesn't get deflated for taking a risk and experiencing too much energy withdrawal.



## Talking Piece and Conversation Council

The use of a talking piece slows down the group's verbal and energetic pace and offers a way to collect the contributions from each person present. In some Native American traditions when a talking piece is passed to the left, the energy or focus of the group is said to spin inward, towards the center. Changing directions is said to release set patterns.

The choice of a talking piece can be important. For example, one woman was organizing an appreciation council for her parents' 75<sup>th</sup> birthdays. Daughters, sons-in-law, and grandchildren gathered. Very few of the people who gathered knew anything of The Circle Way. The family home was in Austin, Minnesota—home of Hormel meatpackers. The host chose a can of Spam as the talking piece. Everyone was instantly put at ease by the fact that humor was obviously appropriate.

Free-flowing discussion without a talking piece is called a conversation council if other components of circle, such as center and agreements, are present to hold the intentional space.

## The Guardian

The presence of a guardian is helpful in circle. The guardian is a rotating volunteer who watches over the energy of a circle. He or she rings a bell or other neutral sound maker to call for a pause in the interaction. After the bell, each member takes several deep breaths to focus back on their own hoops. The guardian then calls for a stretch break, greater attentiveness, or whatever is needed in the moment, and rings the bell a second time to resume interaction.

Whether in talking piece council, conversation council, or silent council, using sound to stop action calls everyone's attention to process. The benefits of using instruments are two-fold: Their sounds are neutral and they interrupt the flow and momentum of energy in a constructive way. Think of the pleasant hum of a wedding reception or retirement party. Voices from several conversations blend into a happy din, sounding the collective energy field of the gathering. Somewhere in the room a guest taps a spoon on a glass. The crowd recognizes the signal and hushes, and the person who rang the glass calls for a toast. This familiar scene exemplifies sounding an instrument to interrupt process and redirect focus.

## Ritual, Container and Agreements

Any repeated gesture or set of actions that is given symbolic meaning becomes ritual. When people begin and end each circle with ritual, they are creating an energetic "container" for their meeting. This container is to thoughts, feelings, and other energy in the collective field as a kettle is to soup. Without a kettle, soup remains individual ingredients chopped on the cutting board. Without an opening ritual, a circle lacks the container to bring things to the greatest potential for completion. And without closing ritual, what is shared and accomplished in a circle can dissipate.

One form of ritual opening used in many circles is check-in. Those on the rim of the circle make a brief statement about how they are and how ready they are to participate in the circle. From the beginning, each voice contributes, just as it does in checkout, the ritual of closure.

The strength and tightness of a container is obtained both through ritual and through agreements. Common agreements of respectful

interaction include:

- Listen with compassion and curiosity.
- What is shared in circle remains in circle.
- Ask for what you need, and offer what you can.
- Whenever uncertainty or a need for a resting point arises, agree to fall into silence, and wait for guidance.

These agreements and others, which may be generated by the group, provide much of the tensile strength for appropriate interaction.

In addition to ritual and agreement, the group's stated intention or purpose for gathering is helpful in identifying the ongoing clarity of what goes "into the stew." Taking time to clarify the group's purpose is as important as any other component of circle in keeping a circle's energy clear. Assumed intentions will inevitably cause a circle to wobble.

The principles of rotating leadership and shared responsibility operate to keep energy moving if the components of circle like agreements and intention are clearly in place.

## In Conclusion

We trust that this booklet has given some practical understanding of how to observe and participate in the energetics of The Circle Way. First, through affirming that energy experiences are real and a normal function of everyday life. Secondly, through giving language with which to talk about these experiences. And finally, through providing exercises and practices to share with circle members.

We wish you courage and good cheer as you embark on your personal journey into the world of energy practices. May your new skills, discipline, and insights enrich and sustain you in circle.

## Energetics of Circle at a Glance

1. A circle is a container of inner personal, interpersonal, and transpersonal energy.
2. Energy is continually being exchanged, whether we acknowledge it or not.
3. Everyone, even when at rest, emits energy and participates in the ebb and flow of the collective field.
4. Well-maintained, permeable personal boundaries help us manage the exchange of

energy within the circle. The three practices of council help each member of the circle maintain clear, helpful boundaries.

5. Group agreements provide a non-judging, impersonal guide for responding to energy that comes into the circle.
6. Tending the center helps anchor the circle and helps its members connect and rejuvenate. Energy is sent to another person through the neutrality of the center, which holds symbols of the group's highest intention.
7. Individuals have differing sensitivities, awareness, and tolerances for energetic events. The presence of a group guardian is helpful in tending to those differences with respect.
8. Energy follows intention. If a circle and its members are clearly intentioned, energy flows in a healthy manner.

## Origins of The Circle Way

Circle process is often referred to as the foundational pattern supporting emerging forms of dialogue. In our need to remember and reattach to this quality of listening and speaking and collaborative action, several modern lineages of circle practice are being carried at this time, as well as the indigenous heritage that has survived around the world.

There are particular gifts associated with practicing The Circle Way that make it adaptable and successful in organizational settings. These contributions include: The Components Wheel, the Three Points of Leadership (especially the use of a group guardian), the articulation of principles and practices, and the four agreements. You can read more about these contributions in *The Circle Way: A Leader in Every Chair*.

In the history of this work, Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea coined the word "PeerSpirit" as the name of their educational company and the original name of their circle methodology. In 2010, with the publication of their book, *The Circle Way, A Leader in Every Chair*, the movement expanded globally and was rebranded as The Circle Way.

responsiveness to the pressing needs of the earth, its people, and its creatures.

Facilitators, trainers, and colleagues offer a variety of seminars and consulting services in The



Circle Way. For more information about these services, visit our website: [thecircleway.net](http://thecircleway.net).

## About the authors



**Cheryl Conklin** is an interfaith eco-spiritual minister, writer, and educator, dedicated to nurturing the soul's integration. Participating in The Circle Way from its beginning, Cheryl is a co-teacher of council skills. As a business owner and member of several councils and

committees, Cheryl has integrated the principles and practices of circle into her personal and professional life. Cheryl's understanding of energy's movement and effects stems from a lifetime of gardening, singing, ceremony, and art, and the study and practice of Healing Touch and traditional shamanism. She holds a master's degree in counseling from the University of Wisconsin-Superior and is the author of *Into the Fullness of Being: Tools for Spiritually Empowered Living*. Cheryl may be contacted through [thefullnessofbeing.com](http://thefullnessofbeing.com)



**Ann Linnea** is a life-long naturalist and wilderness guide. As co-founder of The Circle Way, she led the related outdoor adventure program and has also been one of the indoor teachers of council work. Ann co-authored an award-winning book that teaches

environmental appreciation to children. (*Teaching Kids to Love the Earth*). After a 65-day paddle around the circumference of Lake Superior, she wrote a deeply moving and metaphorical memoir of the journey titled *Deep Water Passage, a Spiritual Journey at Midlife*. In 2010, she co-authored *The Circle Way: A Leader in Every Chair* with Christina Baldwin. That year, her full-color *Keepers of the Trees: A Guide to Re-Greening North America* was published.

Ann has studied Chi Gung and Healing Touch to supplement the knowledge she has gained about energetics from her connection to the natural world. She holds a bachelor's degree in biology with honors and distinction from Iowa State University and a master's degree in teaching from the University of Idaho. She makes her home on Whidbey Island in Puget Sound and can be reached through the PeerSpirit office at [peerspirit.com](http://peerspirit.com).

## More information

The Circle Way is a movement dedicated to re-introducing and supporting the use of council or circle in western culture. We believe that by rotating leadership, sharing responsibility, and attending to the spirit of shared intention, small groups of ordinary people can align themselves with social awareness, spiritual values, and responsiveness to the pressing needs of the earth, its people, and its creatures.

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<sup>i</sup> Advanced energetics practitioners of forms like Reiki, Tai Chi, Chi Gung, Healing Touch or acupuncture actually learn to participate in changing energy patterns in themselves and objects. These skills are beyond the scope or intent of this booklet, but they represent sources one may seek to increase knowledge about energetics.

<sup>ii</sup> The source of these energy drains and disruptions is often found in shadow activity and projection. For more information about identifying and effectively dealing with shadow and projection, see the Kindle booklet *Understanding Shadow and Projection in Circles and Groups* by Meredith Jordan and Christina Baldwin.