

The Salon-Keeper's Companion

The original text of Utne Reader's handbook for salon-keepers, published in 1991.

'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.'

—Margaret Mead

Introduction

What happens if you throw a salon and people come, but nobody talks? Or worse, no one listens. Or people only talk about what they saw on television, or the clever things they said yesterday, or how oppressive the system is, or, you get the idea. Just inviting a group of people over to talk about what they're thinking and obsessing about lately does not in itself insure a successful salon. What follows are a few suggestions from some seasoned salon-keepers about how to have a salon that's stimulating, involving, and might even change the world.

Throughout this guide the word salon is used to describe a wide range of ways groups can interact.

Traditional salons like those that seeded the French Revolution tend to emphasize spirited group discussion. Council, derived mainly from Native American traditions, emphasizes 'devout listening' and unpremeditated speaking. Study circles tend to involve reading and focused group discussion.

Each form is a response to the particular needs and interests of the people gathering together. Sometimes a group begins meeting using the salon format and evolves into a council or study circle, or some other form, like a book club, macro-analysis seminar, consciousness raising group, coven, or twelve-step program. One thing leads to another.

A Place to Meet

The word salon is French for drawing room. Salons can happen just about anywhere, but some spaces are more conducive to conversational intimacy than others. Ideally the gathering will take place in someone's home, in a space just large enough to seat the entire group in a circle. Meeting rooms in an office or church are also appropriate. There should be no external distractions (telephones, traffic noise, etc.) and everyone should be reasonably comfortable. Salons can work outdoors (under a tree, around a campfire, in a private garden), but the potential for interruptions outdoors is greater.

Food/Refreshments

Breaking bread together is a time-honored social lubricant, but food can also get in the way of focused group conversation. Whether you gather for breakfast, lunch, teatime, or dinner, it's usually best to wait until everyone has finished eating before starting the group discussion. Most salon-keepers we've talked to feel that the best conversation happens without alcohol. Potlucks tend to work better for groups that already know each other. For a new salon it's usually better for the host to provide the refreshments (and possibly invite contributions to cover the costs).

Participants

Invite anyone you think would enjoy the conversation and contribute to the group. Salons can be as small as 5 or 6 people or as large as 20 to 30. A salon in San Francisco called A New American Place has grown to 80 participants. After light refreshments in one room they enter another, listen to a short presentation, break into small groups for 45 minutes to discuss what they've heard, and then reconvene for general conversation.

At the Utne Reader's Alternative Press Reading and Dining Salon, we've found that groups of 12 to 18 participants (approximately five regular participants and 10 guests) seem to work best.

Convenor/Facilitator

The roles of convenor and facilitator are distinct functions. The convenor invites the guests, provides the location, arranges the refreshments, etc. The facilitator, who could be the same person, initiates the conversation, modulates its tone, guides its direction and focus, remains aware of the time, draws out the meek, and gently but firmly quiets the boor, while witnessing and participating in the process.

The first order of business when a new salon is assembled, is to ask the group if anyone is an experienced group facilitator who'd like to serve in that role for this particular gathering. If no one steps forward the convenor should facilitate.

The First Meeting

Important goals for the first meeting are to have fun, meet everyone, and draw out the participants' ideas for what the group might do together.

Upon hearing the scraping of flatware against china, the alert facilitator begins to ready him/herself to lead the group discussion. After the dishes are cleared and the coffee or tea has been poured, the facilitator welcomes the guests and announces the beginning of the salon.

Start by asking each person to take a minute and say something about who they are. Just a few sentences should be enough. Then go around the circle a second time asking people what drew them to attend and what they would most like to see happen. Encourage wild ideas. This round could be prefaced by reading the following list of possible purposes for such a group:

Conversation? Exchange of ideas with kindred spirits on topics that people care about. What are you thinking and obsessing about lately?

Trend-watching? Tapping into the zeitgeist by making explicit your own previously unarticulated thoughts and hearing the thinking of others. This is a primary purpose of Utne Reader's salons.

Learning? Formal presentations by group members or invited guests on any subject of mutual interest ? a time-tested and reliable way to start the discussion.

Co-creation? Playful collaboration for the head, hands and heart. Berkeley salon-keeper Jaida n'ha Sandra hosts monthly gatherings for amateur poetry reading (no criticism allowed), collage-making, musical jam sessions with or without instruments, mask-making, contact dance, comedy improvisation, round-robin story writing, even Ukrainian egg-dying.

Support? Developing your own response to critical social and cultural issues (e.g., clarifying your own thinking, enriching and balancing this with other perspectives, validating what you've been intuiting, filling gaps in your knowledge, etc.).

Joint action? Collaboration on some action, like volunteering at a soup kitchen, publishing a newsletter, forming a Green political action committee, starting a calypso band, developing a co-housing project, or creating a human/dolphin pod family...whatever.

Having heard what the others have said, the facilitator could ask if anyone wants to add something. What were you drawn to? Did someone speak to an interest of yours that wasn't articulated in the first round? After this the group should try to identify common threads and see where the greatest interest lies.

It is helpful if the facilitator can model open, heartfelt sharing at the outset. This will help others to open up. Include your feelings and values, not just your ideas.

The facilitator should check for the group's readiness to formulate a vision and mission. This could take several meetings, especially if the group is large and the objectives of its members are diverse. Members could be invited to write their suggestions for a vision and mission statement to be distributed and discussed at the next meeting.

Another way to zero in on the group's purpose is through holding a group meditation after the individual members have shared. Traditionally, everyone sits in silence, as in a Quaker meeting, attunes to the theme, and shares what comes if and when they are moved to do so. People need to be encouraged to let go of preconceived ideas, be open to the unexpected, legitimate the silence, and 'listen' to their bodies as a cue to when they are called to speak. Another approach particularly well suited to identifying a group's purpose is the council process (see the following section).

It may be that your group never reaches consensus about what to do together. It may subdivide into a variety of forms. Hurrah! Go forth and multiply.

Council

Another way a group can be together is in council. Whereas salons are more freewheeling and spontaneous, council is more deliberate and meditative. Salons work well for groups of individuals who haven't met before. Council works better for groups that already have some history, although this is by no means a prerequisite to its use. Salons are more social. Council is more ceremonial. In salons, the emphasis is on conversation. In council, the emphasis is on community. Council is a way to go deeply into an issue, to create a sense of 'groupness,' to seek higher wisdom and guidance, to open the heart and speak truth.

Talking Sticks and Children's Fire

We often set three simple rules for council: Speak honestly, be brief, and listen from the heart. The group chooses one or two leaders or facilitators whose job it is to keep the process on track. To empower each person to speak in turn, a 'talking stick' or other object is chosen to be passed around the circle—traditionally clockwise, in the 'sun direction.' The talking stick can be anything from a flower to a traditional hand-crafted artifact.

If possible, a fire is built in the center of the circle or a candle is lit to set the mood for storytelling. We have come to call this the 'children's fire,' following the Sundance teaching of Hyemeyohst's Storm. When we say, 'Never cross the children's fire,' we mean no one is to interrupt the person holding the talking stick (except, as in the traditional Native American councils, to express approval by saying, 'Ho!').

Devout Listening and Unpremeditated Speaking

One of the great challenges of council is not to be thinking about what you're going to say until it's your turn to speak. Preparing your contribution before you receive the talking stick obviously diminishes its spontaneity and responsiveness to what others have said. A good practice is to wait until the talking stick is in your hands before pausing to see what springs to mind. A few simple silent reflections can be useful: Will my speaking serve me? Will the circle or community be served? Will the 'bigger picture,' life, God....be served? When doubts remain, it is usually best to take the leap. Boldness is rarely inappropriate.

If the ground rules are stated clearly at the outset it will rarely be necessary for the leader to interrupt anyone for rambling or speaking inappropriately. When interruption is necessary, remember that 'gentle decisiveness' is the mark of a good leader.

Councils can be open or thematic, depending on the group's needs.

Even in an open council a theme often emerges, perhaps triggered by one person's story or the general movement of what is said. Often several people in the circle find they are dealing with the same issue and so the council ends up focusing on that topic. Any member of the circle may shift the theme or propose an entirely new course for the circle. Leaders need to continuously consider the truth of the moment, regardless of who may be speaking it.

Normal witnessing is a basic part of council that brings a different perspective to the circle. One approach is to designate a few regular members of the group as witnesses on a rotating basis, or visitors can be asked to participate in this way. Witnesses sit in the circle but are silent as the talking stick goes around, listening with as much of the 'long view' as they can muster. Then after everyone has spoken, the witnesses are asked to comment, not just about the statements already made, but also about the council process itself. Often a witness will have something valuable to tell the leaders about their way of handling the council.

There are as many styles of council leadership as there are council leaders. Some leaders are active and directive whereas others stay very much in the background, letting the process unfold on its own. Experienced leaders vary their style as the situation demands, taking their cues from the council's purpose and the realities of the moment.

Sometimes a leader will initiate the round in order to set an appropriate tone. At other times the leader may choose to speak last, using his or her turn not only to speak on a personal level, but also to respond to what others have said and to summarize the central themes that emerged. When there are two leaders, both of these important functions can be accomplished in the same council. If time permits, the leader may send the stick around a second time or place it in the center for further exploration.

As in the ancient circles of elders, council members come to know that they each bring a piece of the truth to the circle—a piece essential in itself, but only a part of the whole. The passion of a personal vision becomes part of the larger truth of the circle. When council is working, we all experience this truth without any threat to personal identity and without the 'tyranny of the collective.' Everyone recognizes what's really happening and sees the path to 'right action,' often at the same time, and usually accompanied by the special joy inherent in the co-visioning process.

This experience of simultaneous common realization should not be confused with the democratic process treasured by our political idealism. In council we rarely determine which position is held by the majority—by taking a vote, for example. Sometimes a single individual in touch with the larger truth—and clear enough to reflect it in council—can eventually bring the entire circle into focus. On more than a few occasions we have experienced a young child being the truth-holder in a council of elders.

Simply put, the essence of a council is participation in an interdependence that frees us from the bondage of self-absorption and opens the door to spirited co-creation.

Study circles

Study circles are a long established form of adult learning particularly suited for groups that want to increase their knowledge about political or social issues and their ability to effect change. Begun in the 19th century, study circles enjoy widespread use in Scandinavia, where a third of the adult population participates. The Swedish government even subsidizes study circles materials fees.

Participation in a study circle implies a certain commitment. Ideally 5 to 20 participants meet once a week for at least three sessions and rarely for more than five or six. Each discussion lasts approximately two hours and is directed by a well-prepared leader whose role is to aid in lively but focused discussion. Participants receive in advance about an hour's worth of reading material covering the topic for the session.

Two individuals, the organizer and the leader, are central to the creation and success of a study circle. The study circle organizer selects or develops the reading materials, recruits participants, arranges the logistics of the meetings, and chooses the discussion leader. The study circle leader stimulates and moderates the discussion and guides the group toward the goals that it has agreed upon.

The leader does not need to be an expert or even the most knowledgeable person in the group. However, the leader should be the most well-prepared person in the room. The leader guides the study circle through his or her familiarity with the reading material, preparation of questions to aid discussion, previous reflection about the directions in which the discussion might go, knowledge of the people and personalities in the group, and a clear understanding of the goals of the study circle.

The most difficult aspects of leading discussion groups include keeping the discussion focused, handling aggressive participants, and keeping one's own ego at bay in order to truly hear participants. A background of leading small group discussion or meetings is helpful.

The goal of a study circle is not to master a text or to learn a lot of facts, but rather to deepen understanding and judgment. This can occur in a focused discussion when people exchange views freely and consider a variety of viewpoints. The process—democratic discussion among equals—is as important as the content.

Participants should commit to attending all meetings, help keep the discussion on track, address their remarks to the group rather than to the leader, listen carefully to others, speak freely without monopolizing the discussion, and maintain an open mind, even when they disagree with what is being said.

It is not necessary for a study circle to achieve consensus. In some cases a group will split. There's no need to hammer out agreement.

Close each session with a summary and perhaps an evaluation. Review the overall goals of the program and discuss whether the group has moved toward those goals.

The Study Circles Resource Center, in addition to the materials from which the preceding passages were excerpted, now offers the Public Talk Series, discussion aides designed to stimulate exploration of such issues as 'America's Role in the Middle East,' 'American Society and Economic Policy: What Should Our Goals Be?,' 'America's Role in the World,' and 'The Changing Shape of Security in Europe.' Several others in the series, which is free of charge, are due out this year covering such topics as cultural diversity, universal health care, economic conversion, and the death penalty. SCRC invites suggestions for other topics that groups would be interested in discussing.

Salons, council, and study circles are just a few of the countless ways a group of people can interact. The form your group embraces and evolves into will be unique to your particular mix of personalities and goals.

Remember, think globally, act vocally.

Eric Utne, 1991