A short guide to help make workplaces restorative.
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Restorative Workplaces

Restorative processes can be used in varied forms at the workplace, including circles, restorative conversations, and conferences. In addition to these stand-alone processes, becoming a truly restorative workplace requires embodying restorative values in daily interactions, operations and practices, effectively, making these values a core of the workplace’s DNA.¹

This short primer offers a few tools for operationalising restorative values with the idea that all members of the team continuously aspire to implement these tools.

This document is a compilation of research and tools from different sources, including conversations with restorative practitioners. This is a living document and we seek to keep updating and adding to it. Please share your ideas and lived experiences with us at engage@csjindia.org

Restorative mindset & ‘heartset’ at the workplace²

A restorative workplace involves a series of practices and tools, and more importantly, a mindset that prioritises relationships. Often, more than a way of thinking, this becomes a way of being, and hence the term, ‘heartset’.

A core aspect of a restorative workplace is this mindset and heartset that define all interactions and communication. The following are some cornerstone principles of this mindset and heartset:

- We live in a universe where relationships are primary.³
- When using a relationship-centred lens, we understand that undesirable behaviours (including those at the workplace), stem from a lack of strong relationships and offer an opportunity to build warm, strong connections.⁴
• We must treat everyone around us with respect in all settings.  
• We need to involve others in decisions that affect them.  
• We must be cautious about imposing our viewpoints on others.  
• Each person (we work with and work for) is the expert on themselves.  
• We are not expected to know everything or have all the answers.  
• Those involved in the problem must be involved in finding and implementing solutions, rather than experts, professionals, or seniors unilaterally deciding what is to be done.  
• Each of us is more than the worst thing we’ve ever done.  
• We need to replace the idea of isolating, shaming, and punishing those who engage in behaviour that is divergent from organisation norms, with strategies that help them understand how their behaviour is divergent, recognise how their actions impact others, take responsibility for it, and be supported in moving forward.  
• We aspire to practice loving-kindness and non-violence towards ourselves and others.  
• We aspire to practice intentionality and mindfulness in all interactions and communications as that helps us practice effective listening, empathy, understanding and perspective-taking.  
• We acknowledge our limitations and acknowledge when we are wrong and apologise.
RESTORATIVE CHECK-INS
Check-ins are **one on one conversations** usually between supervisors and their direct reports. These conversations **offer space** to understand the employee’s needs, perspectives, struggles as well as to offer timely feedback.

Restorative workplaces prioritise relationships and check-ins help operationalise this value. Check in frequently with team members both informally, as well as by scheduling dedicated time slots for one-on-one conversations.

While allowing for free-flowing conversation, it can also be helpful to have a structural framework in the form of restorative guiding questions:

- Tell me about your week/month – what’s it been like?
- What areas of your work are you enjoying?
- What areas of your work are you struggling with?
- What’s one gift/skill/talent you have that I have overlooked or underutilised?
- What suggestions/improvements do you have about...?
- What roadblocks are getting in your way?
- Where do you think I can be most helpful?
- What can you/we do differently next time?
- Tell me about what you’ve learned from...
- What questions do you have about...?
Check-ins are also a space to work on the employee’s career development, not just limited to the workplace. Asking employees about their long-term goals regularly can help supervisors better understand employees and also offer relevant mentoring and career development opportunities.  

These check-ins can also help to build psychological safety:

- What do you see me doing that is contributing to the team effectively?
- What is one thing I need to know that will improve our relationship?
- What is one thing you need from me that will help you to be more effective/productive/successful?
- What’s one gift/skill/talent I have that I have overlooked or underutilised?
- What motivates you and how can we bring more of that to our work?
RESTORATIVE CIRCLES

CIRCLE PROCESS

CIRCLE OUTLINE

CIRCLE OBJECTIVES
**Restorative circles** are a space for dialogue that can be used for a variety of purposes such as problem-solving, addressing conflict, debriefing, or team building. For an in-depth understanding of restorative circles, see this Primer.

- In organisational contexts, due to their format, **circles create space for team members** to understand each other in ways regular interactions don’t usually allow for. When such meaningful dialogue takes place regularly, “a unique relationship develops among team members …. They develop a richer understanding of the uniqueness of each person’s point of view.”

"The more we get into circle, the more we embody a way of being that really centres everyone’s humanity, everyone’s dignity, everyone’s sovereignty." - Nellie Mae Ed. Fdn.

- **Circles encourage trust, transparency, and create a space for difficult conversations** – all of which help foster a sense of belonging and wellbeing. Dialogue of the form that takes place in circle can have ‘transformational effects’ on groups with “increasing trust between members of the group—and trust in the process itself—lead[ing] to the expression of the sorts of thoughts and feelings that are usually kept hidden”.

- **Circles also actively work to equalise all voices**; supervisors and employees sit in equal positions. The equal spaces can pave the way for breaking through the ‘veil of silence’ that may often seep into organisations owing to management structures and hierarchies.
Circles have particular relevance for organisations working in the social justice and development sector. While participants are invited to share personal challenges, the circles also create space for discussing structural difficulties, as well as the possibility and manifestations of burnout, compassion fatigue and secondary trauma. Using evidence-based techniques, circles also encourage participants to explore individual coping mechanisms and build resilience, particularly designed around those exposed to secondary trauma.23

In contexts of team members experiencing similar distress, sharing experiences and the ensuing impact can also help understand shared distress and find hope and meaning in mutuality.

As circles progress, they can be used to build shared norms for behaviour around the workplace, including needs and concerns related to discrimination and bias related to caste, class, gender, sexuality etc.24

Eventually, organisational circles can also be used to address conflicts that have arisen or may arise amongst staff.25

Circles can also be adapted by the organisation for purposes they see fit, just as running meetings, discussing challenges, problem-solving etc.26
Circle Process

For a detailed insight into the basics of a circle process and related terminology, check out CSJ’s FAQs on Circle Processes Primer here.

Two circle keepers will facilitate the conversation through structured questions and inviting each participant to share in the circle order.

Together, participants define norms that guide the conversations and help foster a safe space for the discussion. No one is required to speak and participants always have the option to pass; however, the pre-determined order offers each participant the space to speak without being interrupted.

Circle Outline

- Opening the circle using guided mindfulness and breathing tools.
- Setting collective norms or guidelines for the circle process which participants can commit to in order to allow each participant to feel safe enough to engage in the space.
- Checking-in to the circle by talking about how participants are doing.
- Sharing experiences.
- Discussing coping tools.
- Closing the circle with a stabilisation practice.
Circle Objectives

- Creating a safe, confidential space for participants to talk about their experiences, challenges or emotions;
- Equipping participants with tools for greater self-awareness, i.e., understanding their own emotions, emotional wellbeing, and tools for self-management of emotions;
- Building and strengthening relationships among the team members to deepen the support systems within the team; and
- Guiding participants towards developing tools for self-compassion, resilience, and wellbeing.

Evidence shows that after participating in circles, people demonstrate better self-awareness as well as a better understanding of others, which in turn promotes healthier relationships.\(^3^0\)

Circles can also help to mitigate the impact of challenging experiences, including trauma, and promote general wellbeing.\(^3^1\)

Different contexts in which restorative circles can be used at the workplace:

- Celebrations and transitions – welcoming a new team member, birthdays and farewells.
- Decision-making & strategic planning – During target review meetings.
- Processing the impact of challenges – including the pandemic, grief, personal and work challenges.
- Connection building – regular circles at fixed intervals, reflection circles at the end/start of the year.
- Conflict resolution – responsive circles to address specific situations.
ADDRESSING CONFLICT AT THE WORKPLACE

A Framework for Restorative Practice
– Belinda Hopkins
If you avoid conflict to keep the peace, you start a war inside of yourself."
- Cheryl Richardson

When conflict arises, and it is inevitable that it will, using the restorative framework can be helpful to operationalise the restorative mindset and heartset principles.

However, it must be kept in mind that these tools are a top-up for relationship-building practices and must not be used in isolation. Relationships are built through restorative spaces, spaces for personal sharing, knowing there will be no backlash to sharing.

When an adequate investment hasn’t been made into interpersonal relationships, and employees are directly asked to engage in conflict redressal, it may cause further harm.

In addition, when employees are asked to resolve conflict on their own, without being provided with requisite tools, it can aggravate the conflict. Employees must be equipped with the tools for conflict redressal and for voicing their needs in respectful ways.\textsuperscript{33}

"Conflict is inevitable, complex, and emotionally challenging for teams."
- Craig Runde and Tim Flanagan

When all members of the team have been provided spaces for relationship building and offered tools for conflict management, the following questions can be used in one-on-one questions as well as in group spaces:

- 1: What’s happened?
  - Everyone has a different perspective on any given experience or issue. Let everyone express how they personally experienced what has happened or is happening.
  - We must be cautious of not imposing our experience as the only narrative; multiple truths exist, and different people may have experienced the same event in different ways.
2: Thoughts and Feelings: What have you been thinking and feeling?
- Thoughts influence Feelings
- Invite people to express what they were/are thinking and how they were/are feeling as a result of these thoughts. If people are not comfortable with vocabulary around feelings, offer tools such as emotion charts.

3: Impact and harm – Who do you think was impacted? In what way?
- Conflict and wrongdoing impact people and cause harm; this harm needs to be repaired
- Invite each person to consider who has been or is being harmed/affected by the situation/event and how.
- Encourage accountability and responsibility by ensuring non-judgmental responses.

4: What do people want?
- In the event of harm, everyone involved will have needs.
- Invite each to consider what they need now to repair harm/solve the problem, to feel better, and to move on.

5: The way forward
- Those harmed/affected need to find ways forward for themselves.
- Invite each to consider how each of the needs expressed can be met, what support they might need to do this and how they will do things differently in the future.

When adequate energy has been invested into relationship building, and employees know that other team members care about them and have their best interests at heart, it is easier to show vulnerabilities and acknowledge wrongdoing, trusting that they will not be penalised.34
RESTORATIVE FEEDBACK
Feedback is important for individuals to grow. However, feedback given without adequate preparation or understanding of the other person’s needs, can backfire and result in the receiver feeling defensive and leave them unwilling to change.

- **Be curious**
  - Before giving feedback acknowledge to yourself that you may not know the entire situation/context and operate from a place of curiosity to understand the situation. Asking the restorative question of “What do you think happened here” when addressing a specific situation may be helpful.

- **Be specific**
  - Provide specific feedback by explicitly tying feedback to a specific/observable behaviour.\(^{35}\) Give feedback on specific observable behaviour and not on the person\(^{36}\) & also factual feedback rather than interpretative feedback.\(^{37}\)
  - Instead of “You aren’t very.../you didn’t do a lot of.....”, use “I observed that you did.....”

- **Communicate your needs and feelings**
  - Talk about your needs (could also be of the organisation) and also include your feelings. Rather than focusing exclusively on the other person, this helps in giving feedback without moralisation.\(^{38}\)

- **Own your perspective as one among many**
  - Acknowledge that your feedback is only a perspective and there are alternative perspectives that could exist.
  - Also try exploring the situation from their perspective by asking genuinely curious questions.

- **Have a clear ask**
  - If you’re recommending changed behaviour, finish with a request and a clear ask.\(^{39}\)

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*Atticus Finch is a fictional character in Harper Lee’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel of 1960, To Kill a Mockingbird.*
• Check-in with them
  ○ Ask the recipient about what they think & how they feel about the feedback they have received. It’s important to take their perspective into account. This helps understand their perspective & reduce defensiveness.  

• Acknowledge your feelings including those of anxiety
  ○ When it feels difficult to be giving feedback, especially to a supervisor, acknowledge that doing this is hard for you. This simple act helps with anxiety.

• Make feedback timely
  ○ Offer feedback in a timely manner, ideally immediately after the event, instead of saving it for quarterly/annual meetings. This helps as the incident/work deliverable is recent for everyone and there is scope for implementing recommendations as well.

• Acknowledge your role
  ○ Own your own part and also share vulnerabilities. For instance, think of things you could have done differently to help in the situation as well, including prior communication of expectations, additional support, check-ins etc.
• Allow for multiple lines of feedback
  ○ Create spaces for reverse feedback which allow all employees to provide feedback on those otherwise engaged in giving feedback. Often, these spaces may need to be anonymous as power dynamics may prevent employees from sharing feedback with employers directly.\textsuperscript{44}

• Offer praise/appreciation and encouragement
  ○ Offer positive feedback in addition to raising concerns and offering constructive feedback.\textsuperscript{45}
  ○ Follow the same rules used for other feedback and offer it in timely way, ensuring it is task-specific.\textsuperscript{46}

• Be mindful of the impact of negative feedback
  ○ Be aware of the impact of negative feedback on an employee’s wellbeing and performance (negative feedback impacts an employee six times more adversely than positive feedback impacts positively).\textsuperscript{47} Being cognizant of this can help to operationalise the other principles of restorative feedback.
Feedback Preparation Checklist
– Brene Brown

1. I’m ready to sit next to you rather than across from you.
2. I’m willing to put the problem in front of us rather than between us (or sliding it toward you).
3. I’m ready to listen, ask questions, and accept that I may not fully understand the issue.
4. I’m ready to acknowledge what you do well instead of picking apart your mistakes.
5. I recognise your strengths and how you can use them to address your challenges.
6. I can hold you accountable without shaming or blaming.
7. I’m open to owning my part.
8. I can genuinely thank someone for their efforts rather than criticise them for their failings.
9. I can talk about how resolving these challenges will lead to growth and opportunity.
10. I can model the vulnerability and openness that I expect to see from you.
11. I’m aware of power dynamics, implicit bias, and stereotypes.
RESTORATIVE ENGAGEMENT OF EMPLOYEES
Restorative Workplaces & Employee Rights

For team members to be able to adopt restorative mindsets and heart-sets, it is crucial for staff to be supported in ensuring their own wellbeing.\(^49\) Organisations should continue to ensure that staff is provided spaces and policies for staff to

1. Have time off – including paid leave and regular time off during the week;
2. Be supported in ensuring a work-life balance including adhering to work hours unless in exceptional circumstances, as well as being encouraged to pursue interests and hobbies outside of work;
3. Receive adequate remuneration based on their experience and skills;
4. Receive support for mental health including access to therapy or other mental health support;
5. Have capacity building opportunities of different kinds including those related to skills, knowledge, practice tools, etc.; and
6. Be made to feel valued, respected and appreciated.

Restorative Workplaces & Employee Rights

International instruments prescribe that all individuals have rights in relation to employment including the right to work, the right to just and favourable conditions of work, right to equality (equal pay for equal work and protection from discrimination) and the right to just and favourable remuneration.\(^50\)

Restorative practices and principles help to ensure employee rights including the right against discrimination by creating spaces that are genuinely inclusive, welcoming and promote belonging and offer meaningful recourse when someone experiences discrimination or bullying on the grounds of gender, caste, ethnicity, disability, socio-economic class, etc.\(^51\)
Even in the undesirable situation that employees’ rights are at the risk of being violated – for instance a new policy potentially infringes the right to just and favourable conditions of work, restorative workspaces allow safe spaces for employees to speak up and be heard, and ideally, for appropriate remedial action to be taken.

**Two-way dialogue and transparency**

Restorative spaces also create space for two-way dialogue and for leaders to explain the reasons for their actions, for instance, an inability to hike salaries during a financially turbulent time period. All affected team members have a chance to know the truth and get the full picture of what is happening, rather than having to rely on rumours or unfounded fears. Restorative practices and principles allow for transparency, honest discussion and collective solutions in consonance with fair process principles.

**Long term change**

However, the real value of restorative spaces lies in transcending a rights framework and ensuring that beyond each individuals’ rights being ensured, intrinsic change begins to take place where people are supported in identifying and overcoming implicit bias and stereotypes as well as broader systemic factors that lead to inequities.
What kind of workplaces can use restorative practices?

‘With the right commitment and support from leadership, a restorative approach could be appropriate for any employer.’

Restorative practices can be used in diverse workspaces in different contexts, including in social justice, prison, military as well as corporate workspaces.

Leadership support to implement the tools is essential. However, even when leadership is not fully on board, it is possible for each individual to begin using smaller tools such as those relating to restorative communication, or checking-in with other employees or beginning to operationalise the restorative values in the manner they deem fit. We don’t need to wait to start working in a restorative organisation to start implementing restorative roots.

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This primer is a brief compilation of ways of building a restorative workplace. If you found resonance with this resource and want our support in implementing restorative tools at your workplace, please feel free to get in touch with us at engage@csjindia.org
End Notes and References


5 Supra, [2]

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 10 ways to see belonging as central to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in 2021. (2021). Retrieved 15 December 2021, from [here](#).

9 Supra, [3]

10 Supra, [2]

11 Bryan Stevenson

12 Supra, [2]

13 Hakim Alaji

14 Supra, [4]

15 Supra, [3]


17 Drawn from Jean Marie DiGiovanna’s work on psychological safety.

18 Supra, [1]


20 Supra, [1]


22 Supra, [1]


24 Supra, [1]

25 Supra, [2]


28 Ibid.


Chris Stevens, Senior Manager, Restorative Practice and Countywide Services Surrey County Council and Dr Belinda Hopkins, Transforming Conflict.


UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR) (UN 1948), Article 23


