

## Who, Like Me, Loves to Use the Step-In Circle?

**Marlo Archer, PhD, PAT<sup>1</sup>**

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The Step-In Circle exercise is an elegant and versatile group-building activity. Group members offer personal information to reveal commonalities safely. This article describes how to facilitate a Step-In Circle, as well as offers four modifications for use in less-than-optimal settings including an amputee support group, a group too large to form a circle, a group with a blind member, and a group unprepared for action.

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### INTRODUCTION

When I was a teenager, my girlfriends and I played a game at slumber parties called, “I never.” Each girl started out with 10 pennies. On your turn, you declared something that you had never done, like, “I never cheated on a test,” or “I never went to Disneyland.” Each player who had done that activity had to give the speaker a penny. If someone ever ended up with all the pennies, they won, but I do not recall that ever happening.

What usually happened instead was that the game just got nastier and nastier with people revealing each other’s secrets in statements like, “I never kissed Johnny Smith” after which everyone watched a red-faced girl slide a penny into the center, but then all would be surprised when a second girl would slide a penny into the center. Thus would begin a spectacular conflict. A person could conceivably “win” if they were willing to betray confidences or set themselves apart from the group with items like, “I never had sex yet.”

When I was introduced to the Step-In Circle, I saw it as just a variation of “I never,” but I have come to see the subtle and important differences that make the Step-In Circle an elegant group-building exercise in contrast to “I never,” which could be quite unsettling at times.

Step-In Circle begins with group members standing in a circle and one person steps into the circle and finishes the following question, “Who, like me,

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Marlo Archer is a licensed psychologist, treating kids, teens, and families in Tempe, Arizona ([www.DrMarlo.com](http://www.DrMarlo.com)). Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to the author at 1237 W. Auburn Drive, Tempe, AZ 85283. E-mail: [Marlo.Archer@AzPsychodrama.com](mailto:Marlo.Archer@AzPsychodrama.com).

\_\_\_\_\_?” People ask things like, “Who, like me, is married?”, “has a dog?”, or “works full-time?” The initiator stays standing in the middle and is joined by anyone else for whom the criterion is also true. When the other people with dogs step in, they will all see each other. Everyone who does not own dogs is left on the outside ring, looking in. Anyone can ask any question, provided it is first and foremost, true about themselves. The group continues the activity until interest runs out or the activity must end for time constraints.

Both activities, “I never” and a Step-In Circle, have a common goal, to reveal commonalities and to help group members get to know each other better. However, the Step-In Circle puts the disclosure in the hands of the subject. A group member may want to know who, in the circle, has been arrested, but they only get to find out if they have also been arrested and are willing to disclose that first, risking that perhaps they are the only one. I find it delightful when people step in with something outrageous, fully expecting to be standing alone but find themselves shocked to have half the group in the circle with them and several others trying to justify how they almost qualify to step in as well.

As the activity progresses, the criteria naturally move from periphery to core, consistent with a good warm-up process. Initial questions are about where people live, how many siblings they have, or what sort of work they do. Middle-stage questions might be about divorce, whether or not they have ever stolen from an employer, or if they have lost both of their parents. Later questions tend to reveal spiritual beliefs, 12-Step group membership and histories of abuse, if the group members are feeling safe with each other.

Needless to say, this is a great group-building exercise to do at the start of any workshop, but it works most simply with about a dozen able-bodied, enthusiastic participants and sometimes that’s not what you get when you sign up to run a workshop. I’d like to share with you four adaptations of this I’ve used very successfully, in less-than-optimal settings.

### **Amputee Support Group**

Asked to facilitate a monthly meeting of an amputee group, I arrived to find several people whose amputations I could not quickly identify, several fully-abled partners of attendees, some torsos in wheelchairs, a fellow whose prosthetic leg had been broken and he had not had the money to replace it yet, and a couple of very obese toe-less women in wheelchairs. I used a Step-In Circle as follows—I identified a circle on the ground and asked everyone to be “on” the circle. That allowed me to assess each member’s ambulatory ability, and I concluded that most of the people would be able to move in or out of the circle. Three of the wheelchair users were quite nimble, whereas the other two were less so, with one unable to move herself at all. The man with the missing prosthetic was not skilled with crutches, but he identified a pivoting motion he could do easily that would put him in or out of the circle. To my surprise, one of the persons I judged to be fully abled was exhausted and preferred to sit through the activity, and he and the immobile wheelchair-bound woman were given a long flag that they would trip into or out of the circle. Once everyone had a way to be

in or out of the circle, we proceeded as usual. Everyone had fun and even the most immobile woman stopped using her flag after a while and would extend a toe-less foot into the circle as her version of stepping in. There was much laughter and fun. A group that had been meeting monthly for years found out many previously unknown things about each other with this simple activity.

### **A Group Too Large to Form a Circle**

I was asked to present at a college and was told to expect an audience around 20–25. Meanwhile, professors offered extra credit for attendance and the venue was moved to an auditorium. I arrived to find a group of about 250. Rather than throwing out my beloved Step-In Circle, I retooled it for a group that size by changing it from Step-In to Stand-Up. I had audience members stand up and loudly use the starter, “Who, like me \_\_\_\_\_?” and anyone who shared that characteristic would also stand. I allowed a lot of time for each item, encouraging them to look around the room and make eye contact with those who shared that connection. The group surprised me by going fairly deep despite a need to speak very loudly about things of a tender nature.

### **Blind Group Member**

We arrived to present a full-day workshop for 12 participants only to find out one member was completely blind. He assured us he could manage with minimal assistance, but we wanted him to have the best experience possible and to be fully included. When it came to the Step-In Circle, I knew that one of the powerful aspects of the exercise is to experience not being alone and I feared that he would miss that part of it, not being able to see who has all stepped in. So in addition to stepping in, I had people say their name, say they were stepping in, and anything else to add about why they were stepping in. I did that also so that he could associate names with voices. Since no one present had ever seen Step-In Circle before, they did not know it had been modified in any way. One person commented on how particularly well-suited the exercise was for visually impaired people.

### **A Group Unprepared for Action**

Sometimes I am requested to speak at events, and although I tell the organizers that my presentation will be interactive, that does not always get conveyed to attendees. Even if it does get conveyed, sometimes it is not entirely welcomed. In such instances I use a graduated version of Step-In Circle to get people warmed-up. It starts with all people in their classroom style seats, facing forward. I offer nonthreatening, connecting, current event criteria I think most people will endorse like, “Who, like me, is rooting for the Diamondbacks to make it to the World Series?” I will raise one hand to about the level of my face as I do it and a number of people instinctively copy me. The room experiences hand-raising and I have not given any instructions to do so. I will throw out a few more here and there, each time raising my hand a little higher, and more enthusiastically each

time. People just automatically copy that. Not everyone does, but it does not matter; I am just building momentum. Inevitably, someone shouts out some variation of a criterion, often in direct opposition to one I offered. I latch onto it as a spontaneous act of participation. I say, "Let's see that one, stand up there, buddy. Who, like him, wants the Boston Red Sox to win instead?" Once one person has stood up, often others will, and I just let them stand up about sports teams or whatever for a while, and then I subtly shift it by saying, "What else do you want to know about each other?" Stand up and say, "Who, like me, \_\_\_\_\_?" After a few people do it, I say it is easier to do it in a circle and I have them form the circle then. When 60% of the people in a room are standing up and forming a circle, the other 40% generally just go along with it, but I let them know that anyone who does not want to be a part of this can feel free to stay in their seats. It is rare that anyone does, and if it is only for physical comfort, I just have the circle form in a way they can be in it seated. Every once in a while someone wants to really protest all the activity, and I just make it overt that it is a bad surprise when you expect to sit in a chair and listen to someone and they want you to get up and walk around. That usually paves the way for them to say whatever their actual objection to it is, and the group usually falls over itself trying to make it okay for that person to be included in whatever way works for them.

## CONCLUSION

The Step-In Circle exercise is simple, easy, flexible, and it builds safety and inclusion and, therefore, trust within a group. Please feel free to call or e-mail me with any questions or comments you may have about using Step-In Circle. Our Institute is happy to provide consultation on using psychodrama techniques, methods, and philosophy in groups or with individuals.