Communication Circle

What is a <u>communication circle</u>?

A tool that provides a visual representation of the communication flows that occur between departments, staff, and customers in a process. The Communication Circle is helpful for:

(1) Identifying the number of transactions and handoffs of information in a process;
(2) Defining the various types of communication in a process;
(3) Identifying possible bottlenecks in a process;
(4) Identifying the need for centralized communication in a process.

When should I use it?

- When you suspect there are bottlenecks or too many handoffs in a communication process.
- When you suspect that there are unnecessary steps or participants in a communication process
- When you are unclear about how communication flows in a process and who is involved in the communication flows
- When process participants report frustration with miscommunication
- When no one person, team, or unit understands or controls the flow of communication about a process

How do I facilitate or create it?

1. **Draw a large circle on a large piece of paper**. It's helpful to use large flip chart paper.

2. **Write the names of all the people or part of the organization involved in the process around the outside edge of the circle**. Space the names of people or divisions evenly around the outside of the circle. Be sure to include the customer and external stakeholders as well.

3. **Start with the first step in the process, and draw a line connecting the first person or division with the second person or division with whom they communicate in the process**. It can be helpful to number each line so you can follow the communication flow chronologically.
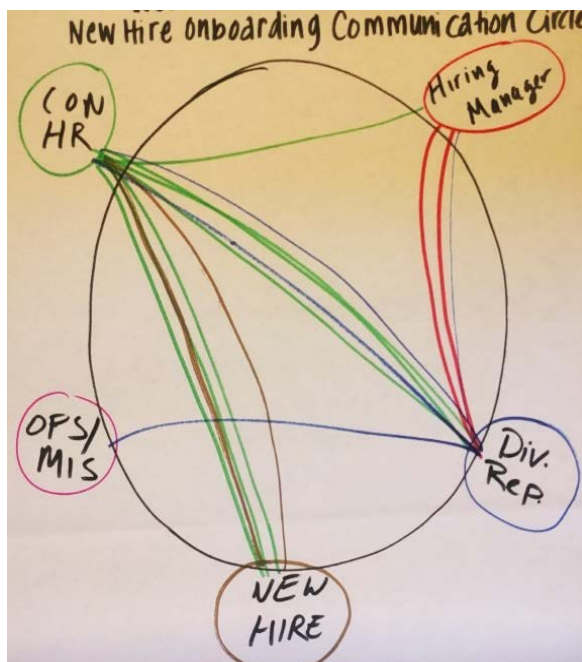
The example provided visualizes the communication flow for the new hire on-boarding process in the City's Controller's Office. The Controller's Office Human Resources (CON HR) staff initiates the process by contacting the Hiring Manager. That initial communication is represented by a green line connecting the Hiring Manager to CON HR (labeled 1).

Different colors were used to signify the originator of the communication. Communications initiated by the Division Representative (Div Rep) are blue. Communications initiated by the Hiring Manager are red; and brown represents the New Hire.

4. **Analyze the results**. Use this time to facilitate a discussion about what group members realized after doing the communication circle. Count how many people are involved in the process, how many different types of communication are represented in the circle, and how many lines of communication there are. Assess the circle for excess movement, waiting, or backlogs. Ask participants, "What strikes you about this communication circle? What do you notice? Are there bottlenecks? If so, where? Are there any transfers of information that seem redundant or unnecessary?"

5. **Debrief with the team**. Using the results of your analysis, discuss possible improvements to the current communication circle. Ask participants, "Okay, so can we eliminate any of these steps?" Ask participants if there are ways to reduce: (1) the number of people involved in the process, (2) the types of communication used in the process (duplicative communication channels), or (3) the amount of communication occurring in the process. "Could A give the info directly to C without going through B? Who really needs to be involved in this meeting / copied on this email?"

6. **Capture diverse voices.** If there are other staff (or customers) who are involved in the process, but not part of the exercise, you might run the diagram by them to see if they have other ideas.

7. **Draw a new "future state" communication circle**. The new communication circle design should incorporate the solutions your group discussed during step 5.

Hints

*   If group members disagree about how to improve a communication problem they discovered during this exercise, try completing a Five Whys or Fishbone exercise on the problem. This exercise usually helps teams that have differing opinions come to a common understanding of the root causes of a problem.
*   A future-state communications circle could accompany a future state process map. Make sure that any future state materials the improvement team develops align with one another.
*   If the process communication is a mess, the current state communication circle will look like a mess, too – that's okay! It will provide a vivid contrast to a cleaned up future state!
*   If group members are having trouble accepting the new communication circle, try framing it as an experiment. See if team members will accept the new communication structure for a few weeks rather than as a permanent change.
*   Remember that change is hard for most people. See the change management resource guide for how to prepare people for and support them through change.