



Mural: "A Love Supreme (Wynwood Saints)" by Miles MacGregor; Photo by Impermanent Art

Roca, Peacemaking Circles & Cultural Systems Transformation

Written by John Kania and Christine Kendall



Forward

Dear Readers,

We write this on the day jury deliberations begin in a case where police officer, Derek Chauvin, is on trial for killing George Floyd. By the time you read this, the jury will have delivered a verdict. Justice will be served, or not. But the system—with roots 500-years-old—will remain.

How do we shift systems that are brutally taking the lives of so many people—Black people, in particular—towards compassion and humanity? How do we provide avenues for systems such as courts, probation, and law enforcement to work *for* the wellbeing of people, instead of against them? The truth is: there is no simple answer. However, there are bright spots in systems change efforts within the criminal justice field. The work of Roca, Inc.—a community organization based in Chelsea and Springfield MA and Baltimore—is one such bright spot. With a focus on supporting success for young people (many of whom were formerly incarcerated), Roca shifts systems by combining love, empathy, relationship building, and accountability for two specific parties: the people working in the system itself and the youth whom the systems impact.

The lessons shared in the following piece provide a window into what holistic systems change looks like. As Roca's work demonstrates, holistic systems change involves both *structural* change and *cultural* change. The power of Roca's work lies in their effectiveness in using cultural change—the often underattended lever—to trigger structural change in systems. Real and fundamental change is possible.

Thank you for reading this. Please reach out to us if you have any questions.

John Kania – Executive Director, Collective Change Lab
Christine Kendall – Board Chair, Roca, Inc.

Roca: Peacemaking Circles

Roca is an internationally recognized community-based organization serving Massachusetts and Baltimore. The organization’s intensive therapeutic programming focuses on the most traumatized, high risk youth—many of them formerly incarcerated—living in urban communities experiencing excessive rates of violence.

Most of Roca’s young people are significantly involved with government systems including police, probation, courts, and family services. Roca often finds that the youth they support are at odds with these systems. Youth who come into contact with criminal justice and related systems are often unable to navigate the complex bureaucracies. Moreover, in many instances, these systems are not well configured to support youth who experience significant levels of risk and trauma.



As a result, Roca believes that it cannot successfully support young people at the center of urban violence without co-creating conditions for change among the systems such as police or probation that regularly touch these young people. In engaging with systems, Roca works intentionally to change mental models, shift power and build deep and trusting relationships with law enforcement, community partners, and others who directly impact the lives of the young people who cause, and are also the victims of, violence in communities.

A critical lynchpin in Roca's strategy of working with systems impacting young people is the use of peacemaking circles. Employing circles to support change is not unique to Roca. However, the use of peacemaking circles to support change in government systems is.

In 2000, Roca learned about circles from the Tagish Tlingit people in the Yukon Territories. Circles are a core transformational practice that facilitate a deep level of listening and connection between individuals to support arenas such as conflict resolution. The intention of circles is to establish conditions for an intimate, honest, nonhierarchical conversation devoid of judgement. When people talk about their experience in circles, they use words such as healing, love, shared humanity, courage, and safe space.



Circles can be held in a variety of settings. With Roca, this includes their own facilities, police stations or even online. Circles can be small with just a few people or large and involve breakout groups. A circle is led by a circle “keeper” who facilitates rituals and supports a deep level of conversation within the group.

At the beginning of a circle, for example, the keeper might support the group in smudging (burning sage) or might read several reflections to help set a contemplative tone for the group's interactions. No one is obligated to share, but over time, most people find sharing their personal perspectives to be a part of the experience. Conversations are confidential. The idea is to create a unique space or "container" where people feel able to share and reflect on personal thoughts and stories.

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Circles allow people to get to a deeper level of personal introspection and human connection in a group setting. A story from a recent Roca circle provides a picture of the process:

In a recent circle Roca was running, there were several young people and two detectives from the gang unit. The circle discussion was focused on forgiveness and one of the young people talked about the last time he had been arrested. The young man had been living with his mother and her boyfriend who was physically abusive to his mother. He came home on his mother's birthday to find her severely injured after the boyfriend had beaten her up and threw her down the stairs. The young man went out to look for the boyfriend, found him, beat him up and was then arrested.

During a break later on, one of the gang unit detectives approached the young man. He paused and then asked if he could ask him a question. The young man said yes.

“Was I there when that happened? Was I one of the arresting officers?” asked the detective.

“Yes you were,” said the young man.

“So when I showed up, was I okay?” asked the detective.

“Yeah, you were fine,” said the young man.

“To be honest,” said the detective, “if someone did that to my mother, I don’t know that I wouldn’t have done the exact same thing you did.”



Engagement in the circle helped the detective see the young man as more than an assault and battery case, and as someone more similar to him than different. The detective had an experience many in circle have of feeling shared humanity with others no matter how different they appear on the surface. In circle, participants often report new connections to universal suffering while also experiencing deep levels of joy. These experiences can help create greater empathy for one's self, support the processing of trauma and grief, and help expand people's empathy for one another.

In breaking stereotypes, circles can shift mental models. In addition to shifting mental models, Roca's circles also provide a medium for transforming power. The passing of the talking piece provides an example of this. Only the person holding the talking piece can speak; this person holds the attention of the entire room. Young people at Roca encourage each other to participate in circles because they recognize that circles provide the opportunity for them to have their stories heard by police officers, probation, and other systems players.

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When participants hear personal stories such as the one of the young man and the detective this can shift relationships away from the hierarchical, creating a more level playing field for relationship development. Officer Billy Phillips of the Cambridge Police Department commented on the breaking down of hierarchy and structure:

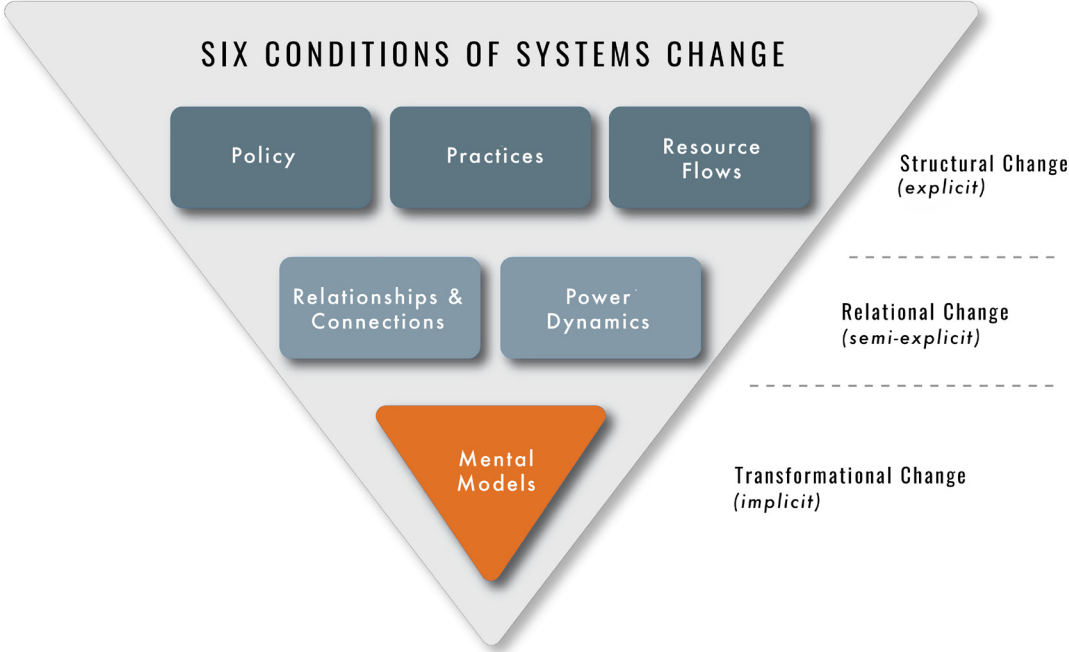
“The circle was just so helpful in breaking down that barrier. In police work, if you don’t break down that barrier with the community you are going to have problems. I hear about all of these problems in other communities with police and it’s all based around barriers on either side. And I think that circle training allows you to look outside of the box and think differently.”

An indication that power dynamics shift during circles is embodied in a reflection from Roca staff that police officers will sometimes walk into the first day of a circle training carrying their guns and wearing their uniforms. By the end of circle training they are often found to be without guns and wearing street clothes. They feel less attached to the power their uniform provides.

How Systems Change Happens: A Primer

There have been countless efforts by society to change systems. Most of these efforts fail to achieve large scale change. Structural and cultural systems change together can produce significantly improved outcomes for people who experience barriers to well being and thriving. Focusing systems change efforts at the structural level alone, however, without sufficient attention to the deeper, cultural levels of systems change, typically leads to temporary or unsubstantial systems change.

The “inverted triangle” framework below depicts six conditions of systems change that typically hold social and environmental problems in place. These exist at three different levels of visibility: structural, relational, and transformational. The largest barriers to change, and also the greatest opportunities for transformation, are the deeper conditions of systems change. Shifting these deeper cultural conditions—relationships and connections, power dynamics, and mental models—can lead to profound shifts at the structural level (e.g. policies, practices, resource flows).¹



¹ For more on the six condition of systems change and the inverted triangle framework see *The Water of Systems Change*; Kania, Kramer, Senge

Roca: Systems Change Through Forgiveness, Empathy & Love

Roca has developed a highly regarded long-term (2-4 year) behavioral health model that intervenes with young high risk people to teach them life-saving skills—the behavioral skills they need to stay alive long enough so that they can learn to choose to live.

Roca’s approach to change has four critical components: creating safety and stability, teaching life-saving skills, practicing work related skills, and engaging institutions and systems. The first three of these strategies serve youth directly. The fourth is focused on changing the systems that prevent young people from thriving. Roca’s Engaged Institutions strategy is a deliberate strategy to work closely with, support, and transform the people in government systems and institutions who most frequently impact the lives of Roca’s young people. Roca’s strategy with institutions mirrors the organization’s strategic approach to change with youth.

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The three legs of its institutional systems strategy are:

Peacemaking Circles:

As described earlier, Roca uses circles, a wisdom practice that facilitates deep listening to support such outcomes as building empathy, connecting across divides, healing, and resolving conflict.

Transformative Relationships:

Roca builds deep multi-year relationships with institutional players (police, courts, probate) that aim to establish empathy, trust and understanding.

Building Brain Science Understanding:

In Roca's work with youth, the organization has developed a street modified version of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)—a tool for regulating emotions and behaviors. This tool has proven to be extremely helpful to the young people Roca supports. Roca also engages system partners with the knowledge and practice of CBT. In this capacity, Roca actively shares with system partners the brain science around trauma and youth behavior. This helps system players internalize how young people—regardless of where they come from, but particularly if they have been traumatized—are vulnerable to poor decision making. Exposure to CBT practices is also personally useful for Roca staff and partners in their daily lives.

Working against all three of these systems change strategies, Roca's efforts have helped shift communities and the justice system, guiding system players to adopt an orientation grounded in forgiveness, empathy and love. In so doing, Roca has begun to rewire relationships in the system to better support youth, shifted power dynamics so that youth are less vulnerable to system-related abuse, and changed mental models so that youth are viewed more positively and less derisively by the system.

These strategies and their impacts have been major contributors to the profound results Roca has achieved in service of young people.

*While more than **85%** of young men come to Roca with a violent record and are at high risk to reoffend, **4 out of 5** end their engagement with crime.*

Importantly, the use of peacemaking circles along with Roca's two other key systems change strategies, demonstrate how Roca has helped to shift the culture of the system they work in. *Cultural* systems change is a critical prerequisite to creating sustainable *structural* systems change—changes in policy, practices and resource flows.



For example, in Western Massachusetts, Roca's cultural systems change work with players in the criminal justice system led to a powerful structural systems change: the establishment of a young adult court that requires its personnel (e.g. judges, prosecutors) to have a deep understanding of youth brain development. In the young adult court, youth are tried differently and receive greater supervision and mentoring in order to support their success.

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Other policy and practice changes stemming from Roca's cultural systems change work relate to ways in which police, Roca and other agencies now work collaboratively to proactively protect youth in dangerous situations instead of merely responding to (or in some cases contributing to) youth violence.

Roca's ability to combine cultural with structural systems change is highly unusual and yet it is an essential part of their phenomenal success in supporting young people. Of course, engaging in both cultural and structural systems change together is not easy. Yet, Roca shows that it is possible. Roca's work offers inspiration for others who are wading into the challenging waters of systems change.



Discussion Questions

To facilitate learning from this profile in deep systems change, we have developed the following questions. We invite you to consider these questions on your own. Or, better yet, identify a group of colleagues or peers to share this case with and schedule a group reflection session on what this case might be teaching you.

1. What was Roca's rationale for moving from a direct service provider, supporting high risk youth, to an organization engaging in systems change? How do you think this affected their scope and required skill sets?
2. As the article describes, Roca uses peacemaking circles as a key tool for systems change. Which specific systemic conditions (see exhibit of systems change conditions on page 7) is Roca shifting through their use of peacemaking circles?
3. Which dimensions of peacemaking circles do you think support their effectiveness as a tool used in systems change? Could you envision using peacemaking circles to shift systemic conditions in your work?
4. Core to Roca's engaged institutions strategy is the need for both Roca and the systems they interact with to see things differently and be a part of the change. Systems change requires everyone to change how they "do things around here." How might you begin to make personal changes to affect the change you want to see?

For more information about the history and protocols of peacemaking circles, see these resources:

- [The Indigenous Origins of Circles and How Non-Natives Learned about Them \(Living Justice Press\)](#)
- [Indigenous Peacemaking Initiative](#)
- [Circle Keepers Manual \(Roca, Inc.\)](#)
- [The Traditional Talking Circle \(Nishnawbe Aski Nation\)](#)



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We welcome your thoughts and perspectives.

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