

Fire in the Circle: Leading through Fear, Desire, Turbulence, and Division

Groups have long been understood as circles—spaces of gathering, reflection, desire, and shared meaning-making. Yet circles are rarely calm or stable for long. At times, they hold heat: conflict, urgency, fear, and the intensity of difference. In the current moment, many groups find themselves organized around these very forces, as polarization, mistrust, and social fracture permeate clinical, organizational, and public life.

What does it mean to lead when the circle is on fire?

This conference explores the challenges of leadership in groups charged with anxiety, division, and moral tension. Leaders today are called not only to facilitate dialogue, but to withstand and work within powerful affective currents. These dynamics often contribute to harm and defensive processes such as splitting, scapegoating, withdrawal, and the hardening of positions that foreclose curiosity and mutual recognition.

At the same time, difference—of identity, experience, power, and perspective—remains both a source of vitality and a site of profound strain within groups. How do leaders engage difference without either collapsing it into false consensus or amplifying it into irreparable rupture? How can conflict be worked with rather than extinguished or inflamed? What capacities are required to remain present, thoughtful, and ethically grounded when the group itself feels volatile or combustible?

We invite workshop proposals that take up these questions across psychotherapy, organizational, and community settings. Submissions might explore: leadership under conditions of fear and uncertainty; the management of conflict and aggression in groups; the role of identity, power, and historical trauma in shaping oppressive group dynamics; the leader's use of self in high-intensity settings; and practices that support resilience, repair, and the possibility of dialogue across difference. We are interested in proposals that promote leadership practices that are affirming and inclusive of diverse identities, and that attend to the social unconscious as it permeates and shapes group life.

We particularly encourage proposals that integrate theory with lived and clinical experience, and that engage participants in experiential, reflective, or process-oriented learning. As groups become increasingly charged spaces, this conference seeks to illuminate how leaders can embrace the fire but not be consumed by it—and instead learn to work with it in ways that sustain connection, complexity, and growth.

We invite proposals to align with our organizational [Mission and Vision](#).