

LEARNING CIRCLES:

A TOOL FOR UNDERSTANDING ROOT CAUSE

WHY LEARNING CIRCLES?

The purpose of a learning circle is to develop a deeper understanding of community problems and issues experienced by agency constituents. The learning circle fosters critical thinking and analysis among circle participants, who begin to form and re-examine their assumptions about their role in community life and their ability to propose solutions for community change.

A key goal of learning circles is to learn together about why things operate the way they do, opening up to new ideas, and thinking about the implications of these ideas for the organization's work. Learning circles can be used for many different purposes, such as learning about the history of a population you serve, policies affecting the work, or ideas about how to include social change activities in your daily practice.

In any learning circle, the group sets aside a designated time and place – whether weekly or monthly – where staff members and others in the organization come together to meet. This helps keep the social change portion of the work front and center and allows the organizational players to think about the issue you have decided to take on and decide on actions that you can take.

The learning circle is a structure that facilitates learning in nontraditional ways. Some common characteristics of a learning circle include:

- It does not rely on expert voice
- Learning happens in a variety of ways
- It expands focus from internal to external
- It produces new knowledge that is owned by those who are engaged
- It creates a safe space for problem solving

The circle discussion also contributes to a common knowledge and analysis for agency work in the following ways:

- Creates a common knowledge across programs and departments
- Informs program planning decisions
- Shapes and informs and advocacy and policy focus

GETTING STARTED: ORGANIZING A LEARNING CIRCLE

- The circle is usually formed following an assessment¹ of agency interest/readiness in building capacity to do social change work. Details from the assessment may provide clues for critical issues that can be discussed in the circle. However, there may be hot button issues that surface from time to time in the community or among agency constituents.
- The environment of the circle should be one that creates a safe space where either staff or constituents may give voice to important issues and concerns. Building support for participation in the learning circle is critical as staff recognize that the learning circle is part of building agency capacity to work for social change around important community issues.
- Begin small. Test out the learning circle concept with a group of staff or constituents who are interested. Schedule a time that is convenient for those participating.
- A designated staff member can assume responsibility for convening the staff and if the circle or if this is a constituent circle, a constituent representative may assume responsibility for recruiting constituents and setting an appropriate schedule.

SETTING UP YOUR FIRST MEETING

1. **Select Participants and Timetable** – There are many ways to select who will participate in a learning circle based on organizational size and structure. Do what works best for your organization, but make sure to include people whose job or organizational role rarely allows them time to participate in this type of reflection. Decide how many sessions you think you will need to identify a community building strategy for at least one aspect of the organization. We suggestion at least four sessions and for some groups it may take more.
2. **Identify an Issue** – Before the first gathering, use the assessment tool mentioned above, or talk with participants about issues they are experiencing with clients/constituents or within the organization. You could take any organizational issue as an example but it is important to have a focus where the result increases reciprocity and trust and can lead to creating a space that helps people be in relation to one another.
3. **Convene the Group** – Spend the first meeting talking about the issue you have selected. This meeting should last for at least an hour. Designate a facilitator from within or outside the organization whose job it will be to make sure everyone's viewpoint is heard, including those who are reluctant to speak. Remember these tips:
 - When talking about the issue, encourage participants to think about what it means to build a community that goes beyond individual actions or behaviors.
 - You may find you want to read something, talk to another organization, or research some ideas that will guide your agenda for the next meeting.
 - In facilitating this discussion, it is important to remember and respect the fact that not everyone will agree.

1 An assessment of agency interest/readiness in building capacity to do social change work can be found at http://www.buildingmovement.org/our_tools/detail/assessment_of_organizational_readiness_for_social_change.

4. **Plan/Schedule the Next Meeting** – Follow-up is crucial, so make sure everyone is clear what they are being asked to do before the next meeting including written notes from each meeting, and following up on assignments and reminders about the next meeting. It may also help to identify who will facilitate the next session in advance.
5. **Re-convene the Group** – As you convene these meetings you want to expand your learning, but remember you are looking for small changes that can make a difference in building understanding of root causes. Keep track of ideas that surface and then begin to hone in on some practices you can try out in your work and develop a plan that includes:
- How to communicate your ideas to others in the organization as needed such as other staff and volunteers or members
 - Ways to implement the ideas and assess their success
 - Timeline for trying something new

MORE RESOURCES ON LEARNING CIRCLES

For more background and information on designing and running learning circles, including online principles, you can visit the following sites:

The Learning Circle Model: Collaborative Knowledge Building (Pepperdine University)
<https://sites.google.com/site/onlinelearningcircles/Home/learning-circles-defined>

The Learning Circle in Culture Change (Pioneer Network)
<http://www.pioneernetwork.net/Data/Documents/LearningCircleKeane.pdf>

Learning Circles Focused on Serving Youth (Hunter School of Social Work)
<http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/pass/learning-circles/>

TIPS FOR LEARNING CIRCLE FACILITATION

When the circle is convened, someone is selected to serve as the recorder and facilitator. Each of these roles may rotate among circle members. It is suggested that the circle members agree on a set of dialogue guidelines. The following is a suggested set of guidelines and should be shared with all circle participants.

- Show up and be present
- Respect oneself, others and the process of building shared meaning
- Increase awareness to our own reactions – impact of your thoughts on your behavior
- Suspend judgment
- Recognize the values of contribution. Individuals have differing strengths in their ability to communicate.
- Speak for yourself truthfully
- Listen to your own listening/let go of your certainties
- Include what has been said before

Adopted from the Wisdom Institute

