



Learning Circles: A Tool for Moving from Social Service to Social Change

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. Participants begin to form and re-examine their assumptions about their role in community life and their ability to propose solutions for community change.

What is a Learning Circle?

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

- Does not rely on expert voice
- Learning happens in a variety of ways
- Expands focus from internal to external
- Produces new knowledge that is owned by those who are engaged
- 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
- Invites and promotes diverse leadership roles among staff and agency constituents.

How to organize 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 circles may be organized inside the agency to include **staff**, as a circle that includes **constituents**, or perhaps a circle that includes both **staff and constituents**.
- Typically the circle time may range from an hour to an hour and a half and meet biweekly.
- 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.
- 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.

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.²

- 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

¹ An assessment of agency interest/readiness in building capacity to do social change work can be found on p. 58 of *Social Service & Social Change: A Process Guide*, available at www.BuildingMovement.org.

² Adopted from the Wisdom Institute