



Peer Learning Circle Handbook

Created in Partnership with



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Being Person Centered

Person centered means: empowering each individual to choose, set, and reach their own life goals, and treating each person with dignity and respect. Asking the person who receives services “What do you want”? Knowing who this person is and what is important to them.

Person Centered Circles

About

Peer Learning Circles: about action learning and development to support leaders, social workers, teammates, employees and employers in tackling challenges and building a place where creativity and creative problem solving can be shared, practiced and grown. Each person participates and focuses on personal learning. The overall goal is creative problem solving, sharing, and growing best practices in person centered thinking.

Overview + description

PLC's are a circle model of leadership and creative development, with a leader in every seat. Each member of the circle is a participant and a co-creator of the circle's experience. The circles are facilitated and topics are pre-chosen, but what develops, is shared, and is created in the time together is unique to each circle.

Each circle begins with a theme or topic(s), is held in under an hour, has a warm-up check in question (or several), short facilitator lead information about the theme / topic(s) and professional or personal resources to support it, group discussion and sharing and/or problem solving.

Purpose

PLC's have been developed to create an internal movement and culture shift towards person centered thinking as both a service delivery and work environment change. Providing opportunities for creative problem solving, teamwork, sharing, delving into “What do you want” on a professional and personal level, all to create a Washington County Person Centered legacy.

Impact

What is the potential impact of coaching circles? People learn by seeing, doing, exploring, and engaging with others. Each time the group solves a problem, it expands the group members ability to think creatively, connect as a team to problem solve, creates a collaborative team environment, and grows the potential for each group member to ask meaningful questions, become an active listener (seek to listen not to respond), and to engage with new and ever-widening perspectives about their work and their way of relating to others.

“When coaching circles meet regularly, there is an opportunity to build a very powerful community of practice driven by a practical curiosity, a love of inquiry, and a deep care for the success of others. With time, the group can learn to function effectively on its own, able to self-regulate, self-correct and learn on a continuous basis.” From Integral Leadership, Peer-to-peer Coaching Circles article.

We need to get past the hurdle of being “too busy” and take the time to consider, analyze, reflect and gain new perspective. In the past, a lot of problem solving was able to be done by policy, checklist, or technical resolution. We are now challenged in person-centered service delivery to be creative, focused, and relationship based.

Coaching circles allow for practice in difficult conversations, an expansion of relating, and an opportunity to have a team of creative problem solvers tackle the most difficult of challenges.

Why circles?

The use of a circle as both a format and a metaphor for people to meet together has been around as long as there has been fire. For centuries, people of all cultures gathered in a circle to pass down stories, share wisdom, discuss problems, and bring about change. The Stonehenge boulders stand in circles. King Arthur and his knights sat in a circle, and so do the United Nations members. Sitting in a circle face-to-face promotes the feeling of respect and community by giving everyone an equal opportunity to be seen and heard. The circle format encourages quiet people to speak, talkative people to listen, and equal participation in making decisions.

The circle strategy has many different names and applications including: “wisdom circles,” “study circles,” “literature circles,” “Open Agile learning circles,” “quality circles,” “online learning circles,” “learning circles,” and “Lean in Circles.” Learning circles can take many forms. They can be a roundtable at home or at work, a brown bag series at work, or a virtual session with participants from around the world. Sessions can be ongoing or organized to deal with a particular issue.

Who is this work for?

Why coaching circles?

Coaching circles are about action learning and development to support leaders in tackling challenges – all Social Workers are leaders. Peer Coaching leads to more effective and better supported employees. In a circle, each person focuses equally on each members’ learning and development, while focused on their own experience. It allows for challenges and problems to be addressed, as well as extended accountability and goal setting. It builds leadership skills, resolution of problems, and a new way of reflection and learning that builds towards more creative action. All while listening, absorbing, reflecting, and participating.

Connection

Learning circles have been used by many groups to bring together individuals interested in exploring ideas in a respectful learning environment.

Creativity + solutions

We want to create empowered, creative thinkers and problem solvers. How will the circles actually work? The meetings are structured: participants address real-life issues or goals and peers ask useful questions (and sometimes share practical advice and resources). Discussions in the circles are confidential, supportive, and focused on learning and action.

Pause

Circle participants aren't taking time away from work, but are instead working *on* work. It is a small window of time to take a brain break and use other skills: intuition, experience, wisdom, creativity, interest, imagination, and connection.

Co-created resources

What has resulted from many circles are new or improved resources: success / risk story sharing, expanded solutions, new ways of looking at issues, ways of speaking and thinking that focus on the person are practiced in a personal way. The power of problem solving from many perspectives is also in play.

Concept: Holding Space

Holding space for another person means being there with unconditional positive regard – no matter the situation (*concept developed by Heather Plett). Being person centered also grows to that – being present to what is and listening to what someone wants.

Being person centered is not always about solving problems. It also takes into account soft skills, risk taking, courage, levels of uncomfortability (yours and others), and opening to conversations about needs, wants, values, and future thinking.

PLC's are a great way to practice holding space in a person centered way with low professional, but high personal gain.

How To:

PLC Values

- Start with ground rules
- Build trust
- Ensure all voices are heard = equality
- Everyone has something to contribute, and everyone has something they can learn
- Selects a learning topic
- Different viewpoints are shared
- Encourages growth, reflection, action
- Expands knowledge
- Encourages creativity
- Applies knowledge to real-world challenges
- Opens a forum for feedback from peers
- Shares new processes and approaches to work from peers

Basic Format:

- Circle Facilitator prepares agenda / topic / reflection questions
- Sit in circle
- Set ground rules

- Share topic
- Open Circle with check in
- Shared learning
- Each person shares experience or insight
- Group leaders monitor timing and participation
- People can pass, go back to them after everyone else has shared
- Wrap up

Expanded Format:

1. Circle purpose and topic(s) shared.
2. Ground Rules are set up (see agreements).
3. A check in question opens the circle: Opening space to come into a different kind of being – space for people to arrive mentally, to join into the room, to step outside of their ordinary workday
 - i. In place of check in questions, could use photos, objects, words, movement, an activity (breathing)
4. A theme or issue exploration is shared by the Circle Facilitator. Exploring or expanding on topic, sharing insights or challenges, and bringing in new perspectives on the theme.
5. The group asks questions (or is asked questions) to really understand the problem, see the issue in new ways, and possibly provide feedback and brainstorming on how to solve this issue. It is an opportunity to see things in a new light – not just an opportunity to have technical expertise to present solutions.
6. A period of reflection is had, in how this issue sits with them, in their work, or changes how they think about solving some of their own challenges.
7. A share is had around insights and observations about how the problem was solved, and what has shifted in their thinking, and what has been learned.
8. A 2nd topic could be introduced, depending on time / need.
9. Wrapping up by sharing an insight, a take away, a new idea learned.

Sample agenda – see Appendix #1

How to create a circle

Circles can be in departments, or across departments, with teams, around topics or work groups. Ideally, it is best to have a minimum of four participants (outside of facilitators) for a good discussion. It is basically comprised of a group of peers, and is helpful to have 4 or more participants, and ideally a maximum of 16.

How to choose topics

What needs currently exist? What are folks struggling with? What topics / ideas / challenges seem to come up repeatedly in meetings, discussions, assessments, daily work or support planning? Topics can come from social workers, team members, participant request, supervisors, trainings or conversations.

Buy in

To make any kind of change, it is necessary to have buy in from all levels. To really incorporate person-centered concepts into team meetings, working with folks who receive services, daily work and support plans, everyone needs to participate. We need to be able to hold each other to this new way of thinking, and have permission to talk about it openly, to make corrections, to make edits, and to use this way of thinking on a daily basis.

Tips for facilitators

You are a participant as well, and not the “expert”. Your wisdom is to be shared, but also it is your role to encourage each participant to share their thoughts, ideas, and feelings.

It is your role to make sure that everyone’s voice is heard, and to encourage conversations to open up and continue through questions. It is not your role to “teach”, fill all the quiet spaces, or to dominate the conversation. There is a leader in every seat, it is your role to open the door for each person to be a co-creator of the circle.

Language considerations

Our basic communication in a Circle can begin with language. Body language, posture, comfortability are all important to notice as well.

PLC’s focus on the power of words as tools for communicating to one another, in support planning, and in listening to “what the person wants”. Words matter, and one of the first resources we developed (see appendix for document #2), entitled *Our Words Matter* was an early document developed to help guide how we speak in PLC’s and beyond.

Our Words Matter is a language document which lists “old” ways of saying things or “old” terminology with recommendations of saying things in a more person-centered way.

Leadership link

It is important to have decision makers willing to participate and to make sure this happens, so that there is accountability, permission, and open follow through. There also needs to be a place for ideas and issues and solutions and resources to go somewhere so that they can be implemented.

Questions

Questions are one of the key components of PLC’s. It is necessary to listen to what is being said and what isn’t being said as well as a tool to expand conversation and creative thinking. A path of continued questions helps create the circle community of practice and it helps to expand the topics under discussion.

Feedback and Lessons Learned

Facilitator Feedback

Strengthened my leadership skills and more encouragement to help promote person-centered thinking shifts.

This has helped me be more person-centered with my co-workers.

Peers are welcoming this group to connect and learn new ideas and ways to work. Peers are open to share their ideas where before they felt it had been wasted time.

PLC's have connected our team and people welcome new ways to share, expand, and reunite our goals for our clients.

Participant Feedback

PLC's keep the elements of person-centered thinking at the fore front.

Appreciate learning perspectives of others or new generated ideas in work with tough situations and stress.

Skills learned have helped me think outside the box in situations.

I have expanded new ways to write, think, and speak!

Unintended benefits

- Shift from a clinical way of writing and speaking
- Increased congruency in day-to-day work
- Development of concrete tools and resources that can be used across the agency
- Shared permission to grow and learn
- Cross-department internal networking, resource sharing, and solution-finding has expanded.

Lessons learned

- The amount of time it took, and continues to take, to get people on board with a person-centered culture shift was unexpected.
- Deepening our understanding of how we build relationships with each other as peers is important to support this work internally.
- Folks think they “are being person-centered” and this belief left no room to consider additional changes or shifts that need to be made.
- The practice of this work is in getting comfortable being uncomfortable. Leaving space to co-create an hour of time, leaving space for folks to participate (even when it's quiet), and leaving space to see how creativity can open up new conversations and solutions can be off-putting for folks who like concrete agendas and checklists. Creativity is not easily found in checklists or guidelines.

Resources

Additional training for facilitators

- The Circle Way <http://www.thecircleway.net/>
- Art of Hosting <https://www.artofhosting.org/>
- <https://www.youhavethepower.org/training/circle-training/>

Agreements

- What you share within the context of the conversation is confidential, honored, and respected.
- Use “I” statements. No one speaks for another, or for an entire group of people.
- Focus on your own experiences.
- Be honest and willing to share.
- Listen with curiosity and the willingness to learn and change. Resist the desire to interrupt.
- Be brief and share the time equitably.
- Be open to the wisdom in each person’s story.
- Be willing to be uncomfortable, have uncomfortable conversations.
- Each person in the circle would present and issue or a challenge and receive coaching/feedback/problem solving from the rest of the group.

Check In Questions

- Check in questions are about inviting the participants into the space. They are most times outside of the topic, and relate to getting to know yourself and one another better. Questions can be found online, in icebreaker books, or off the top of your head.
- Sample questions:
 1. What’s one thing that brings you energy and joy?
 2. What kind of a day have you had so far today?
 3. What is your personal weather status (cloudy, foggy, sunny breaks etc.)?
 4. Would you choose an extra \$100 a week or an extra hour a day?
 5. True / False: I’m used to doing lots of things at once, so I don’t need to stop and listen to someone.
 6. What is one of your personal superpowers?
 7. What is the favorite part of your job?
 8. Would you consider yourself an introvert, extrovert, or ambivert?

CEU’s / Certificates of Attendance

We had the opportunity to provide CEU’s to attendees of the PLC’s. This helped with initial mandated attendance and was a nice perk for staff. Assessors also needed Person-Centered CEU’s for recertification, and this counted. You will need to check with DHS and the Board of Social Work for your needs.

Topics

- What needs currently exist? What are folks struggling with? What topics / ideas / challenges seem to come up repeatedly in meetings, discussions, assessments, daily work or support planning?
- Sample topics:
 1. Growing a culture of Risk/Creativity/Failure
 2. Team members that don't agree
 3. Movement
 4. People that don't use language to communicate
 5. End of life/aging/elderly issues
 6. Creating a Person Centered Workplace
 7. What are my "zones of genius" at work?
 8. How do we create time?

Appendix 1: Sample Agenda

Washington County Person Centered Planning
Person Centered Peer Learning Circle 2019

TOPIC: {xxx}

Dates: {xxx}

READ TO REVIEW FOR NEW FOLKS EACH MEETING: Peer Learning Circles: about action learning and development to support leaders in tackling challenges and building a place where we can all stretch our creativity. Each person is here to focus on personal learning. Building a Washington County person centered legacy to do this work really well. Creative problem solving, sharing, best practices in person centered thinking.

1. Check in questions 10 minutes
 - 2-3 questions
2. Introduce topic #1
 - Background info
 - Why it was chosen
 - Is there learning that needs to be introduced?
3. 2nd frame of discussion related to topic #1
 - 2-3 discussion questions related to personal experience / challenges
4. Solution / Resources / Brainstorm ideas
5. Is there a secondary or complimentary topic that could be introduced here? If yes, go back to #2 with this topic.
6. Wrap up
 - Review any big aha's, resources, challenges, or next steps needed
 - Could ask folks if they have one takeaway from the day
 - Introduce next circle: topic and dates

Appendix 2: Facilitator Prep Check List

1. Put out sign in sheet
2. Self-introduction of participants
3. Laying the groundwork
 - a. Description of PLCs
 - b. agreements
 - c. Check In Questions (10-15 minutes)
 - d. Introduce topic, any education / teaching
 - e. Discussion
 - f. Introduce 2nd topic, any education / teaching
 - g. Takeaways
 - h. Next time + closing
4. CEU Certificates to hand out
5. Follow up notes / ideas

Appendix 3: CEU Certificate Example

Appendix 4: *Our Words Matter*