

# **THE LEARNING CIRCLE IN CULTURE CHANGE: WHY USE IT?**

INFORMATION COMPILED BY BILL KEANE AND USED WITH PERMISSION

## **Sources:**

Norton, LaVrene, "The Power of Circles: Using a Familiar Technique to Promote Culture Change", *Culture Change in Long term Care*, Audrey S. Weiner and Judah L. Ronch, Editors, The Haworth Social Work Practice Press, New York, NY. 2003.

Sierra Health Foundation, [www.sierrahealth.org](http://www.sierrahealth.org).

## **What is a Learning Circle?**

A Learning Circle is a group of individuals with a common interest who meet regularly to learn from each other, and others, about a self-identified topic and in a format the group has decided upon. Learning Circles are flexible, peer-directed learning experiences. Learning Circles are built upon the idea that every member has something to contribute and that every member has something to learn.

Learning Circles are intended to lead to action and change. Learning objectives and how to achieve them are agreed upon by the group members. Learning Circles meet on a regular basis but the number of meetings, length and frequency of the meetings are determined by the group.

Learning Circles are usually facilitated by a group leader or facilitator. This leader can be an expert on the subject of the circle or not. The leader can be someone from within or outside the circle. The leader's job is to facilitate the discussion, not to determine subject matter, set the agenda or drive the discussion to a prejudged outcome. Outside experts can be invited to address the group participating as teachers and students.

## **How do Learning Circles differ from discussion groups?**

The distinction between a Learning Circle and a discussion group is not great, but there are three common differences:

- A Learning Circle is often more focused than a discussion group.
- A Learning Circle is based in common resources which may not be the case with a discussion group.
- A Learning Circle is intended to have targeted learning objectives—which may not be the case with a discussion group.

## **What is the history of Learning Circles?**

For over 100 years Learning Circles have proven an effective and practical method of learning and social change. Modern expressions may be found in the traditions of King Arthur and his Round Table, the United Nations and the Society of Friends. Community

organizations, trade unions, churches, schools and social justice groups have used them to empower their members to make choices and take action.

### **What are the general characteristics of Learning Circles?**

- Small, diverse group (8-10 people)
- Meet regularly over a period of weeks / months
- Set ground rules for a respectful, productive discussion
- Are usually led by a facilitator who is impartial but helps to manage the deliberation process
- Look at an issue from different points of view
- Act as a vehicle to discover, share, and express knowledge
- Start where people are and encourages growth
- Involve a spiraling process of reflection and action

### **What is the purpose of a Learning Circle?**

The Learning Circle is a tool that encourages all key stakeholders to speak, listen and participate in problem-solving and making decisions. Participants observe, interpret and experience not only their own feelings and viewpoints about an issue, but also broaden their perspectives by considering the many viewpoints around them.

### **What are the outcomes of a Learning Circle?**

A successful Learning Circle can achieve a number of outcomes, including but not limited to the following:

- Action planning
- Affirmation of participants / views
- Answering a question
- Building common ground
- Collaboration
- Decision-making
- Fun
- Goal setting
- Objective achievement
- Problem-solving
- Recommendations
- Relationship-building
- Trust

### **Who can participate in a Learning Circle?**

It will depend totally on the purpose and intended outcomes of the Learning Circle. In the context of “culture change” or the Pioneer movement to create a new culture of aging, Learning Circles can focus on a wide array of topics from general aging issues,

to getting started on the “journey”, to practice or regulatory concerns, to more global challenges of “deep system change”. Participants can include elders, residents, families, staff, community representatives, advocates, educators, researchers, journalists and many others.

### **When should a Learning Circle be held?**

The initial meeting might be set by the convener or first facilitator, but all other decisions about time, place, frequency, facilitator, process, etc. should be made by the group through the circle-defined processes. Again, depending on the purpose and desired outcomes of the Learning Circle, some are short and time-limited or others meet daily, weekly, monthly, and as needed.

### **Who should lead a Learning Circle?**

The main role of the leader or facilitator is to assist and support the discussion and other processes of the Circle. The facilitator is not expected to be an expert on the topic or issue, any more than anyone else in the Circle. Their most important tasks are to be organized and to ensure that the logistics support the success of the circle, including room set-up, handouts, AV, etc. if needed. The facilitator follows the procedures of the Circle and keeps the discussion focused on the topic or issue, making sure no one person dominates. Many Learning Circles rotate the facilitator position from meeting to meeting.

### **What are the ground rules for a successful Learning Circle?**

1. General Learning Circles can be 10-15 participants. Depending on topic or intensity of emotions, number could be limited to 5-10.
2. Reading materials may be distributed prior to the Learning Circle, but their use, including AV presentations, should be minimized during the Circle in deference to participant sharing on the topic.
3. One person is chosen as facilitator. This person poses the (chosen) topic or question to the Circle, gives encouragement, and keeps the Circle moving in an orderly fashion.
4. Sit in a circle with no obstructions blocking the view of the other participants.
5. The process begins when the facilitator poses the question or issue.
6. A volunteer in the Circle responds with her or his thoughts on the topic.

7. The person sitting to the right or left of the first respondent speaks next, followed one by one around the Circle until everyone has spoken on the subject without interruption.
8. Participants may choose to pass rather than speak. After everyone else in the circle has taken a turn, the facilitator goes back to those who passed and allows another opportunity to respond.
9. Only after everyone has had a chance to speak is the floor opened for general discussion.
10. Average length of time for a Learning Circle may be 1-2 hours without interruption, but length will depend on the topic or needs of the group. Closure should be by group consensus.

### **What are some general tips for Learning Circle participants?**

- If you don't understand the topic or question, say so.
- Listen carefully and accurately, making sure the group is hearing what each participant has to offer.
- Maintain an open mind; feel free to explore ideas you might have rejected in the past.
- Be prepared to disagree.
- Don't get aggressive.
- Try hard to understand the point of view of those with whom you disagree.
- During the first round before open discussion, be sure to respond to the topic or question as posed by the facilitator, not what the previous participant had to say.
- Don't participate in cross-talk, analysis or other interruptions.
- Help keep the discussion on track.
- Speak freely, but don't dominate.
- Talk to the group as a whole, not the facilitator.
- Value your own experience and understanding.

### **What are some Learning Circle topics for participants just getting started on the "culture change journey?"**

- What is one key value that has shaped my life so far?
- What is the first word or thought that comes to mind when I think of my own aging?
- How do I see myself living as an Elder in America?
- What is my greatest fear in my own aging experience?
- What does this “culture change” thing mean to me right now?
- What does “home” mean to me?
- What would I want if I chose to live in a nursing home or other residential care setting?
- Where is my organization right now in this “culture change” journey?
- What have I learned from the Elders in our organization / community?
- How does my organization / community define person-centered care?
- What is our greatest success so far?
- What is our greatest challenge?
- Where do we want to be in our journey two years from now?
- What will be our key success factor in getting there?
- How will I take care of myself along the way?
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**What are some Learning Circle topics for persons or organizations who have been on the “culture change” journey for some time?**

- Where am I right now in my own personal journey in aging?
- How am I taking care of myself in well-being?
- Where is my organization right now in this “culture change” journey?
- What have I learned from the Elders and other key stakeholders in our organization / community?
- What role has the physical environment played in the journey?
- What has been our greatest success so far?
- What has been our greatest challenge?
- What is the most important lesson learned so far?
- What is next in our journey?
- What role do we plan to play in bringing about the “deep system change” for the “New Culture” of aging?