



Worksheet 3h.A3

Competency: Problem Solving— Solutions in Rounds: Learning Circles

Learning Circles Concept and Goals

Ever since people began to work together, they have gathered to talk and figure out better ways of achieving their common goals. This concept gets a new life with the advent of Learning Circles (LC) to solve problems and make decisions in organizations. Within a Learning Circle, members collaborate to pursue new ways of addressing common issues affecting their team, their agency, and their practice with clients. Learning Circles can be an effective technique for building organizational capacity in the child welfare workforce. Learning Circles help to promote the use of critical thinking skills in making the tough decisions that define child welfare work.

Learning Circles are a form of community of practice. Supervisors and their workers explore the challenges of their work, create and implement innovative ways to meet those challenges, and engage in self-reflection about their own practice. In short, supervisors and workers come together to learn how to do their work better.

Circle Composition

Learning Circles can be configured for a given agency. Typically, they consist of the supervisor and his or her unit, but they also might exist across functional areas (e.g., youth, foster care, geographical areas, or all investigative units in county offices).

Circle Facilitation and Leadership

Initially, an LC coach and LC facilitator co-facilitate LCs. Both individuals have received training in group facilitation skills and the Learning Circle approach.

Roles of LC Facilitators

- Facilitate group meetings using the PLAN, ACT, REFLECT, and ADAPT (PARA) process (defined on the next page).
- Provide direction and leadership for their group.
- Generate excitement and keep momentum within the Learning Circle.

Roles of the LC Coach

- Link individual circles with the larger organization.
- Serve as a resource for information, best practices, topical expertise, and facilitation.



- Provide leadership around group process.
- Prepare LC Facilitator and circle members for sustainability.

LC Coaches remain “hands on” with LCs for a limited period of time. Coaches withdraw from the group as the LC Facilitator grows more confident in his/her ability to facilitate the group. Coaches may continue to serve as resources for facilitation, best practice, and topical expertise as needed.

Circle Structure and Activities

Circles are expected to hold regular meetings, approximately once per month. Each circle will determine the specifics of its meeting schedule, time, and location.

During the LC, group members focus on a topic in a semi-structured format to develop a plan to address that issue. LCs use the PLAN, ACT, REFLECT, and ADAPT (PARA) approach that mirrors most strategic planning or even problem-solving processes; that is, they plan, implement, reassess, and then begin the cycle anew. A loose structure maximizes meeting time while ensuring fidelity to the LC model.

Cumulative in nature, LCs may explore one topic while acting on another, and discussion of a topic may span several meetings. LC members may choose their own topics to discuss in their LCs, though some agencies may encourage or designate a topic that requires immediate attention. However topics are chosen, groups develop their own plan to resolve those issues. Topics explored by LCs have included secondary trauma, team cohesion, use of data, job satisfaction, and performance monitoring.

LCs allow the problem-solving process to occur at the level of the agency where the issue is the most meaningful to staff. Empowerment comes from how members resolve the issues, the recommendations they make, and the changes they are able to implement for the benefit of their colleagues and clients.

General Guidelines for Learning Circle Structure and Activities

- Meet once per month for at least two hours.
- Establish clear norms for LC interactions.
- Develop methods for researching best practices for the topics and interventions.
- Ensure that plans of action developed within the circle are actionable at the unit level (i.e., within the unit’s control or sphere of influence).
- Focus on critical thinking, problem solving, and performance improvement.
- Keep the LC size to 4-10 people (the unit).



Learning Circle Principles

- Create organizational change through solution focused discussions and subsequent actions at the team level.
- Inspire a learning organization committed to improved practices and functioning.
- Address challenges or practice issues relevant to and actionable by the LC team.
- Connect practice change to the agency's mission, values, and practice model.
- Employ interventions based upon careful assessment of the current situation.
- Empower team level staff to improve practice for more positive organizational climate.
- Use strengths-focused interventions.
- Embody a culturally responsive approach.
- Use comprehensive, incremental interventions for long-term sustainability.
- Expect full, open, and unbiased participation that encourages communication by the team.
- Empower team members to engage in collaborative, balanced, and supportive behavior.
- Interact with other agency staff to determine appropriate topics, gather information, and implement interventions.
- Emphasize ongoing evaluation to improve effectiveness and achieve desired outcomes.

For more information, go to:

[NCWWI Design Teams & Learning Circles Webinar PowerPoint & Handouts](#)

[Learning Circles: A Peer-to-Peer Learning Tool](#)

