



Peer Learning Circles Overview

What are Peer Learning Circles?

Small (5-10 person) peer groups that meet monthly in an informal learning environment to discuss real and current issues. Through thoughtful discussion, feedback, and inquiry, participants are able to work on real-life goals, while taking action during and between meetings.

Peer Learning Circles are founded in the following theories and principles:

PRINCIPLE #1: People learn best by working on real world problems

- By applying new information or materials to current, real-life challenges
- Exchanging feedback with others around those applications
- Continuous reflection and application of learning by taking action contributes to transformational learning for the individual as well other peers within the group

PRINCIPLE #2: People learn best when they share feedback with each other

- When they consider the questions, advice, opinions, and values of others

PRINCIPLE #3: People get stuck on perceptions, values, and feelings

- Action Learning is ideal for helping members to understand their own perceptions (and often misperceptions) about their current challenges in life and work

PRINCIPLE #4: Learning involves the whole person

- Brief discussion about all aspects of a particular issue (including emotions), enables a holistic understanding by both the individual and peers about the issue discussed, therefore contributing to a more effective learning process

PRINCIPLE #5: Finding the right problem is as important as solving it

- Peers play a significant role in assisting individual members in moving past initial misperceptions and begin working on the real issues
- Powerful questions are useful questions that enable people to reflect and critically analyze their current situation
- Providing and receiving advice does not provide the depth of understanding that can come from slowly peeling away the layers that lead to determining the real problem

PRINCIPLE #6: The person with the problem is the expert on the problem

- People often make note of other people's advice, but rarely follow through with it or learn anything from it
- People learn little unless they discover their problem on their own

The Benefits of Peer Learning Circles

Opportunity for participants to dedicate time to work on important issues

- Provides ongoing support and networking, thus reducing burnout
- Reduces isolation – provides a sustainable forum to interact and collaborate with peers
- Opportunity for brainstorming, evaluation of options, and diverse feedback
- Improved problem solving and critical thinking skills leading to increased confidence, ultimately creating organizational change
- Creates more action-oriented leadership, enabling participants to take ownership of their experience, therefore not being dependent on experts
- Members develop skills in peer coaching

Learning results from...

- Individual describing/discussing of individual issues
- Applying new information and feedback to real life challenges
- Skillfully asking and responding to questions (inquiry and reflection)
- Obtaining factual information
- Development of action plans to address issues
- Taking action between meetings

Key Important Elements of the Peer Learning Circle**1) Reflection (Role of Participants)**

- Opportunity for creative problem solving
- Opportunity to focus on personal experiences and knowledge
- Requires skills necessary to identify individual learning needs
- Ability to accept ideas and help offered by peers

2) Peer Interaction/Learning (Role of Participants)

- Relies on democratic and participatory dialogue
- Draws from experiences and knowledge of participants
- Exchange of ideas, information, perspectives, attitudes, and opinions
- Opportunity to work on current, individual real-life challenge/goal or group can work on common goal
- Thought provoking discussion → continuous learning → movement towards action
- Peer support: questioning, supportive challenges, limited advice (asking useful questions enables participants to further understand their problem and get to the 'real' problem)
- Each participant gets a block of time during each session to receive help and feedback from peers
 - Understand own perceptions/misperceptions about current challenges
 - Develop new insights
 - Test new insights and perceptions

3) Skilled Facilitators (Role of facilitators)

- Encourage exploration, questioning, critique of perceptions
- Ask critically oriented questions
- Identify critical incidents
- Support critical analysis
- Moderate and focus discussion
- Equal participant
- Not an expert

Peer Learning Component Overview:

- Peer Learning Circles will be formed from the in-class training session groups and will be composed of no more than 10 participants
- There will be two trained volunteer facilitators assigned to each Peer Learning Circle
- Peer Learning Circles will meet once per month for 6 months for a 2 hour time period
- Learning Circles are semi-structured, only in that:
 - topics for discussion are pre-determined for some but not all circles based on participant self-identified needs
 - Peer Learning Circle structure is followed at each session to ensure that all participants have equal opportunity to work on an issue and receive feedback
- BWED staff will support the Peer Learning Circles by:
 - Providing participants with pre-reads, additional informational resources, and referral to resources of benefit
 - Providing each circle with 2 skilled facilitators and providing them with the necessary support and resources to fulfill their role