



Learning Circles Concept and Goals

Since people have worked 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, as well as 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 of their own practice. In short, supervisors and workers come together to learn how to do their work better.

Circle Composition

Learning Circles for the Western Workforce Project are comprised of supervisors and their units. Other agencies may choose different configurations of membership.

Circle Facilitation and Leadership

Initially, Learning Circles are co-facilitated by an LC Coach and an LC Facilitator, both of whom have been trained in group facilitation skills and the learning circle approach. The LC Coaches are provided by the Butler Institute for Families.

Role of LC Facilitators:

- Facilitate group meetings using the PARA process.
- Provide direction and leadership for their group.
- Generate excitement and keep momentum within the Learning Circle.

Roles of the LC Coach:

- Link between the individual circles and the larger organization.
- Resource for information/best practices/topical expertise/facilitation.
- Provide leadership around group process.
- Prepare LC Facilitator and circle members for sustainability.

LC Coaches remain “hands-on” with Learning Circles 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 have regular meetings, approximately once per month. Each circle will determine the specifics of their meeting schedule, time, and location.

During the Learning Circle, group members focus on a topic in a semi-structured format to develop a plan to address that issue. Learning Circles use the PLAN, ACT, REFLECT, and ADAPT (PARA) approach that mirrors most strategic planning or even problem-solving processes; that is to plan, implement, re-assess, and then begin the cycle anew. A loose structure maximizes the meeting time while ensuring fidelity to the Learning Circle model. Cumulative in nature, Learning Circles may explore one topic while acting on another, and discussion of a topic may span several meetings. Learning Circle members may choose their own topics to discuss in their Learning Circles, 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 Learning Circles have included secondary trauma, team cohesion, use of data, job satisfaction, and performance monitoring. Learning Circles 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 2 hours.
- Establish clear norms for learning circle 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).

Case Study Example

Kara's team was leery of these new Learning Circles and approached the first set of meetings reluctantly, but their manager assured them that they had the power to make a difference to improve outcomes for children and families. During the "plan" phase, the team decided to tackle visitation between biological families and kids in foster care, as their reunification rate was much lower than other areas of the state. First, Duane searched the Child Welfare Information Gateway and found some great publications, including a guide from Minnesota and a Casey Family Services Report about an evaluation of a project to improve permanency for older youth. While Duane was working on finding publications, Deidre spoke to a local child development center about how to improve the quality of visitation, and everyone on the team took on the task of talking to at least one client about ways that visitation could be improved. From all of this information, they decided to put in place a formal visitation program to improve the quality of visits between parents and their children, thus moving into the "act" phase. After a month, team members came back with a report about how the process worked with their families. Several families are already on track to be reunified. During the "reflection" stage, they decided their

case aide, Tamara, should be more involved in the visitation process and the assessment of each visit. Next, they created a new plan for the “adapt” phase that includes Tamara and refines other aspects of the program. Their manager, Sheila, has been supportive of their efforts and congratulated them on their interim results. Kara’s team now believes in the power of the Learning Circle to improve practice.

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 Learning Circle 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.

Frequently Asked Questions (from the Western Workforce Project)

1. **What's the difference between a Learning Circle and a unit meeting?** *A unit meeting deals with the day-to-day business of the unit while a Learning Circle typically focuses on one topic and is guided by the PARA (plan, act, reflect, adapt) process.*
2. **Who conducts the Learning Circle?** *The designated LC facilitator, typically the unit supervisor but this person could be a lead worker so long as he/she has been trained at the LC Facilitator training.*
3. **For how long will I be conducting Learning Circles?** *Learning Circles are conducted at least once monthly indefinitely. The Western Workforce Project will be providing support and evaluating the process for one year after you begin. But as a problem-solving tool, you can use them indefinitely.*
4. **Once I've done five (5) Learning Circles, am I finished?** *No, see above. The coach will attend up to five (5) Learning Circles, then you'll be facilitating on your own.*
5. **How long do I have to do Learning Circles?** *Please see above. As part of the project, your agency has committed to the Learning Circles for a minimum of one year, but we hope you will use this tool indefinitely.*
6. **What's an appropriate topic for Learning Circles?** *Previous topics have included: team cohesion, secondary trauma, scheduling, morale, communication, and documentation.*
7. **Am I required to participate in the Western Workforce Project and Learning Circles?** *Your agency has committed to the Western Workforce Project for the five-year funding period. As part of your job expectations, management expects you to participate in the project and conduct learning circles. The Learning Circle intervention lasts for one year of observation and support from staff at the Butler Institute.*
8. **What's in it for me?** *Learning Circles will help you to address issues and functioning that most impact your team and your agency. Your team will decide together how to tackle these issues with an action plan. The process brings decision making down to the team level and gives you control over issues relevant to you and your team. By engaging in Learning Circles, your team helps to create a more positive organizational culture that reflects the qualities of a learning organization.*

9. **How are these Learning Circles helpful to me in my job?** *You and your team decide what to discuss and work on during Learning Circles. The solutions you develop in your Learning Circle should have a direct effect on how your team and agency functions, thus improving practice and job satisfaction.*
10. **Do I always need to fill out the Learning Circle journal form?** *Yes, as part of the evaluation process we need to know whether you're conducting Learning Circles as intended in the model (this is "fidelity"). Your Learning Circle journals also help us to understand what you are doing in your learning circle and then provide support to you in this project.*
11. **Do I have to complete the evaluation survey?** *In accordance with Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines, completion of the surveys is completely voluntary. We are asking that you complete the surveys in order to assess the effectiveness of the Western Workforce Project interventions.*
12. **Who's going to see the survey data?** *All survey data are completely confidential. Only Butler Institute research staff have access to the securely-stored data. Your unique identifiers will help us to match surveys over time so we can understand your attitudes and reactions to the learning circles over the project period. Data will only be reported in aggregate and never will we report anything that could ever be attributed to any individual. We follow strict research protocols established by our Institutional Review Board to protect your privacy.*
13. **Why do we have to keep on taking all these surveys?** *So that we can measure your attitudes about the Learning Circles over time.*
14. **What does my coach do?** *Your coach will help you get your Learning Circles started by guiding you in both the content and process of Learning Circle, and will be able to answer questions, like what is an appropriate Learning Circle topic and how to deal with your group's dynamics. Also, your coach will be administering the LC surveys we are collecting at specific time points to assess the learning circle effectiveness. Either in-person or on the phone, your coach will be there to assist you in the ongoing implementation of the Learning Circles.*
15. **How do I get started with Learning Circles?** *Excellent question! We will schedule an orientation on Learning Circles by Butler Institute staff for your team during this training. Next, your coach will contact you to set up your first Learning Circle with him/her in attendance. Within 30 days, you should hold your first Learning Circle.*