

Facilitator's guide

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This guide is designed to help the learning circle facilitator. It outlines things you need to know about your job, covers some practical issues that may come up in your group and provides a step-by-step guide to helping the group decide what to focus on.

Facilitating a learning circle group can be great fun. With practice, anyone can become skilled at handling groups. It's a great skill to have. If you already have some experience, keep learning. Watch how others facilitate. If you come across someone good, watch how they work and pick up any techniques you find useful.

1. A facilitator, not a 'teacher'

As a facilitator of a learning circle, your main role is to help the group clarify what it wants to focus on and then to help keep discussion productive. You are not expected to be an 'expert' or to know more than others in the learning circle. An important part of the philosophy of a learning circle is that everyone learns from each other and everyone has something to contribute. If you do have expertise in some of the topics covered in this kit, be careful not to be drawn into the role of 'teacher'.

Your most important task is being organised and familiar enough with the issues to help discussion to flow. Going through the material beforehand and thinking a little about it will help you to be effective. Your job also includes coordinating (but not necessarily doing) the practical organisation—making sure the group has what it needs for the session (for example, photocopies of the relevant module, butcher's paper and felt pens, maybe a video player if necessary). As a facilitator, you can also play an important role in helping the group work well together—for example, by setting a positive tone and letting others have their say before expressing your own opinions.

The group may decide to share the role of the facilitator so that everyone has a chance to develop their skills in this area. If so, make sure people read this guide before they start to facilitate.

Generating ideas¹

Brainstorming is a way of generating thoughts, ideas and views about a given topic. It's a quick way to help prompt new and innovative ideas from the group, giving you lots of options to consider. Be creative and outrageous. There is no analysis, criticism or discussion of ideas. All ideas should be written as concisely as possible where everyone can see them—say on a board or butcher's paper.

Brainstorming is a good approach to use when the group wants to generate as many ideas as possible. Depending on your objective, you may want to add some further steps once you have an initial list of ideas. For example, if the group is using brainstorming to get an idea of people's expectations for the learning circle, you might review the list and see which ideas are similar or could be combined. The group could then use this shorter list to discuss priorities. If the group has used a brainstorm to generate possible strategies to tackle a graffiti problem in the area, it might then analyse the results according to their appropriateness, importance, feasibility or how urgent they are.

A **suggestion circle** is a different way of collecting ideas from the group to help solve a particular problem faced by someone in the group. It involves everyone providing one considered idea, expressed in one or two sentences. Brainstorming stimulates creativity; a suggestion circle draws on the wisdom and experience in the group.

The aim is not to cover all possible solutions. It is to recognise a problem and deal with it in a way that meets the need of the person with the problem, involves others in the group but doesn't take too long. The person gets the benefit of the experiences of the whole group and the group's efficiency is strengthened by having a quick way to address a variety of problems that may arise. A suggestion circle includes everyone, treats everyone in the group as potential experts with knowledge to share, and encourages clear, concise thinking and empathy for the challenges facing others.

The group decides its directions. Participants in the learning circle have already made a decision to spend some time talking about crime prevention and community safety. They also need to decide what parts of the kit the group will focus on and in how much detail. This means that the group will have to agree about how it should review its objectives—so the learning circle meets the real needs and interests of its members.

Encourage the group not to stick too rigidly to the kit. It is a resource, to be used as the group sees fit. The group might want to focus on one or two modules or go through each one from start to finish. It's the group's decision. It is not necessary to read through all the material—groups can pick and choose what is of interest to them and relevant to their particular community.

2. Keeping things on track

Helpful suggestions to keep the group's meetings running smoothly:

1. **Be relaxed and comfortable.** Go through the material before the session. If you don't know the place where the group will meet, try to call in and have a look. Is there space for the group to divide into smaller groups? Is there a whiteboard or a blackboard available? Is there space to display butcher's paper on the wall?
2. **'Beginning is half-way to succeeding.'** Set a friendly, relaxed and respectful atmosphere from the start. Make sure everyone knows each other. Check that everyone has the relevant module. Check people's goals for the meeting and review the suggested activities to make sure everyone understands and agrees on how to proceed.
3. **Try to involve everyone in the discussion.** If this isn't happening naturally, try something like, 'Let's get the full range of views in the group on this issue'. If some people tend to dominate, try something like 'Those are interesting points you have. Let's go round and see what others think'.

Create a secure and comfortable environment for participants to express their views. What this involves will vary from group to group but you might find these tips useful:

- Avoid a sense of competition—people should be encouraged to extend themselves but without feeling they have to 'perform'.
 - Ensure that participants have opportunities to identify issues or ideas they don't understand.
 - Value participants and their views—if a group feels valued, it will assist you in setting a safe mood. Learn people's names and use them. If your memory for names is poor, ask everyone to wear name tags. Draw conclusions/summarise discussion based on people's contributions.
 - Don't allow others to interrupt while someone else is speaking.
 - Ensure the group establishes very clear rules about issues such as confidentiality, respect and confrontation as part of its 'ground rules' for working together.
4. **Draw out the quiet people.** It may help if you know their interests, so take notes at the start

when people are introducing themselves. Don't pressure people into talking, but support them and ask them if they have thoughts they would like to share with the group.

5. **If the group gets bogged down on unprovable 'facts' or assertions**, ask how relevant they are to the issue and maybe get someone to find out for the next session.
6. **Be an active listener.** Listen carefully to what people are saying so you can help guide the discussion. There's nothing worse than a facilitator who is too busy working out their next 'speech' to hear where the discussion is heading.
7. **Try to stay impartial when there are disagreements.** Your role is to further the discussion and draw out the different viewpoints, not to come down in favour of one of them.
8. **Conflict is okay if it's focused on the issue and not on the person.** Everyone has to feel safe about expressing their views, even if they are unpopular.
9. **Pauses are okay.** They probably mean people are thinking. Count to 10 before trying to answer your own questions to the group.
10. **You are not expected to have the answers.** If the group asks you a question, throw it back to them. Invite others to comment on what someone has said, even if he/she has addressed the comment to you. Try to encourage 'cross talk', to get people talking to each other rather than to you.
11. **Help people connect with the issues being discussed**—by encouraging participants to reflect on their experiences.
12. **Encourage cooperation in the group**—for example, by joint activities such as research projects, meetings with local politicians, a visit to a local youth project.
13. **Regularly intervene to summarise where you think the discussion has got to.** Don't get stuck on a topic; move on if people don't seem interested.
14. Ask the 'hard' questions, point out issues that people are ignoring, help the group examine its own assumptions.
15. **Use questions that encourage discussion** rather than yes/no answers—for example, 'Why do you disagree with that point?' rather than 'Who agrees/disagrees?'
16. **It's okay for the group to disagree.** If there are strong differences, just summarise and move on.
17. **Make sure there is some 'closure' to each meeting.** This might be a brief question that each person can answer in turn; for example, 'What do people feel they have gained from this session?' If there are suggestions for improving the process, note them down to help you with the next session.
18. **Collect any points written on butcher's paper;** you may want to come back to them in later sessions.
19. **Organise who will do what between meetings**—for example, photocopying, organising refreshments.

As a facilitator, you can provide a role model for the group. By using these principles for your own behaviour, you can demonstrate how respectful, non-violent interactions between people with different opinions, life experiences and abilities can be achieved.

Emotion, anger and sensitivity

People will come to a learning circle with a wide variety of interests, views, attitudes and personal experiences. This is one of the features that makes learning circles such effective environments within which to discuss, explore, learn and problem-solve. Everyone has experiences, views or attitudes from which others can learn something—it could be something like the importance of tackling prejudice or how to argue effectively against a position you strongly disagree with.

But with diversity can come argument and conflict. And sometimes people will come to discussions with very clear views about a topic and how to deal with it. The suggestions for keeping things on track give you some ideas about how to approach such situations. The main thing is to get people to focus on issues and ideas, not the person, and to avoid getting stuck in debates when there is no one

right answer.

Issues around crime, fear of crime and safety can be very emotional for some people. If their lives have been directly affected by crime, they may respond to discussions in a personal way, or tend to dismiss the views of people who haven't had the same experience. Where the crime involves a person rather than property, responses may be very strong. It's important to acknowledge and respect people's feelings and experiences, even if you do not share them. A learning circle works best when people feel safe and comfortable about expressing themselves.

Think about these issues at your first meeting and address them in your ground rules. If people agree, for example, to respect the views of others even if they don't agree with them, to focus on the issue, not the person, and to acknowledge that everyone can learn something from others, you can point to these agreed rules if conflict emerges.

Dealing with disclosures

Some of the material in this kit deals with sensitive issues, particularly the module on personal violence. Some people may find it challenging or confronting. Material in this kit and discussion in the group may enable people to see their own and others' circumstances differently. If the group feels safe or someone thinks other members will be sympathetic to their situation, it is possible they will disclose personal experiences.

Encourage the group as a whole to think about how they might handle particularly sensitive issues or situations if they happen—it will be easier if everyone has thought about and agreed on how to handle a situation before it arises. Below are some suggestions for dealing with disclosures that people in the group may make.

Suggestions for dealing with disclosures

- Listen. Don't interrupt.
- Give positive feedback. For example, 'This is never an easy thing to talk about. You are being courageous in telling your story...'
- Be non-judgmental. Try not to show specific emotions like shock at what is said.
- Believe, and affirm that you believe, what they are saying.
- This is their story, not yours. Empathise but don't focus on things that happened to you.
- Don't counsel the person. Refer them to appropriate people if they want counselling.
- Don't make promises and commitments you can't keep.
- Keep your opinions about their abuser, or their behaviour if they are the abuser, to yourself.
- Find out what their present situation is. If a group member is experiencing violence, give them information to enable them to make decisions about what to do about it.

Victims and perpetrators

Your group may contain both victims/survivors of crime and people who have committed a crime. A wide range of activities is covered by the word 'crime'; it's likely that members of the group may have offended, even if they don't recognise it. Nonetheless, given general attitudes about crime, you may find some members of the group show prejudice towards someone who has offended.

Crime can have very direct and personal impacts on people's lives—whether they are victim/survivors, perpetrators or people whose daily activities are influenced by concerns about safety. Acknowledge and respect people's feelings and experiences, even if you do not share them. For your learning circle to work well, people need to feel comfortable about expressing themselves.

A learning circle is based on the idea of learning from those who have different experiences from

yours. If you've never been a heroin addict, you may find it hard to understand the way it can take over your life and remove any reservations you may have about stealing to get a hit. Given approximately 10 per cent of those in gaol in Australia are there because of drug-related offences, if we want to know more about preventing crime, there are benefits in hearing and learning from the experience of offenders.³

You may want to deal with this issue in your group rules. Our justice system is based on the idea that you serve your punishment once. Being judged differently or being closed out from society despite having done your time adds to the punishment—and can increase the likelihood that someone will offend again.

Discussing violence

Discussions about violence, particularly domestic violence, raise some particular issues you need to think about as a facilitator.

Are there men and women in the group? Different issues arise if the group is all male or all female. If the group is mixed, think about how women and men can get equal talking time. Studies of mixed groups from school age onwards show men in a group tend to dominate discussion times. In relation to domestic violence, men may resent a focus on male violence and may push the view that women are violent too. Yes, some women are violent, but conventional wisdom holds that physical domestic violence is mainly perpetrated by men against women.²

Do group members know each other? This can affect privacy and safety issues. At the group's first meeting, try to find out why people have got involved in the learning circle and what their interests are. Ask if they know others in the group, and how they are linked.

Checking how things are going

You might find this a useful exercise during meetings. It will take about 5–10 minutes, depending on the size of the group. It provides a quick check on how people are feeling, whether they understand what is being discussed, and whether their needs are being met.'

Stocktake exercise

Choose an unfinished sentence that reflects what you want to check—for example:

- 'Right now I feel ...'
- 'The thing I find hardest to understand is ...'
- 'I would like to change ...'

Ask each person to complete the sentence in a few words. Ensure everyone has a turn, then summarise the responses and, with the group, address any issues that arise.

Or

- Ask the group to 'Choose a word that explains what is happening for you right now'.

3. Adults learning

This section highlights some factors that help adults learn. You may find it useful in understanding the different ways people respond. Your learning circle will work best if the group looks for different ways of presenting and exploring information—activities, discussion in pairs, story-telling, drawing, visual presentations, videos, guest speakers etc.

Linking ideas to life experiences

Most adults find it easier to learn new concepts and facts if these are linked to something they know or have experienced. For example, if the group is struggling to understand why women do not leave violent husbands, you could ask people to think about how hard it would be to pack up and leave the homes they have created. Many people make sense of abstract ideas or complex concepts by relating them to something they are familiar with or know about.

Participation

Adults learn better when they have some control over, and input into, their learning. Learning circles recognise this—by putting participants in charge of their learning and drawing on their life experiences.

Fun

People find learning easier if they are having fun and the learning environment is informal and relaxed. Not all of the issues you will cover lend themselves to the group having fun but it should be possible to be relaxed and informal.

Individual differences

People are different and they learn in different ways. Some people enjoy listening to discussions and conversations and then reflecting on what they heard or relating it to their own experience. Others learn by watching people do things—and like things such as role-plays or stories of approaches tried by someone else. Some people like practical learning experiences—learning by doing. Others prefer emotional experiences. Some learn by writing down everything someone says.

4. Practical issues

Sorting out a few practical details should help your learning circle work well and allow the group to contribute to community safety and crime prevention.

Taking notes

You might find it useful to keep track of the work of your learning circle so that everyone can see how views and ideas have developed and so that they share their experiences with other groups. Written notes may also provide points about your group's activities that could be included in a newsletter or on a website. Groups can then learn from one another and participants can see outcomes from their activities. Keeping notes shows that the knowledge and experiences of members are valued.

Talk to the group about taking notes. Note-taking doesn't need to be a big job. Notes could cover what the group discussed, key points that came up, what actions or activities the group got involved in, visiting speakers, videos watched etc. If the group decides to take notes, you might discuss whether one person should do the job or it will be shared, and what to record.

Visiting speakers

Listening to and talking with people who are actively involved in an issue can be a great way to get a subject across. But coming to a meeting of your group may mean for the speaker spending time away from family or friends or from their workplace. If your group wants to invite a speaker—say a local community representative, a politician, a representative from an offenders group or an expert in crime prevention—be aware of the commitment this involves for the speaker. If the person accepts the invitation, find a way to show that the group appreciates the time they have contributed (for example, provide a meal). You might check whether the speaker needs transport to and from the meeting and indicate the range of people in your group. When planning a guest speaker, you might also consider joining with another learning circle group in your area, to reduce the demand on the speaker's time.

5. The first meeting

A facilitator's input at the first meeting is perhaps the most important part of the job.

A key aim of the first meeting of a learning circle is for people to get to know one another and for you to sound out participants' main interests, why they have joined the group and what they want to achieve. Participants then need to plan and agree on their objectives. The module *Getting the most from your learning circle* provides handy hints on how you might conduct your first meeting. It covers issues such as:

- getting to know each other
- agreeing on some objectives/outcomes
- agreeing on themes and topics
- setting some ground rules
- recording the group's plans.

If you don't have an opportunity to contact members of the learning circle before the first meeting to suggest they bring refreshments to share, you may want to arrange this. The group can then decide what to do for future meetings.

It may be useful to provide name tags or labels so people get to know each other. If appropriate, let people write their own so they can use their preferred name.

1 Australian Bureau of Statistics 2003, *Prisoners in Australia 2002*. Catalogue number 4517.0, ABS: Canberra.

2 De Vaus, D, Headey, D & Scott, D 1999, *Domestic violence in Australia: Are women and men equally violent?* Australian Social Monitor 2(3), pp.57-62.

This section draws closely on Dirk, J.M. and Prenger, S.M., *A guide for planning and implementing instructions for adults: a theme-based approach*, Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco, 1997, pp. 93–6, 100–2.