



Advanced Techniques in Facilitating Peer Support Circles (PSCs)

Description

You could facilitate the Circle process just by following the directions in the section "Facilitation Tasks" in the [Quick Reference](#) tool. However, this document provides guidelines for situations that could be challenging for Circle facilitators, but that rarely occur in Circles.

About Facilitation and Group Process

To What Extent is the Facilitator the "Expert"?

During the first few PSC meetings, members might perceive the facilitator as an expert in solving the members' individual problems. However, this perception should dissipate quickly, especially if the facilitator deals with any problems by following the guidelines in this document.

The extent to which members perceive the facilitator as the expert is proportionate to the extent to which members may lose their opportunities for learning, due to their own passivity.

What if the Presenter Keeps Eye Contact Only with the Facilitator?

The presenter is the Circle member who is currently getting supported in a PSC meeting. Sustained eye contact from the presenter to the facilitator occurs occasionally. This should be avoided since it tends to disenfranchise the other members and indicates that the facilitator is perceived as the "leader" of the PSC, which detracts from members' ownership and development.

The facilitator should avoid continued eye contact with the presenter by occasionally looking to other members in an attempt to divert the presenter's eyes to other members. Make a note to cover certain suggestions about the PSC process in the next meeting, including mentioning to the Circle how important it is for presenters to acknowledge members of the PSC through eye contact.

What if One Member Does Most of the Talking?

In that situation, ask the current presenter if the current activities in his or her time slot are helpful. It might be that the presenter believes that it is, in which case it might be best to not intervene. Still, it is useful to remind members how important it is that every member makes an opportunity for others to participate.

What if a PSC Member "Rescues" the Presenter?

When a presenter has a major priority about which he or she has been struggling for some time, it's sometimes very attractive for members or the facilitator to step in and "rescue" the presenter, that is, to dictate "quick solutions" to the presenter's issue, including dictating what the presenter must do.

This rescuing should be avoided. Real development for the presenter comes from their initiative in addressing their current priorities. Rescuing not only subverts the presenter's opportunity for this development, but also establishes an imbalance in Circle dynamics, indicating that the "rescuing" member or facilitator holds powers greater than the rest of the PSC members.

If this "rescuing" behavior is perceived to occur in the PSC, it's appropriate to ask the presenter if they feel they have the freedom to choose their own course of action, noting that the current feedback may seem too directive.

Can the Group Set Their Own Ground Rules and Values?

This *Quick Reference* includes suggested ground rules and values for Circles. A Circle can come up with their own ground rules and values. However, the suggested ground rules have been time-tested over the years and should be modified only with great care. If modifications are being considered, then the modifications should be considered by the Circle as a whole and the process should be done outside the format of the PSC. For example, use a discussion Circle format. Any more than ten ground rules can be unseemly for Circle members to realize. Be sure that ground rules and values are repeated at the beginning of each meeting.

Can I, As a Facilitator, Use the PSC's Process to Address a Priority?

Yes. Some past facilitators in the PSCs have asked the PSC for permission to present an issue to the PSC and seek their focused assistance. On these occasions, the facilitators were able to experience the presenter's role in the PSC's process. This opportunity for facilitators is best when one or two members are missing from a Circle, thereby freeing up time for the facilitator to take a time slot.

About Keeping PSC's Process Effective for Everyone

What if a Member Says the Process Just Isn't Working?

The Peer Support Circles is a format of the overall Action Learning process that is popular around the world. Weinstein (*Action Learning: A Journey in Discovery and Development*, London: HarperCollins, p. 100) points out several suggestions for those who believe their experience is not effective for them, as paraphrased below. Has the member:

1. Told other PSC members?
2. Asked for help?
3. Been clear?
4. Attended regularly?
5. Felt committed and involved themselves?
6. Listened to others?
7. Taken responsibility for working out why the process seems ineffective?
8. Helped the (members) ... to help them (by their own responses and feedback)?

This author has had a few occasions where a PSC member has called to report that the process wasn't working for them. When these members were asked if they had reported this issue to their PSC members, they responded that they had not. In PSCs, members must fully and honestly participate. They must take charge of their own development experience. Members need to report their impressions and concerns to their PSC members or privately to their facilitator.

A member may feel disenfranchised from the process because he or she does not have enough in common with them. That's why it's important when organizing the PSC, that all members have a similar topic in common.

How Does One Know if the PSC's Process is "Working" for Its Members?

Schwartz (*The Skilled Facilitator*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1995, p. 21) explains that a Circle is working when:

1. The services that the Circle delivers or the products it makes meet or exceed the performance standards of the people who receive it, use it, or review it.
2. The processes and structures used to carry out the work maintain or enhance the capability of members to work together on subsequent Circle tasks.
3. The Circle experience, on balance, satisfies rather than frustrates the personal needs of Circle members.

A good indicator about whether the Circle process is working for its members is the rating that each member shares near the end of the Circle meeting -- the ratings of 1 to 5. Another indicator is the nature of the members' responses to the evaluation questionnaires administered near after the third and sixth meetings.

What if the PSC's Process Seems Somewhat Stale?

Sometimes by about the fourth or fifth meeting of PSC meetings, one or more members may comment that they sense that the PSC is no longer as robust or energized as before. At these times, it's useful to pose the concern to the entire PSC to get other members' senses as well.

Review the ground rules with the Circle. Often, if a PSC is going stale, members will find that they have abandoned the ground rules.

Consider taking 10 minutes of the meeting to have each member record on paper their thoughts about "What we need to do to energize the PSC" and provide the notes to the facilitator. Before the next PSC meeting, the facilitator can synthesize these suggestions and pose them to members of the PSC in the next meeting, for members' discussion and conclusions. Do attempt to incorporate some suggestions in the next PSC, if only for some reinvigoration.

Dealing With Conflict

This author has seldom experienced or heard of a major conflict that could not be addressed by the following guidelines.

- **First, recognize, or name, the conflict and moving on.**
Note that there is disagreement between members of the Circle and ask how the members would like to promptly address the conflict. Often, parties in the conflict can quickly find suitable means to resolving it.
- **Focus on ground rules.**
PSC's ground rules can go a long way toward resolving conflicts. The ground rules recommended in the *Quick Reference* are intended to cultivate respect and individuality among participants. Remind participants of the ground rules that apply to the conflict.
- **"Table" the conflict.**
That is, recognize that member(s) disagree, suggest that the disagreement be put aside, and then proceed on with the PSC's agenda.
- **Invite the involved member(s) to take a "cooling off" period.**
The member, or members, in the conflict can take five minutes to step outside of the Circle, while the Circle engages in open discussion about a matter other than the conflict.
- **If a member is chronically confrontative, then privately ask that member to quit.**
Mention the specific recurring behaviors that are not acceptable in the Circle. You might offer other resources, such as getting private coaching.

About Membership and Attendance

Sometimes, for example, during the summer months or if a member's organization is mired in a major activity, the member may not be able to attend a PSC meeting. Ground rules assert that if a member cannot attend a PSC meeting, they call the facilitator to explain the pending absence. However, occasionally a member may begin to miss meetings without notification. In these instances, it's important to acknowledge to the member that the absence was noticed and concern exists among PSC members about the absence, and ask for a recommitment. If it's not there, pose to the rest of the members whether they want to replace the member or not.

What if a Member Doesn't Show Up?

Be sure to call the member to see if they're OK. Ask them to consider coming for the remaining half of the meeting. Remind them of the importance of attendance. If they continue to not show up to meetings, present the issue to the Circle and ask how they would like to address the issue.

What if Two Members Don't Show Up?

Repeat the process above. Ask the attending members if they want to continue the meeting (typically, they do). The meeting can proceed; however, the quality of feedback may be decreased due to the reduced rate of communication and diversity of views remaining in the PSC.

Can a Member Be Fired From the Group?

Yes. A member might be fired by being voted out of the Circle by other Circle members. A facilitator should be very careful not to remove a member without first getting majority or unanimous vote from other Circle members.

Acts that might deem being fired could include breaking terms of confidentiality, chronic absence, chronic lateness, continued rude behavior in the Circles or continued provocation of conflict.

In the above cases, the facilitator might present the case to the Circle, hear from the member who is charged with having made the wrong act(s), asking the member to step outside the room for ten minutes, having remaining Circle members discuss the act(s), voting on whether the member should retain his or her membership in the Circle, and then letting the member come back in the room to hear the decision of the other Circle members.

What if a Group Member Drops Out?

Occasionally a member will drop out from a PSC. This is not a major problem. Typically, you will first find out from the facilitator that a member has left or needs to leave. See the process below for adding a member.

Can a Member or Two Be Added to a PSC?

If a member or two decides to quit a PSC, then new members can be added. The facilitator can respond with the following process.

1. Before adding a new member, the facilitator should ask the remaining PSC members whether they want to add a new member. Typically, adding a new member is well received.
2. Once the potential new member has been identified, the facilitator should tell the new member's name to the current members. Provide any additional information about the potential new member to help give current members some impression from which to decide if the new member will work out or not.

3. If current members agree to accept the new member, the facilitator calls the new member to:
 - a. Tell the new member that current members agreed on the new member.
 - b. Brief the newcomer on the current members, how long they have met, their positions and general descriptions of any goals that current members have worked on or are working on. Carefully consider confidentiality when providing descriptions of goals or issues because the new member is not yet vested in the PSC.
 - c. Tell the new member when the next meeting is to occur and where.
4. Update the PSC membership list for new members, the facilitator and provider.
5. In the first meeting when the new member attends, take about 15 minutes for members to introduce themselves and describe their organizations. Provide a brief review of the PSC process and its evaluation, and the PSC ground rules. New members typically pick up quickly on the PSC process.

About Emotions and Therapy

How Are Strong Emotions Addressed in Groups?

The dealing with strong emotions in a Circle is not really a “problem in facilitation.” However, dealing with strong emotions can be a major challenge for a novice facilitator. If a member is using their PSC to deal with a particularly difficult issue, the member may exhibit strong emotions in their PSC where trust and confidentiality are usually high. Showing strong emotions is a healthy response to dealing with the stress of handling such a major issue. To deal with strong emotions:

1. **Stick to the PSC process,**
including monitoring time during the time slot, offering support, ideas and advice.
2. **Use “clearing”.**
The member with the strong emotion, or even confusion, can take one minute to clear. Clearing involves venting about the emotion or confusion or problem in a continuous stream of expression for the time allotted. It’s important that the facilitator and other Circle members not intervene or judge the member who’s doing the clearing.
3. **Offer a time out.**
If a member becomes so emotional as to not be able to communicate with other Circle members during their own time slot, then offer the member a time out. During the time out, they can step outside the Circle, for example, into a hallway or outside for five minutes, and then come back.
4. **Let the Circle member leave that meeting.**
If the strong emotions persist, then offer the member the opportunity to leave that meeting. At least one member should specify that they will call the emotional member within the next few days.

Are PSCs Intended to Provide Psychotherapy? (No!)

PSCs are not intended to be therapy Circles, and facilitators and members should not act as if they can provide psychotherapy. PSC facilitators and members should not act as if they have the expertise to evaluate and diagnose for psychotherapy. However, there may be occasions where it may be suitable to suggest that a member pursue a psychological evaluation if the member exhibits any of the following:

1. Continued, frequent sobbing
2. Mention of, or actual, behavior that's hurting them or others
3. Mention of suicide
4. Consistently not getting their needs met in the PSC meetings