

MENTORING CIRCLES

INTRODUCTION

What Are Mentoring Circles?

Mentoring circles are a form of group mentoring that encourages participants from all levels of an organization to propose and own a topic of interest. This unique setup gives motivated employees an avenue to grow within the organization and opens the door for all employees, no matter seniority or department, to find or create a circle that motivates them. Once a circle is created, other employees interested in similar growth and discussion can join and participate. These circles can occur virtually or in-person depending on the organization's needs.



Whom Do Mentoring Circles Serve?

The versatility of mentoring circles allows them to serve a swath of organizational learning initiatives and employee needs. Whether a company is focused on development objectives or the increased participation of a specific workforce population, mentoring circles provide an equal opportunity for involvement and employee-driven growth.

With the growth of Sheryl Sandberg's lean-in philosophy and community meet-ups, mentoring circles have become an increasingly popular way to elevate women in the workplace. Mentoring circles can give women access to influential peers, future sponsors, and senior leadership they might never have interacted with before. This pulls women into networks sooner, engaging them earlier in their careers.

Likewise, mentoring circles are a great way to integrate other diverse populations—generational, gender, LGBTQ, cultural, socioeconomic, educational, neurological—more thoroughly into organizations. The nature of work is becoming increasingly global, with teams spanning multiple states, countries, and continents. Organizations that can navigate and incorporate cultural differences will source more talent and greater business opportunities. Starting a mentoring initiative, or several, can support minority staff, and build awareness, tolerance, and empathy in majority staff.



BENEFITS OF MENTORING CIRCLES

With mentoring circles, organizations can enhance their talent strategy by creating cross-departmental connections for employees. The free, self-selecting form of mentorship allows entry-level employees to mix with management, senior-level executives, peers, and other new hires. This will enable employees to build more robust networks and connections they can turn to for support in new roles, stretch assignments, and future promotions.

With the wide variety of circles created, employees can learn about various skills and tools that can help them grow in their current roles and advance within the company. From management skills and customer relationship management best practices to handling workplace conflict and office ethics, mentoring circles can impart knowledge to employees through others' experiences and lessons learned.

The group style of mentoring circles elevates accountability for all involved. This type of interaction builds trust between members, allowing them to come together to support each other's goals while seeking to achieve their own. It also relies on participants to show up and interact. This group commitment keeps members engaged.

Finally, mentoring circles can go a long way in creating a space of trust and rapport for co-workers. This trust allows employees to confront difficulties in the office and discuss candidly the challenges they face. It encourages participants to embrace diversity within the circle and learn from their experiences inside the workplace and out. These connections can create a more unified workforce and build a more productive path to collaboration and eventually more incredible innovation within the company.





BEST PRACTICES FOR CREATING MENTORING CIRCLES

Before you start your mentoring circles program, take a moment to note the critical elements of a successful setup:

- Circles work best with between five and eight members participating. If groups grow much larger, participants speak up less and provide fewer individual contributions.
- Designate someone to administer the program—it won't run itself! Although circle leaders manage individual mentoring circles, you'll still need an administrator to coach them along, encourage them to recruit participants, and celebrate their efforts.
- Establish goals for the program and publicize these to participants. Without set goals, a circle can meander and get off-topic. Be sure participants come away feeling like they've accomplished something.
- Develop an efficient way for participants to propose circles, as well as a marketplace for participants to easily find a circle they'll get excited about. Remember, you should make this process as streamlined as possible to keep motivation high.
- Track program health—how many people sign up, how many groups form, how well they persist over time, and participant satisfaction.

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a black top, is smiling and pointing with a white pen at a document on a table. She is surrounded by other people in a meeting setting. A man in a light blue shirt is visible on the left, and a woman with curly hair in a white top is smiling on the right. The background shows a large window with a grid pattern and a stone wall.

CONCLUSION

Mentoring circles allow employees to learn from one another in a supportive format and drive knowledge transfer and engagement. It's a new spin on a long-valued learning technique. And whether groups want to come together to provide mutual support, build professional networks, or develop specific skills, a mentoring circles program can be a creative new addition to any organization.

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