

Guidelines for a Listening and Learning Circle

A Learning Circle is a powerful tool for culture change. It is a problem solving tool that helps teams to make decisions and create solutions. The process, when done over several teams, departments and levels provides a way to tap into all of the wisdom of everyone in the organization. Learning Circles insure that everyone has an opportunity be heard - to provide input and their perspective into decisions and changes being made. Learning Circles should be done with people who are at the level of resident care whenever decisions effecting resident care are being made.

The key to the learning circle is to carefully craft the question that everyone in the group will answer. A good way to begin each question is with “How can we...” in order to be inclusive of everyone. It is a good idea to have someone taking notes of everyone’s answers (or use a tape recorder).

The process:

- Groups should not have more than 15 people per group. Groups as large as 12 to 15 may want to break into two smaller groups to get different group perspectives.
- The group is gathered and sits in chairs that have been arranged in a circle – no table or other obstructions should be between the group members so that energy can flow easily.
- The group chooses a volunteer to lead the process. The job of the leader is to pose the question and then ensure that each individual has a chance to talk with no interruptions during the first round. The leader does not participate in making comments, only in being the moderator.
- The leader poses the question, and asks for a volunteer in the circle to go first.
- The volunteer starts and shares. From this point through to the end of the first round no one is allowed to talk but the person whose turn it is. The leader provides reminders if some people in the circle forget.
- Once the first volunteer is finished, the two people on either side of her/him look at each other and decide which of them will go next.
- The person to either the right or left of the first person to speak talks and then the circle proceeds around from that point.
- A person may pass if more time is needed to form thoughts. The leader must remember who has passed and return to this person at the end. There is only one opportunity to pass, after that the person must answer.
- After everyone has had a chance to talk, the leader opens the circle up for comments and questions (and can make his or her own comments).
- After the process is finished the team can reflect on everyone’s input and form solutions based on the input.
- Organizations will want to have several teams participate in the Learning Circle process, making sure that representatives of each area that will be affected by a change are represented.