



Toronto Neighbourhood Centres
Community Development Renewal Initiative

Transferable Strategies & Case Studies
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Learning Circles and Agency Change

Issue:

How can learning circles be used to support agency staff to examine the context of their work in ways that promote positive organizational and community change?

Background:

North York Community House is in the midst of multi-year organizational change process that they began three years ago. This activity is designed to integrate community development and social service activities within a broader social change framework that better meets their agency's community-building mission.

At the same time, via the Toronto Neighbourhood Centres Community Development Renewal initiative (supported by 2-year funding from the Metcalf Foundation), a number of TNC member agencies have participated in workshops and small-group discussions to explore the links between "social service and social change".

Sixteen TNC member agencies have begun to sketch out "community-development plans", and a number of these organizations have identified staff learning and development as a key component. The promising practice of learning circles formed the basis of a peer networking discussion where staff groups from five TNC agencies who are poised to implement some kind of organizational learning process had an opportunity to draw upon North York Community House's experience in using learning circles.

Solution:

North York Community House has used a "learning circle" model to create opportunities for staff across levels and departments to participate in informal and collegial discussions that link their day-to-day work to larger community issues and social structures.

These small-group discussions are voluntary, and are facilitated to ensure that a participatory and open space for discussion and exploration will emerge. The topics for discussion are determined by the group themselves, emerging from initial exploratory discussions where staff are asked to share their reflections on how their own day to day work with community members is linked to or affected by larger community or system-level issues. From these initial discussions the group decides upon a few key topics for deeper exploration, and seeks out

supports (e.g. existing writings, presenters, other groups working on the issue) to stimulate their shared discussion and analysis.

The agency currently supports two learning circle groups, with 10-15 participants. The frequency of their meetings is determined by the group, but tends to be monthly. Participation in the groups is voluntary, but the organization has committed to ensuring that all interested staff can attend and their program responsibilities will be covered off to make this possible. The groups draw from across levels (front-line, coordinator, manager) and departments (e.g. settlement services, leadership development, youth programs, childcare).

Some issues explored in this fashion by North York Community House include barriers facing newcomers with overseas credentials, and systemic issues facing undocumented refugees.

Results:

Staff across departments and levels of the organization are valued for their expertise, and build a deeper appreciation for each other's work. Synergies and connections across disparate program areas are discovered.

Staff deepen their understanding of the context for their program interventions, and discover new program approaches and relationships with community participants to address systemic barriers.

The impact of power relations in a hierarchical workplace are diminished, as staff work across levels to direct their own learning objectives, and take on shared responsibility to promote positive program changes.

Analysis:

Learning circles are a powerful tool to empower staff, draw upon organizational expertise, and strengthen understanding and connections across program areas. They nurture a "learning organization" where staff connect their work to broader trends and issues, and achieve greater impact.

Reflections/Conclusions:

North York Community House has found that learning circles are best realized if they are not a stand-alone initiative, but are implemented as one tool among many (coupled with other professional development and learning events for individuals and groups). The management of the organization must also be consistently supportive of staff wishing to participate in learning circles, and must be willing to share power, as the locus of creating ideas and agendas for change are shifted away from a top-down planning model.

Contact:

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