



A Guide to Civic Leadership Circles

DRAFT (Spring 2012)

The idea of democracy is a wider and fuller idea than can be exemplified in the state even at its best. To be realized, it must affect all modes of human association... democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself. --- John Dewey, The Public and Its Problems (1927, 143, 148) (quoted in X.D. Briggs, Democratic Problem Solving)

According to Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow, forty percent of American adults participate in voluntary small groups. These range from religiously oriented small groups (Bible study groups, etc.) in which, Wuthnow estimates, forty million participate to book clubs, Alcoholics Anonymous, and a range of service clubs and fraternal organizations. As Robert Putnam shows, these groups are invaluable for creating “social capital.” But what if we could use this approach more directly to organize people around tackling the challenges of our communities and our democracy?ⁱ

The purpose of this guide is to lay out a framework for doing just that. We hope that our framework combines some of the best of these other small group models along with tools from the Community Platform in a simple, practical and holistic package for people of all persuasions – religious and secular; liberal, conservative, or libertarian – to build from our shared sense that we have a collective problem, or what survey researchers call our loss of confidence in American institutions and about the future.

Overview

Most of us feel that our democracy isn't working well. We probably can't agree on causes or solutions, but we at least share a sense that we should do better.

So what to do? We don't have any simple and quick solutions but we do have a simple concrete set of steps we propose. The starting point is to recognize that we need to think and act for the long term. Our goal is to have 1,000 neighborhood or civic “leadership circles” -- neighbors, fellow students, co-workers -- meeting once a month or more frequently for the next year. Think of these circles like a combination book club, neighborhood watch, Bible study group, neighborhood association, supper club, or Twelve Step program. Each group will develop its own focus, but the unifying theme is that they are focused on taking a holistic approach to strengthening the capacities of their communities and the individuals and families who live there. What’s a holistic approach? It means combining action and reflection; and it means looking inward at our own lives as well as outward at our communities. If they

work as we hope, people will feel tied to one another by both a sense of shared purpose and of fellowship and friendship.

We will provide a range of resources to help each group find its way. Resources will include:

- Introductory video on goals, working principles, etc.
- Discussion guides and videos or articles relevant to the topics listed below
- Web tools from the Community Platform that provide a way to track what's happening in the groups and provide resources for thinking about community needs and resources.
- An online forum or Knowledgebase for exchanging ideas
- Training for group leaders or facilitators

Each group will meet on a regular basis for six months or a year. Groups will meet weekly (like most religious small groups), biweekly, or monthly (like a dinner club). Weekly is preferred so that participants get to know each other well, there's a sense of starting a conversation and continuing it, and there's a feeling that this time together and the relationships one builds are woven into the fabric of one's life.ⁱⁱ

Types of Circles

The idea of neighbors coming together to talk about their communities and their own lives feels like the ideal from the perspective of community-building, but it's important to meet people where they live, so to speak. Thus, the groups would include:

- Neighborhood- or block-based groups;
- University student groups;
- Groups of retirees, who often have more time to meet or work together during the day;
- Work-based groups that meet over lunch or after work;
- Congregation-based extensions of traditional religious small groups that convene to study the Bible or other texts.

Recruitment

There are a number of ways that circle members can be recruited. These range from asking friends to posting on community electronic mailing lists and blogs to "Meetup" and other similar online services, to canvassing a neighborhood one door at a time.

We have had good success bringing nonprofit organizations together to conduct a series of "community canvasses" in the District of Columbia's Columbia Heights-Pleasant Plains area on summer weekday evenings and on Saturday mornings. The canvassing provided an opportunity to learn about residents' interests, concerns and willingness to volunteer, as a well as a means to recruit for the neighborhood leadership circles.

Ground Rules

The ground rules for these circles are straightforward:

- Respect all voices (and be sure to give opportunity to introverts as well as extroverts)
- Listen (This is usually more important than speaking!)
- No side conversations

20-minute Introductory Video: Themes

We hope to strike a balance between empowering each circle to chart its own course and providing a structure for the circles to thrive for many years (we hope) and stay true to the core vision of the project. The introductory video can help launch the circles forward in constructive directions with a firm vision and momentum. The likely themes and segments for the video include:

- The difference a few leaders can make
 - Freedom Riders, etc. -- small numbers are sufficient!
 - Alcoholics Anonymous
 - Videos: Bryan Stevenson, Ronald Heifetz, Václav Havel, or Patrick Awuah
- What does a thriving community look like? What difference can we make?
 - Perhaps have different versions of this for different communities. (For example, it makes no sense to talk about cleaning a park if all the parks in some affluent neighborhood are already pristine.)
 - Short film of interview with Jackie Arguelles, a retiree from DC's Ward 1 who tutors kids and gets neighborhood kids helping with snow shoveling, gardening and more.
 - People helping each other in an emergency
 - It's a Wonderful Life
 - Create a collage from magazines or photos of a good community. What are its characteristics? (Zaltman)
- Interplay between personal well-being and community well-being
 - If hurt...
 - If distrustful...
 - Mundane: If obese, hard to contribute...
 - Videos: JK Rowling
- Broader responsibility for world
 - We find meaning in being interconnected
 - What ordinary Greeks think about their place in the world may affect your future!
 - Habits of the rich and powerful may be unique to them, but also heavily influenced by our prevailing culture
 - Videos: Bryan Stevenson
- Recognizing what we don't know
 - The mystery of our world, others, and ourselves
 - What motivates us? Why do some things move us more than others?

- Videos: Goleman on compassion, Napoli on empathy, Zimbardo on moral disengagement
- Making a small group work
 - Start with a meal: We are social beings!
 - A 3-minute intro to Myers-Briggs, differences in learning styles and personalities, or something like that (<http://www.humanmetrics.com/cgi-win/jtypes2.asp>, <http://www.developandgrow.com/lifecoach/blog/free-on-line-myers-briggs-personality-tests/>)
 - Staying grounded and the value of a couple of group "rituals":
 - Start with "checking in". The personal relationships created in the small groups matter too!
 - Include a few minutes of silence for reflection or prayer?
 - Include a short TED-style video on a relevant topic each meeting? (Psychology: Why we reason so poorly?)
- Where we hope you will go over the next year
 - A holistic approach to both communities and our own lives: John Dewey: Democracy is more than just voting; it is a way of life.
 - Have each member design his or her own segment each session that lets other members into his or her own world. It could be organized around question: What are you passionate about? Or, what are your unique gifts?
- A range of options for reflection, discussion and action. We hope that each group will do some of each.
 - Linking to like-minded people and nonprofit organizations
 - Conclusion: A vision of a community-wide or even a national movement.
 - Encourage outreach to create new groups, perhaps focused on specific issues or themes ranging from a tutoring group to one where people get together to exercise.
- This is an experiment and we would greatly appreciate your feedback!
 - Have individuals set up individual accounts and a group account.
 - Collect info on topic and notes on each group
 - Have a standard feedback questionnaire for participants
 - Give groups the opportunity to share notes or keep them private

Procedural Questions

Some religious small groups are organized as time-limited series so that members have the opportunity to join different groups or gracefully drop out. Should the Circles be organized like this or as ongoing?

Options include:

- One year commitment to meet once a month or every two weeks
- Three months of weekly meetings
- Six months of biweekly meetings

A trickier issue is whether the group is fundamentally open or closed. The Alcoholics Anonymous approach is that all are welcome. The True North Groups, on the other hand, are based on the group picking people who they think will be congenial, sharing similar goals.

What do you think?

A Menu of Circle Activities and Topics

We hope that you will have at least an hour at each meeting for discussion or action. Here's a list of some possible topics or actions. (Some of the actions could be for a planned weekend activity.)

Starters

Pick and choose the questions or discuss them over several meetings if you'd like.

- How did each person come to be here in this Circle?
- What's your background?
- What motivates you?
- What would success look like to you?
- What does a good community look like?
- Imagine yourself in 10 or 20 years. Ideally, what would you be doing?
- What are we responsible for? What are we willing to sacrifice for? Under what conditions?
- How do you think others think about these questions? Your neighbors who aren't in the group? Co-workers? Other communities to which you belong?
- Why do you think some people feel more responsible for the world or each other than others? Why do some give more to charity or volunteer more? Why do some choose "public service" careers in government or nonprofit organizations?

Other Sessions

You can pick and choose from these activities, but we would prefer that all Circles tackle the same topic or activity one session per month so we can more easily learn from one another and maintain a connection to the other circles and the broader vision of what we want to accomplish.

- Learn about or map your neighborhood assets and nonprofit organizations using the Community Platform and other resources.
- In-depth “gap and overlap analysis”: Are there gaps between needs and resources in a given area? If, for example, one looked at mentoring, members of the group could each be assigned to interview local teachers, principals, mentoring programs, and youth workers to get a feel for needs and capacities. (This would require extra time.)
- Learn about or map the neighborhood challenges and needs.
- Invite a local nonprofit leader to talk about his or her work and, hopefully, make a donation or have at least a few members volunteer.
- Invite several organizations or experts to talk about a community problem or opportunity.
- "Solutions Sessions"
 - We provide videos or short write-ups of programs, projects or leaders that are making a difference around a specific challenge or issue. Of special interest are place-based projects in education, public health, and community and economic development. Some of these use the terminology of building “social capital,” others “resilience.” Regardless of the terminology, most have similar ultimate goals.
 - Brainstorm about what could be done in your "community." This could be a neighborhood for a neighborhood-based group or a city or some other geography or population for other types of groups. Ideally, this brainstorming will lead to consensus around what could be done and action.
- Conduct a community canvass: Go door to door to learn about neighbors, hear their concerns and maybe identify those who need help, such as shut-in seniors.
- Work in smaller teams to write or film a story of a successful community project, which could be shared with the network of groups.
- Thinking about our networks: Who do we know? Do they share our values? Would they be interested in getting involved? Are we “connectors”?
- Debate a local or national policy issue. Can our group reach consensus? If not, why? Are there particular experiences or world views that we just can’t shake? Can we live with these differences and build on what we have in common?
- Change from the inside out
 - What personal weaknesses prevent us from contributing more to our community or to this group?
 - Do we trust one another to work together well? Are we candid with one another? If not, are there things we can do differently or is it perhaps just a question of getting to know one another?
 - How can we help each other?

- Community leadership training
 - What does leadership look like? Models:
 - Transformational
 - Authentic
 - Servant leadership
 - Emotional intelligence
 - The role of empathy
- Mentoring training
 - Child psych lesson?
- A holistic approach to individual well-being is often said to encompass physical, mental, social/emotional, and spiritual dimensions. This session will be devoted to learning more about the linkages across these domains, how that may play out in our own lives, and how we think about these dimensions across our community.
- Community or action research project
 - Household survey looking at social capital, or topics that the group defines.
- The arts
 - Help with videos for nonprofits or public art
- Improving presentation skills to make a difference
- Marshall Ganz on telling your individual and community stories.
- Planning a group civic action or activity. (The Platform provides online tools to help in managing the project.)
- Have each member develop a personal action as a means for both personal growth as well as for spreading our work.
- TED Talks and other videos: Why do some people feel responsible for a broader world while others don't? Moral disengagement in a complex and confusing world

What Impact Could Widespread Neighborhood Leadership Circles Have?

Impact is every community member and organization taking a more active, thoughtful and sustained civic role. At a deeper level, it's about helping people find a sense of optimism and energy in all aspects of their lives – physical, mental, social and spiritual; an end to a culture of blaming the other guy or helpless passivity; and a return to a culture of responsibility for ourselves, our communities, our nation, and our world; and it's about a sense of camaraderie. We are, after all, in this together. As the Puritan leader John Winthrop put it in 1630, "We must delight in each other, make others conditions our own, rejoyce together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our community as members of the same body."

It is, as Dr. King put it, "enormously difficult to know what to do. We must climb the unfamiliar slope of steep mountains, but there is no alternative, no well-trod level path. There will be agonizing setbacks along with creative advances." But "sometimes leadership must begin with nothing more than a question."ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ Some service clubs such as the Rotary and Lions Clubs arguably have a similar focus, but they are burdened with both reputations and practices that tend to turn away younger adults.

ⁱⁱ See Bill George & Doug Baker, *True North Groups: A Powerful Path to Personal and Leadership Development* (2011).

ⁱⁱⁱ The first quote is from Martin Luther King, Jr. “Where Do We Go from Here?” page 598. The second quote is from Ronald Heifetz, “Leadership With No Easy Answers.”