

Peer Learning Circles: A Uniquely Well-Suited Method for Developing Today's Leaders

Contemporary Leadership Advisors

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Introduction

Small groups have gathered around circles for as long as humans have known how to make fire. Time and time again, people have conformed to this shape to share culture, explore new opportunities, problem-solve, and make high-stakes decisions that impact themselves and their communities. At its core though, the purpose of this universal practice is to promote human connection.

Peer Learning Circles (PLC) pay homage to this age-old tradition. They offer a forum for leaders to build lasting relationships with a diverse set of peers, expand their view across the business, hone their coaching skills, and gain fresh insight into their most pressing, everyday challenges.



The circle is the fundamental geometry of open human connection

Harrison Owen

Conventional Leadership Development Methods Are No Longer Sufficient

Conventional leadership development methods are based on best practices in adult learning. For example, we know that adults like to apply their own knowledge and perspective to personalize their learning experiences. We also know that adults prefer to learn practical skills that they can apply in the near-term to help them achieve something meaningful, and that they typically benefit from the opportunity to self-direct their learning. In relatively stable and predictable operating environments, development programs that apply these practices generally optimize the learning experience for leaders and ROI for the business¹.

But the operating environment has changed, and these practices are necessary but no longer sufficient for developing today's leaders. As the half-life of information grows smaller, leaders must increasingly rely on their network of relationships across and beyond the business for information in response to new developments or shifting dynamics². Additionally,

as organizations grow more complex, leaders need to zoom out beyond their team or functional silo and view the business holistically to deliver strategic insight³. Alternative methods like PLCs encourage leaders to adopt a curious mindset, build strategic networks, and think from a systems-level perspective to combat the accelerated pace of change and increased complexity of today's business landscape.

The Business Case for PLCs

There are several reasons why PLCs are uniquely well-suited for developing today's leaders. First, employee expertise is a vast untapped resource for most organizations. More than half of employees turn to peers when they need information or want to learn a new skill, but less than half of organizations institute any kind of formal Peer Learning Program, and one in three don't have any system in place for employees to share learnings with one another. This is even more surprising given that employees who reach outside their function pick up skills faster and those who are asked to share their expertise are more likely to feel valued by their colleagues⁴.

The PLC approach is also timely because today's leaders need to be better equipped to influence and collaborate without formal authority. Most companies are organized and resourced in a manner that directs leaders to optimize for the performance of their own group, even if it comes at the expense of other parts of the business⁵. Unfortunately, traditional development programs can amplify this disconnect by failing to help leaders cultivate cross-functional relationships and build the skills needed to collaborate across the organization. PLCs, on the other hand, teach leaders to influence at the interfaces between teams by forging partnerships with colleagues who think differently and by demonstrating the willingness to be influenced by them.

In addition, PLCs are fit for purpose in contemporary organizations because participants learn to become more effective coaches. As the world slowly emerges bruised and battered from the pandemic, it is critical for leaders to be able to listen to and empathize with their people, as well as offer support, clarity, and perspective. The great resignation can be attributed to many factors, but poor leadership is among the top of the list. By teaching leaders to be better coaches, PLCs can go a long way in combatting employee stress, burnout, and turnover⁶.

Finally, PLCs make sense for today's organizations because leaders report having less time for traditional development programs that take them away from their work⁷. Most leaders are being pulled in several different directions simultaneously, battling competing priorities, and carrying a lot of responsibility for the business. In this context, leaders have trouble stepping away from their work for development activities that they can't turn around and immediately apply in their roles. That is why PLC sessions are not meant to take individuals away from their jobs. Instead, they are designed to hold a magnifying glass up to the challenges and

opportunities participants are currently facing in their everyday work lives.

How PLCs Work

A PLC is a group of between 6 and 8 peers with diverse backgrounds from different parts of the organization who come together (virtually or in-person) for monthly learning sessions with an expert facilitator to support one another's growth and development.

Successful PLC programs meet seven criteria: (See Figure 1)

- 1 Expert Facilitation
- 2 Structured Process
- 3 Psychological Safety
- 4 Real-World Application
- 5 Reflection & Critical Thinking
- 6 Diversity
- 7 Accountability

Figure 1

1 Expert Facilitation. The most common mistake organizations make when implementing PLC programs is neglecting the importance of expert facilitation. The facilitator plans and organizes the live sessions, sends out the pre-work (typically a short article or podcast on the monthly learning topic), keeps the conversations progressing, maintains a positive atmosphere for participants to be vulnerable, learn, and experiment, and curates the Peer Consultation Protocol.

PLC facilitators should have a deep understanding of the skills required to be an effective coach. They should also have the business acumen to understand the

challenges that participants raise during the sessions, as well as the gravitas and verbal communication skills to guide their attention during key moments. Finally, it is critical that facilitators possess the interpersonal and cultural sensitivity needed to navigate topics involving differences between people and fully embrace participant diversity as a core element of the PLC. In our experience, Expert Facilitation is the most important determinant of the PLC's success.

2 Structured Process. The second most common mistake organizations make is to allow PLC sessions to become freeform discussions. The most effective PLC sessions provide a set of guardrails to ensure the session progresses on track. For example, we use a 3-part semi-structured agenda (See Figure 2) to organize each monthly session. The Check-in offers participants the opportunity to update one another on the progress they've made and to hear

from those who received a peer consultation during the previous session. The Insights Discussion is a guided conversation based on a set of pre-defined questions about the learning topic and assigned prework, and the Peer Coaching Protocol is the inquiry-based learning approach where participants apply coaching skills to help one another problem-solve for their current challenges and opportunities.

It is important for the group to align around a set of ground rules for how participants show up and engage with one another during the sessions. Some of the essentials include maintaining confidentiality, remaining open-minded to the perspectives of peers, and arriving to the session prepared and on time. Most PLC programs are run with a distributed cohort of participants, and there are an additional set of practices we apply (e.g., cameras on) to optimize the experience for virtual sessions.

(See Figure 2)

Each PLC session uses the same 3-part, 90 Minute Agenda



Figure 2

3 Psychological Safety. PLC participants need to be able to discuss personal, sometimes highly sensitive matters and feel confident that their peers will listen respectfully and with open minds. At the same time, participants must display the courage to speak up and ask challenging questions or pose provocative reframes when appropriate. At the root of it all, the PLC space enables participants to take risks without the fear that they are being judged or evaluated while they learn. One of our PLC participants at a Fortune 100 Technology company recently said, “PLCs are our only opportunity to have real, authentic group discussions [in the organization].”

4 Real-World Application. Each PLC session comes with bite-sized, curated content on a topic that is highly relevant to participants and the business. During the Insight Discussion segment, participants are encouraged to talk about how their takeaways from the assigned article or podcast can be applied to extend their impact as leaders. As part of the discussion, participants can learn from one another about what specifically works and doesn't work within their respective parts of the organization.

The peer consultation process enables at least one leader per session to solve for a specific real-world challenge or opportunity that they currently face, so that the insights drawn from the process can instantly be applied outside the session. Post-work can be assigned to encourage the exploration and application of new capabilities (i.e., knowledge, skills, and mindsets) as well.

5 Reflection & Critical Thinking. The PLC process challenges participants to reflect on their leadership impact. During each session, the facilitator prompts powerful questions that require leaders to pressure-test their assumptions and consider novel perspectives. As part of the peer consultations, participants develop and apply

coaching skills (e.g., active listening, powerful inquiry, reframing) that lead to deeper discussion and greater insight. By learning from peers who represent different parts of the organization, participants can approach their work with a broader view of the business and think more deeply about how their work impacts the rest of the system.

6 Diversity. PLC groupings should maximize participant diversity (e.g., gender, race), as well as spread across the organization (e.g., function, business unit). Despite coming from different backgrounds, PLC participants quickly learn that they share many of the same experiences. For example, we find that the most common challenges our PLC participants face relate to managing performance on their teams, collaborating across silos, and pushing back against more senior leaders.

By creating a safe space to talk through these challenges, leaders feel a greater sense of belonging and camaraderie with their peers. In fact, many of our PLC groups have continued to meet even after the formal program had concluded. When run at scale, PLC programs have the potential to break down silos and enhance connectivity across entire organizations.

7 Accountability. Leaders need to hold themselves and one another accountable for attending the sessions and arriving prepared to participate. If members fail to regularly attend the sessions, the group will struggle to develop the chemistry and ultimately the psychological safety it needs to function properly. Commitment from the organization and buy-in from participants' direct managers can go a long way to support participant attendance and engagement. Beyond these “table stakes”, some PLC programs also include a process for touching base on participants' personal leadership development goals during the Check-In segment of each session.

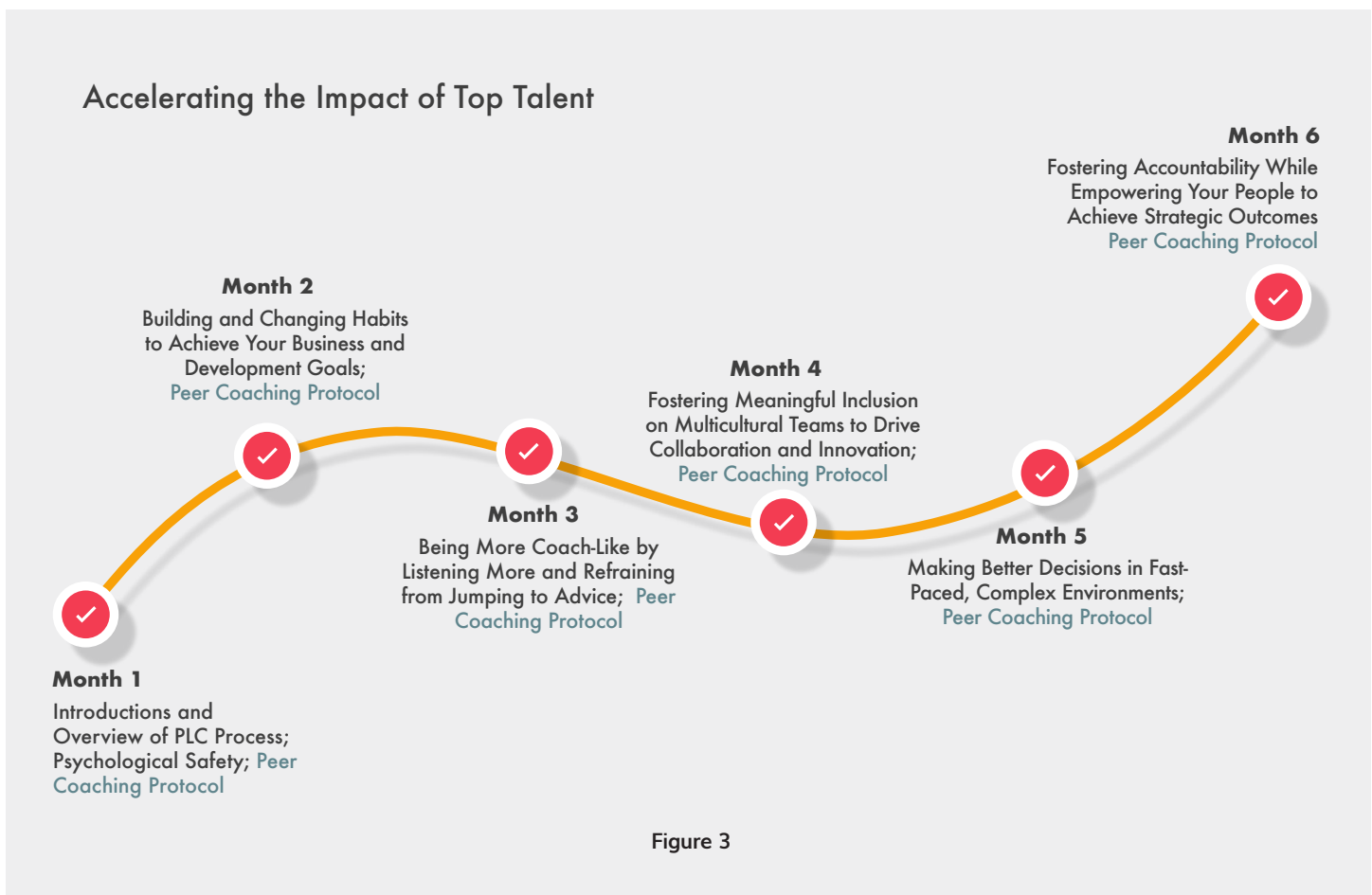
The Myriad Benefits of PLCs

PLCs are a mechanism for leaders to grow their networks across the enterprise in ways that help them achieve their goals and create value for the organization. In other words, PLCs grant participants greater access to different parts of the business and the distributed expertise that they need to lead with an enterprise mindset and deliver strategic insight.

PLCs also foster resiliency networks by providing the space for participants to forge relationships that are grounded in their common experiences as leaders. In this way, PLCs tighten the fabric of social support across the organization. In one PLC program we ran with over 125 participants from across a large organization, we found a 5X increase in cross-functional collaboration after six months.

Another benefit of PLCs is that participants learn how to be more effective coaches. They become better listeners, learn to ask powerful questions, and identify strategies for reframing challenges to draw out new perspectives. They also benefit by gaining fresh insight to solve for their most pressing challenges and opportunities.

A final advantage of the PLC approach is that it can be used as a vehicle to deliver the content and develop the leadership capabilities that are top of mind for the business. For example, we run PLCs as part of an award-winning leadership development program at a Fortune 50 company. The content we curated for the sessions (See Figure 3) was grounded in the organization's Leadership Principles and a robust needs analysis to determine the capabilities most critical for participant success and business impact.



The program has been a tremendous success, with 93% of the more than 350 PLC participants reporting that the six-month experience extended their leadership impact. According to one director, "It's a wonderful experience. Getting a glimpse into how my peers handle problems like the ones that I face was hugely helpful learning for me." Managers also noticed the program's impact, with 91% reporting that the PLCs helped their direct reports progress on the personal leadership development goals they had identified six months earlier.

Conclusion

Circles have been used to facilitate human connection from time immemorial. When implemented correctly, PLCs harness the natural power of structured, small group learning to accelerate the development of today's leaders within the context of a rapidly evolving, more complex business landscape.

The method is uniquely well-suited for the operating environment and leadership requirements of today's organizations. They enable businesses to better leverage their existing employee expertise, empower leaders to influence horizontally across the enterprise, and create a cadre of more effective leader-coaches with the skills and mindset needed to solve their real-world challenges.

In short, there is every reason to be leveraging PLCs for leadership development in your organization today.

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