

Story Circle Method

IN THIS PRACTICE NOTE...

Story circles bring people together in an equitable, collective experience to share their stories.

In facilitating reflective convenings among professional practitioners we have found it to be a profound way of generating insight from personal and professional experience while creating a democratic atmosphere and a safe space for expression.

This Practice Note outlines the method as the Research Center for Leadership in Action scholars have learned it from our partners John O’Neal and Theresa Holden of Junebug Productions and Holden and Arts Associates, and share a snapshot of our experience with story circles.

Introduction

Leaders of social change efforts have used story circles to stimulate memory, share experiences, and/or to build community solidarity through remembering events, people, or repertoires. Junebug Productions refers to this as ‘creating a tapestry of community’ and has used stories to share experiences of the Civil Rights movement.

At the Research Center for Leadership in Action, we have tapped the dialogical and reflective elements of story circle in facilitating convenings of practitioners belonging to the same professional sphere or sharing similar interests.

Using story circle we have brought practitioners together to:

- Identify and explore patterns relating to an experience, problem or issue; and
- Find common threads of experience and build relationships among practitioners by illuminating connections.

In addition to its potential to explore patterns and find commonalities, we have found story circle to be effective in:

- Encouraging practitioners to shed technical jargon and overly processed communications by focusing on direct experience;
- Empowering individuals by sharing their memories and experiences, which are precious sources of knowledge; and
- Creating a deep space fairly quickly among people who may have never met before.

How to Hold a Story Circle

Theresa Holden uses the analogy of a gumbo to describe the story circle, which we truncate here. Imagine the space in the middle of the circle as a potential holder of all the stories. Before stories are recounted, that space is empty. In going around the circle each participant puts his/her story in that space. In the end, it is filled with potent memories, emotions, and importantly connections. Out of this central space and in combining all the stories, a new story emerges that belongs to everyone and is like a rich and textured stew.

Here's how to do it:

- Everyone sits in an even circle with no physical obstructions.
- The facilitator introduces him/herself and the story circle method. Everyone introduces themselves in turn.
- The facilitator or the group can choose a theme at the beginning to guide the stories.
- The facilitator can use a primer story or other memory prompts to can be used to stimulate the group. As an example, the facilitator can ask “tell us about a time when you faced up to a real problem.”
- The facilitator and the group agree on a period of time for each person to tell his/her story. Depending on the size of the group this can be three to five minutes. It is important that everyone has equal time to ensure inclusion and equality. A person who has taken more time should not end their story abruptly, but be allowed to finish. One way to keep time is for the person sitting next to the story teller to gently tap that person one minute before the designated time has lapsed.
- Each person tells their story in turn. If a person is not ready, they can ‘pass’ and tell their story once the circle has been completed.
- Stories can come from anywhere – one’s day, personal experience, an encounter, a phase in one’s life, or from someone else. But it is important that they remain stories – not rhetoric, opinions or analytical thoughts.
- After all stories are told, participants may engage in cross-talk or open discussion to ask clarifying questions or generate themes.

In facilitating sessions among practitioners we have found a manageable size of a story circle to be in the range of three to eight participants. In similar contexts, we recommend that larger groups are split into smaller story circles to allow ample time for each participant to share a story and to create a more personal space for storytelling.

Ground Rules

The equal spirit of the ‘circle’ should be enacted through the story circle method:

- Everyone sits in an equal circle with no physical barriers like tables or chairs in the middle.
- Listening is more important than talking.
- A storyteller and his/her story should be respected, not judged.
- Too much information processing in the mind should be discouraged. The story that needs to be told will emerge from the heart.

Our Experience with Story Circles

In December 2006, RCLA organized a convening of practitioners and academics to discuss the use of Cooperative Inquiry (CI), an inquiry method that encourages collaborative reflection on and in practice. To help us think about the impact of CI on our work and life, the group broke off into smaller story circles. Powerful stories were told from people’s own CI experiences, generating common themes like the developmental potential of CI. These themes were shared to the wider group in the form of skits, group sculptures and poetry. Interestingly, these artistic forms of expression were not requested at the beginning, but were inspired through the story circle method.

In this context story circles were a way of exchanging experiences between academics and practitioners. The story circle setting reinforced collaborative relationships and dialogue – elements of the wider RCLA ethos. Talking through stories was also a humane and innate way of exchanging thoughts, in contrast to talking through jargon or more theoretical frames.

In another example, we used story circles during a strategic planning retreat at RCLA. Staff organized into smaller groups of four to five people and shared stories of how they joined RCLA. The stories were a good way of reminding staff of why they were drawn to the organization, and of remembering/finding common interests among staff. In a larger group reflection session, the sub-groups came together to share common themes about what attracted them to the organization. These included dialogue, reflection, and qualitative research – work methods that RCLA takes pride in.

Keep in Mind

- Sharing stories on a personal level can summon deep human emotions that require empathy and emotional intelligence.
- Silence in between stories is, in fact, good. It gives the latest story teller, and the circle, time to reflect on the story they just heard, and it gives the next person time to land on his/her story.
- If the story circle is going to be recorded, group permission needs to be obtained. It should be disclosed that the designated note-taker will compromise full participation in the story circle. There is a trade-off between deep listening and taking notes.

More References

Junebug Productions Leadership Story – Leadership for a Changing World
<http://www.wagner.nyu.edu/leadership/reports/files/JuneBug.pdf>

Junebug Productions The Color Line Project
http://www.artsusa.org/animatingdemocracy/labs/lab_004.asp

Making Connections – Denver
<http://www.makingconnectionsdenver.org/publications/view.aspx?PublicationTypeID=5>

Relevant RCLA Resources

Practice Note: Using World Café in Complex Conversations - October 2008

This Practice Note draws on RCLA's experience using World Café in a Race and Leadership symposium to examine the central roles social identity, particularly race and ethnicity, can play in the work of social change organizations. Facilitators can use this method to enable a variety of rich, in-depth discussions, letting coherent themes emerge without imposing their own interpretations.

<http://www.wagner.nyu.edu/leadership/reports/files/PracticeNoteWorldCafe1008.pdf>

Practice Note: Designing Peer-to-Peer Learning Exchanges - April 2008

How to organize and facilitate learning exchanges among leaders who share an understanding of each others' common challenges, experiences, and practices in such a way that enables participants to apply new learning 'back home' in their own organizations.

http://www.wagner.nyu.edu/leadership/practice_notes/RCLA%20Practice%20Note_Peer-to-Peer.pdf



The Research Center for Leadership in Action (RCLA) at New York University's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service supports leadership that listens to many voices and serves as a resource for making systems and organizations effective, transparent, inclusive and fair. RCLA supports change agents tackling critical public challenges through rigorous, practice-grounded research and reflective processes that strengthen the theory and practice of leadership.

As part of this work, RCLA crafts and runs customized, experiential leadership programs that both expand individuals' skills and strengthen the organizations in which they work. RCLA develops structured convenings where leaders explore the complexity of the challenges they face and together advance their efforts to make change possible. As an academic center, RCLA conducts rigorous social science research, employing a variety of innovative and participatory methodologies to the issues of contemporary leadership.