



Peer Learning Circle Project II Final Report

Cultural Careers Council Ontario

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Executive Summary

A peer learning circle is a facilitated process to further individual and collective learning with a small number of participants who have something in common. Growing more popular in both the private and public sectors as “communities of practice”, “peer coaching”, and “mentor circles”. There are many variations on the model.

As part of its efforts to support a resilient, skilled and innovative labour force Culture Careers Council Ontario (CCCO) addresses the arts and culture sector’s business skills such as its human resources and career development needs. CCCO has recognized that traditional techniques, such as workshops, are common in the marketplace and yet do not fully meet the learning needs of all parts of the sector, or throughout all stages of a career. In its exploration of other models CCCO piloted a peer learning circle targeted to executive directors of cultural service organizations in 2007/08 . In 2009’s Project II, CCCO expanded its pilot to four additional segments of the cultural workforce: emerging arts professionals; curators and programmers; managers/leaders from a specific region; and artists or creators.

The peer learning circle model is based on the premise that learner and learning are self-directed and that there is a cycle to learning in which one moves from concrete experience to reflection and from that experience to integration, application, and judgment – only to begin again. In order to achieve this, peer learning circles help develop skills in critical thinking, reflection, self-assessment and decision making.

CCCO’s Peer Learning Circles provided a unique small group setting and structure for planning and accountability. In their group, or Circle, participants discussed current projects, shared insights and resources, supported and challenged each other and developed individual action plans over a series of months. Within a monthly facilitated process Circle members identified issues, developed individual goal(s), committed to taking specific action between meetings to address their goal(s) and then reported on progress at subsequent meetings. Through peer-to-peer coaching participants both supported the development of goals and held each other accountable for taking action. At the conclusion of the six month Pilot and seven month Project II, participants demonstrated new knowledge and skill development in a variety of areas and the use of new tools. For example participants were increasingly able to identify

roadblocks to decision-making, “coach” others to support their decision making (as opposed to “managing” or “telling”) and use different approaches to strategy development and decision making.

These new skills and insights in turn supported the action plans and results, directly impacting on the participants in their personal and professional lives. Participants set goals and action steps to reach them which were highly individual, covering both personal and professional issues such as: gaining better work/life balance; overcoming creative blocks; completing major workplace projects; finding new employment and addressing workplace conflict.

However, Peer Circles are not without challenges. Many workplace and home life issues such as underemployment, unemployment, contract work, low pay, high rent (Toronto), changing technology and the need for new skills are systemic and not “solvable” in a peer circle setting. While all participants actively set goals, their action plans were limited to what they could control or influence individually. Nor do peer learning circles sufficiently fill the needs of cultural workers who are newcomers to Canada and seek to establish a Canadian based network of colleagues and insight into the working practices of the local cultural sector.

Furthermore, the circle experience is **difficult to describe and effectively market** to employers and cultural workers. It is also a challenge to **gather an appropriate peer group** with a high level of a commonality and among whom there is a low risk to share information.. Barriers to access include **the time and financial commitment for travel** (for some), **the multi-month commitment**, and the **high level of english proficiency** needed to effectively “coach”. The effectiveness of peer learning circles is highly dependent on the skill and availability of **trained external facilitators**.

The Pilot Project and Project II allowed CCCO to refine a model for peer learning circles and test its applicability across segments of the cultural workforce. Both pilots showed that peer learning circles are an effective form of professional development. As CCCO looks to offer peer learning circles in the future, the following recommendations are offered to guide program development and implementation. Development of a **marketing strategy** is key for CCCO to implement peer learning circles as a sustainable regular program. Future circles should **be based on the model developed for the Pilot and Project II and be targeted to a career point** (e.g. early career) rather than a functional area (such

as educators). The priority for future circles should be **mid and senior career workers in organizational settings** and **participants should be drawn from a large geographic area. CCCO should develop a pool of facilitators** to support future peer learning circles.

Overall there was a high level of satisfaction with the Peer Learning Circles by participants and a willingness to recommend it to colleagues. The Pilot and Project II suggest a broad applicability across the disciplines and sub sectors of the cultural community and throughout a career. More than networking or traditional skills development, peer learning circles are an enriching unique experience that has direct impact on workers in their personal and professional lives and has both direct and indirect impact on cultural organizations.

Peer learning circles have the potential to be one of CCCO's niche professional development programs and a core service to the cultural sector.

The Project

With the financial support of the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, in late 2007 and early 2008, CCCO piloted a peer learning circle with mid career executive directors of arts service organizations to address the issues they face. The Peer Learning Circle (PLC) Pilot Project involved nine individuals from different sub-sectors in culture and was held in Toronto.

Following the successful pilot CCCO decided to explore the effectiveness of the model with additional segments from the cultural sector.

The aim of the PLC Project II was to explore the effectiveness of the peer learning circle approach as a tool for the professional development for:

- 1) **Emerging arts professionals:** administrators and managers with up to ten years of experience.
- 2) **Curators and programmers:** for film and theatre festivals, museums or galleries.

- 3) **Managers/leaders** from a specific region: people who supervise staff or departments in an arts and culture organization or facility. The Greater Bay area (St. Catharines, Hamilton, Burlington and Oakville) was selected.
- 4) **Artists or creators**: e.g. writers, actors, musicians, dancers, filmmakers, photographers, designers, craftspersons, visual artists, and other interpreters and creators.

The goal of the original PLC Pilot Project *to help participants improve their capacity to identify and address the key issues they face in their work* was carried through Project II. In order to achieve this goal, participants were supported in the development of skills in critical thinking, reflection, self-assessment and decision making. In all four Circles participants discussed current projects, shared insights and resources, supported and challenged each other and developed individual action plans. Circle members identified individual goal(s), committed to taking action between meetings to address their goal(s) and then reported on progress at subsequent meetings.

Carrie Brooks-Joiner & Associates was contracted to expand the pilot framework, facilitate the four circles over a seven month period in 2009, evaluate the project and produce a final report.

Project Promotion and Call for Participants

As with the Pilot, the PLC Project II was promoted through the existing channels of the CCCO and its partners. A media release (appendix I), a backgrounder (appendix II) providing an overview of the Project, and the call for participants were all posted on the CCCO's website. Hard copies were circulated by mail and fax to organizations within CCCO's database,

In addition, information was provided at complementary CCCO events and a poster targeted to artists and creators was displayed at key locations within Toronto (appendix III).

The Application Process

Interested participants self identified and applied for consideration to participate in one of four Circles. The application package included:

- Application form (appendix IV)
- Letter of Interest
- Resume

The Selection Process

Staff from CCCO and the facilitator reviewed all applications and made decisions regarding candidates accepted into the Project and each Circle. Some applicants applied to multiple circles and were placed in one while others were directed to a circle other than the one for which he/she applied. Applicants who did not match the four target groups or whose expectations as expressed in the required letter of interest were not compatible with the objectives of Project II were directed to other CCCO programs and services.

Participants were charged a nominal \$100 participation fee.

The Project Framework

Planning Assumptions

Project II maintained several key assumptions from the original Pilot. These included:

- The Circles are *facilitated in a face-to-face format*
- *The target participants are selected from a self-identified pool*
- *Participation in the Circle is confidential*
- The Circles will be held in Toronto and Hamilton in a location *accessible by public transit* and where the confidentiality of the Circle could be maintained

The Circle Format

The Project II Circles started in April 2009 and met six times over a seven month period (no August session) through October. Sessions were three hours long each and were held in a consistent location in downtown Toronto or Hamilton.

At the first gathering of each Circle the participants agreed on the following ground rule for all meetings:

- Confidentiality

Each Circle then added ground rules of their own (though the Managers/Leaders Circle chose not to add any additional ground rules). As an example the Emerging Arts Professionals added:

- No judgements
- Be positive

and later included:

- Be on time.

Each of the four Circles of Project II had a consistent structure:

- Opening – welcome & review of ground rules and Circle agenda
- Tools and Tips
- Individual reporting on previous goal with entire group
- Setting new goals and small group coaching
- Sharing new goals with entire group
- Closing

Issue identification, implementing a strategy for change and being accountable to the group for follow up are the key components of the peer learning circle process. At each meeting, Circle members identified one or more individual workplace, professional or personal issues they consider to be priorities, set a goal(s), identified next steps, and committed to taking action between meetings to address their goal. They reported on their progress at the following meetings and “checked in” with a Peer Circle partner between Circles. Worksheets provided a consistent format for recording goals and planned actions, and were used as reference for reporting.

Results

The outcomes of Project II were consistent with the outcomes of the first Pilot. It confirmed that the key issues within the cultural sector, such as resources, are systemic to the non-profit and cultural sectors and cannot directly be addressed through skill development and professional development opportunities. At best, change to systemic challenges is indirect and incremental.

At the same time participants successfully set goals within issues that they considered to be priorities and ones that they could influence, and then developed strategies to meet them. Among the specific outcomes of both the PLC Pilot and Project II were:

- Identification of key issues
- development and application of new skills
- application of new tools, techniques and technology
- new knowledge and learning
- development and use of a peer network
- enhanced personal reflection and awareness
- positive changes in behaviour
- increased risk taking

Skill Development

Among the most critical skills developed in the Circle model were issue identification and goal setting. Whether the goal set was for the organization, career related or personal, the actions had to be the *participant's* to take and be accountable for. Early in the process one participant noted that: "...the exercises showed my goal is not what I thought it was—it's more about balance". This shift from identifying what the *organization* or *board* has to do,

Anticipated Outcome

Skills – participants will develop skills in:

- supporting one another as learners (conversations, encouragement, group coaching, support groups, feedback, etc.)
- documenting and sharing reflections as a way to develop new knowledge (journals, reflection papers, oral dialogues)
- assessing expectations – how to determine collective expectations and agree on a process for assessing individual progress
- influencing and implementing change in their own workplaces

or *others* have to do, to what *I* have to do, was a challenge for some participants to make. One participant in recognizing ongoing indecision stated “Do it or not do it – I need to make a decision”.

The distinction between control and influence was also a challenge for some at early circles. For example, actions or strategies could be identified and implemented for such issues as a co-worker unwilling to work as a team, or a supervisor not completing a performance assessment. However, although the actions or strategies may in the end influence the other party, resolution is not in the control of the circle participant and may not be achievable. One participant spoke of the shift in her thinking as the realization that the issue of changing technology standards in a cultural industry is “bigger than myself” and that “I have 0% input ...can’t make a positive change [to change the industry]” and shifted the goal to new skill development. The skill to identify what could be controlled or influenced and what could not, or only in part, is key to successful goal setting. A participant noted [the Circle] “has helped me make change and think clearly” and another commented “things are going better knowing I have options”.

Meetings 1-5 of each circle included a Skills & Tools section as part of the agenda and included discussion, exercises and templates as appropriate. For example:

- The first circle meeting discussed goal development and the idea of “SMART”¹ goals and other variations of the mnemonic.
- Meeting 2 included success and learning journals as tools to track and celebrate progress. The exercise included defining personal success and how it changes over time².

¹ SMART = specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-based

² Success exercise based in part on Elizabeth Verwey’s success journal exercise for small business owners, sales professionals and entrepreneurs. Elizabeth Verwey. The Mentors Circle Clearing Your Path to Business Growth. Small Office Mentors 2006.

- Meeting 3 addressed “gremlins”³- identification of roadblocks to decision-making, and tips on “coaching”⁴ others to decision making as opposed to “managing” or “directing”.
- Meeting 4 included the Six Thinking Hats⁵ approach to strategy development and decision making developed by Edward De Bono.
- Meeting 5 discussed the “Cycle of Negative Self Talk”⁶ and offered a new model on overcoming gremlins.

In Meeting 6, the last circle, the Skills and Tools section was replaced with an evaluative open discussion on the project.

“[the Circle] focussed a babbling brook into a stream”.

-Circle Participant

The skill and tool topics for the first four sessions were brought forward from the Pilot. The fifth meeting’s discussion on the *Cycle of Negative Self Talk*, was added following participants’ high interest in the concept of gremlins and additional research by the facilitator on roadblocks and strategies.

“Younger” participants, (those closer to their years in formal education) readily worked within the set structure and templates of the process although some desired additional structure. One of the recommendations from the Emerging Arts Professionals Circle was more resources, such as a reading list, online tools, a more structured curriculum and the addition of an online group at the conclusion of the project.

On the other hand, the Manager/Leaders participants were not supportive of more structure. They noted the value of “vet and vent” time and didn’t want to have to “prepare and present”. This group was also less tied to the templates and

³ The concept of “gremlins” was informed by the “governance gremlins” concept in Tim Plumptre, “Getting to Good Governance: Overcoming the Hurdles” (Canadian Fundraiser eNews, August 2002) as reprinted by the Institute on Governance <http://www.iog.ca/page.asp?pageID=24&htmlarea=aboutUs>.

⁴ The handout on coaching questions was based in part on: Laura Whitworth, Henry Kimsey-House, Phil Sandahl (1998) *Co-Active Coaching*. Davies-Black Publishing, 288 pages.

⁵ Edward De Bono, *Six Thinking Hats*, Penguin, 2000, 177 p.

⁶ Antony M. Grant and Anne Greene. *It’s your life. What are you going to do with it? Coach Yourself*. Pearson Education Ltd, 2001, p. 91.

once familiar with the process was comfortable in working within general parameters..

Participants demonstrated learning of the concepts presented by building on previous conversations and adding insight. The idea of gremlins, introduced in the third meeting carried through discussions in later meetings as participants were able to identify and label self-imposed restrictions to goal achievement such as lack of confidence, fear of failure and risk of non-support by others. One participant upon overcoming a gremlin reported “I unblocked myself... [I realized]...it was a decoy block”.

“peers will tell you you’re full of shit, staff won’t”

-Circle Participant

The idea of “celebration” and “rewarding oneself” introduced in meeting two also carried through. The Thinking Hat’s model was implemented by two participants in their workplace. In general, there was increased awareness of incremental progress and acknowledgement of the value of *self* recognition (as opposed to recognizing and celebrating only staff or volunteer efforts) and recognition of shared challenges.

As in the Pilot, other tools, programs or resources were identified by the participants as useful to other participants, or potentially useful: publications, grants, resource library, relationship brokering, as well as traditional professional development opportunities. Unlike the Pilot, and given the range of participants (particularly in the Emerging and Artists/ Creators Circles) there was also identification of software, explanation of technical terms, processes or products specific to an art form or sub-segment of the sector (e.g. film editing and play writing). Participants, at their own initiative also exchanged invitations to openings/readings/events; exchanged templates (e.g. job performance forms); offered complementary tickets to performances; and shared experiences to support others’ goals and actions.

Anticipated Outcome

Impact - Improving the skills of cultural workers will help develop the capacity and sustainability of the sector as a whole

Communication among the participants between sessions is built into the process and is both a strength and weakness of the PLC model. At each session, participants were “buddied” and asked to “check in” with their partner at some point prior to the next session by phone or email. This helped to add an accountability milestone, motivate, and provide an opportunity to network. Between some participants, (as in the Pilot), the amount of participant to participant communication between sessions *exceeded* the minimum expectation, however, other participants *did not consistently follow-up* with their buddy which compromised this essential component of the Circle experience.

As in the Pilot, by the second meeting, in reporting on goal progress, participants noted that the accountability and self imposed “deadlines” built into the circle process was a “driver” and that the goal setting and commitment to action provided clarity for next steps. One participant stated that he finally “lived up to what I’ve been writing down” and considered himself “on track”..

Impact

Similar to the Pilot, there was demonstrated direct impact on the employing organizations. For example, one participant initiated a job performance discussion and process with the relevant supervisor; another planned a capital campaign; a contract employee planned knowledge transfer for the conclusion of the contract; and a senior-level participant implemented an organizational restructuring and set goals regarding the related staff communication and roll out. In Project II not all participants were employees of an organization (some were unemployed, self employed, temporary contract staff or held employment in other sectors) so organizational impact was not possible or desirable for all participants.

There was direct impact on the participants in their role as cultural workers. Participants who were not in a senior position frequently identified goals related to workplace relationships – including co-worker conflict, communication gaps, and lack of leadership and decision making by supervisors and boards. Other areas of impact across the Circles were new skill or knowledge acquisition which was directly applicable to the sector as well as an expanded colleague network.

There was also significant personal impact on the participants. Several participants developed goals for new employment (similar to the Pilot) and by the end of Project II, four had confirmed new positions, work or contracts; two had secured promotions with the same employer; and ten were working on

employment related goals including pursuing new employment or additional education/training.

Other personal goals included work/life balance; financial planning; overcoming creative blocks; finding time and/or space for creative pursuits and establishing creative production targets.

The Circles provided a unique space for a broad perspective. One participant noted that she learned that “work and life are intertwined” and a change in one affects the other. Another participant noted in the evaluation discussion that she “enjoyed how the professional and personal mix [in the Circle] as they don’t in the workplace”.

Key Challenges of Peer Circles

However, Peer Circles are not without challenges. The Pilot and Project II identified several drawbacks or limitations of CCCO’s Circle model:

- **Many workplace and home life issues are systemic and not “solvable” in a peer circle setting**

Many of the larger issues within the sector such as underemployment, unemployment, contract work, low pay, high rent (Toronto), changing technology and the need for new skills are systemic. While all participants actively set goals, their action plans were limited to what they could individually control or influence. For example, although the Circle could not directly impact underemployment, the Circle could support an individual’s strategy for increasing management’s awareness of good performance, making effective use of an upcoming performance review and clarifying future career aspirations.

- **The goals and operation of peer circles are difficult to describe and market**

During the evaluation discussion at the final meeting, participants consistently noted that the experience was not what they expected. Although they noted that CCCO provided accurate upfront information,

participants had little, if any, familiarity with the model and that it was unlike other common professional development offerings (e.g. workshops, networking forums, seminars). The shared experiences, “hearing from others in the same situation and similar problems was helpful”, and the open minded discussion were mentioned among the assets of the PLC. One of the participants described the Circle as “an unique space” and that it “took away the noise”.

While “peer learning circle” is an accurate label for the structure, it does not adequately capture the full experience nor it is a particularly appealing title. When asked for alternate names, participants were also hard pressed to offer suggestions but confirmed the importance of “peer” and “circle” and noted the “coaching” aspect as a potential positive spin. One participant jokingly refers to the Circle as “AA - Arts Anonymous”.

- **Some participants incur significant time and financial cost to participate**

Several of the participants incurred direct costs of driving, commercial transportation and in some cases, hotel to participate in the Pilot or Project II. Some stayed with friends and family. Employers, if there was one, did not cover these costs in all cases. Distances included travel from Kitchener, Guelph, Belleville and St. Catharines to Toronto, and Oakville to Hamilton. Even those participants living in Toronto experienced up to 1.5 hours on public transit to attend. There was tremendous commitment to participate in the Pilot and Project II by travelling participants.

- **Circles are dependent on the skill and consistent availability of the facilitator**

Participants consistently reiterated the need for an external facilitator to keep the group focussed, provide a process, ensure equal participation, to “push back” or challenge alternate thinking. However, should peer learning circles be offered in the future, CCCO’s capacity for facilitator “backup” to cover absence needs to be addressed.

- **It can be challenging to gather an appropriate peer group**

A level of commonality is essential for a viable Circle but the range of commonality can be very broad. As an example, the Emerging Arts Professional Circle participants were from various segments of the cultural sector (heritage, performing arts, visual arts, arts service organization, etc) they shared a fairly consistent level of career experience and were generally similar in age. This provided enough common ground for sharing experiences.

There was more variation in age, knowledge and experience in the other Circles and at times this was an asset and provided a breath of perspective or exposure to new issues; at other times, the disparity was a negative as some participants were “out of their depth” and had little insight to contribute. Similarity in career point (e.g. emerging or senior) would appear to be more essential than similarity in sector (e.g. performing arts or service organization).

- **Irregular participant attendance limits the success of peer circles**

Consistent attendance provides critical continuity and is essential for build trust within the group. Attendance was an issue in all four Circles for a variety of reasons.

Two of the four Circles began with minimal numbers: there were five participants in both the Managers/Leaders Circle and Curators/Programmers Circle. The Curators/Programmers dropped to four as one participant was successfully accepted into an employment program (a goal set after the fourth Circle meeting). With small numbers any absence from vacation, own or family illness, or work conflicts, reduced the scope of the conversation and the effectiveness of the Circle.

The Artists/Creators Circle started with seven participants (dropped to six after the first meeting and then lost another as a participant moved out of the area for employment). Interest appeared to wane late in the process in two other participants once their major goals were met.

In the Emerging Circle in particular, at times, participants were not given permission to attend a scheduled circle by supervisors because of conflicting priorities. Despite initial organizational support to enroll in a Peer Learning Circle, participation by contract employees, or those in junior positions proved vulnerable. For one participant who changed employers during Project II, the commitment to participate was not assumed by the new employer. Members of this Circle recommended a contract or some formal commitment from the organization to ensure ongoing availability and participation.

Participants in all Circles recommended a larger group for future Circles.

- **Needs of Newcomer Cultural Workers**

Three of the Circles had a member that was a newcomer to Canada. These workers, regardless of their level of experience and training, were seeking to establish a Canadian based network of colleagues and insight into the working practices of the local cultural sector. In the absence of a targeted service for newcomers, each joined the Circle project to further those key objectives. Their reasons for participating reveal a gap in services for newcomers to Canada's cultural workplace which is worth exploring.

- **High demand on language proficiency**

The shift from contemplation to action is a key component of the peer circle process. A shift in language such as "I want to" to "I will" is an indicator of commitment to action. Such subtleties of language are critical and reporting to the group, presentation of goals and especially peer –to-peer coaching all require a high proficiency of English (or the language of the circle).

Recommendations

The impact of the Peer Learning Circle Pilot and Project II on the professional and personal lives of participants and related organizations strongly suggests

that the model of a peer learning circle is an appropriate development model for multiple segments of the cultural workforce.

Overall participants showed a high level of satisfaction with the Peer Learning Circle Project II and a willingness to recommend it to colleagues. Participants were willing to participate in a panel discussion or conference presentation regarding their experience if there such an opportunity.

Based on the outcomes of the first Pilot and Project II, a focus group with the Pilot participants, the input of the current participants, and the facilitator's insight, a series of recommendations follow to guide CCCO's future involvement in Peer Learning Circles.

Branding and Marketing

Key to establishing CCCO peer learning circles as a preferred professional development option, the branding and marketing of the product needs to be tighter and clearer. The overall "package" would benefit from professional guidance on: product name, key messages, visual identity, pricing and marketing strategies.

Recommendation: Develop a branding marketing strategy for peer learning circles

Duration of Circle Cycle

The Pilot was six months long with five face-to-face meetings (no December meeting) and Phase II was seven months with six face-to-face meetings (no August meeting). It is the facilitator's opinion that there was more momentum lost after Project II's August summer break than the Pilot's December winter break.

While the five meetings of the Pilot was a long enough cycle for the group to "gell" and for individuals to have individual results, participants recommended a renewable 6 month term for future circles. In Project II, the seven month period was considered too short by some, sufficient, or too long by others but there was also interest in a longer experience.

Recommendation: the duration of a Circle be approximately 5 meetings and optimally be fall/winter or winter/spring with an option for a second term

Circle Composition - Application Process & Frequency

Peer Learning Circles are a unique experience and very dependent on the dynamics of the group. Careful selection of the participants to ensure a base commonality is key. Future circles should maintain a high level of quality and quantity of offerings should not be the driver for development of the program.

Recommendation: Continue to provide peer learning circles as a limited offering with an application and screening process for participation.

Recommendation: Offer no more than two circles in a year

Circle Composition - Sector Scope & Career Point

A level of commonality between participants is essential for a viable Circle. While job function and sub-sector provide a shared base, it would appear that career experience is more critical to a balanced composition.

Typically for professional development planning, careers are divided into three phases: emerging or early career, mid career and mature or senior career. While Peer Learning Circles are an effective technique throughout all phases of a career, it is perhaps best suited to those in later career phases. These workers tend to have, or gain more, ability to self reflect, to identify behavior patterns or work style, and to have a higher level of realization of what they can control or influence.

Self employed or short-term contracted cultural workers and artists do not always have the luxury of consistent employment in the cultural sector with regular hours and earnings. Several participants in Project II had alternate employment to

supplement cultural or artistic earnings. Cultural pursuits were, for some, minor or vulnerable, in their current work life. The need to relocate to follow work and to quickly seize work opportunities is a reality for many which does not align with the regular and multi-month commitment of a peer learning circle.

Cultural workers within organizations are better positioned to be able to maintain the multi-month commitment of a peer learning circle. Furthermore, mid to senior workers in organizations also tend to have more control of their time availability and thus ability to fulfill the participation commitment and perhaps are best positioned to follow through on implementing meaningful change.

Emerging workers also benefit from peer learning circles. Future circles targeted to this segment should maintain a high level of structure in the process and include additional resources and tools.

Recommendation: target future circles to career points

Recommendation: set mid and senior career workers in organizational settings as the priority

Circle Composition- Geographic Scope

The peer learning circle models that were examined in the original research for the pilot in 2007/08 tended to draw from a single geographic area. This minimizes travel and serves to build a local network among the participants. One of the unanticipated strengths of the first Pilot was that it *did not* draw from a small geographic area and participants generally did not know each other.

A Circle was formed for the Greater Bay Area (Oakville – St Catharines) to explore the effectiveness of a Circle in a smaller draw area. Ironically, participants did not know each other. Participants in this Circle reinforced the concern a Circle composed of “colleagues” would compromise confidentiality and the freedom to discuss personal and/or workplace issues and goals. They noted that the Circle would have been less effective with participants from existing networks as people would have their “game face on” and be reluctant to share challenges or opportunities.

However, the large geographic draw does place a travel burden on some participants and travel costs are no doubt a barrier to participation.

Recommendation: draw Circle participants from a broad geographic area

Recommendation: explore travel subsidies

Circle Support - Attendance

Attendance at meetings proved challenging for several junior level staff when permission to participate was withdrawn because of other workplace priorities. Employers need to be engaged right from the application point to ensure an understanding of the commitment and the need for consistent participation.

A successful Circle is based on what participants gain as well as what they contribute. It is important that participants attend consistently through completion of the Circle term in order to support others even if personal goals are met early. Some kind of “contract” or other mechanism to confirm commitment is needed at the time of registration.

Recommendation: CCCO explore mechanisms for securing commitment from both employing organizations and individuals

Facilitation

Project II confirmed the findings of the Pilot with regard to facilitation. Participants consistently reiterated the need for an external facilitator to provide a process, keep the group focussed, ensure equal participation, and to “push back” or challenge alternate thinking. Knowledge of the cultural sector and ability of the facilitator to contribute cultural-based content to the conversations of the Circle is also considered desirable.

Of all four circles, only a few participants in the Emerging and Curator groups were interested in a self facilitated experience or being trained as a facilitator. However, rotating the facilitation responsibility among Circle members or the use

of volunteer facilitators, as used with other models, are unlikely to meet the expectations of participants, especially senior-level participants.

In order to ensure that future Circles are effective, CCCO requires a pool of experienced facilitators to draw from as needed, who are familiar with the objectives of a peer learning circle and have credibility within the cultural sector.

Recommendation: external facilitators continue to be used for Peer Learning Circles

Recommendation: develop a pool of facilitators to support future peer learning circles

Summary

Peer learning circles have the potential to be one of CCCO's niche professional development and a core service to the cultural sector. More than networking or traditional skills development, peer learning circles are an enriching unique experience that has direct impact on workers in their personal and professional lives and has both direct and indirect impact on cultural organizations.

Appendices

- Appendix I - Media release
- Appendix II - Backgrounder
- Appendix III - Targeted poster
- Appendix IV - Application form

Appendix I - Media Release



What is the CCCO Peer Learning Circle Project?

CCCO is committed to strengthening the human resources within the cultural sector to increase individual and organizational capacity. The CCCO Peer Learning Circle Project is an opportunity for Ontario workers in arts, culture and heritage to participate in this new approach to professional development in the cultural sector. Following the successful Pilot, CCCO is offering four Circles targeted to specific groups: emerging professionals; curators; artists/creators; and managers/leaders in the Greater Bay Area. Using an innovative participatory group learning approach, Circles challenge and support participants to address the complex issues within their workplace and/or career.

Who Should Apply? Cultural workers in the areas of performing arts; visual arts; crafts and design; writing and publishing; media arts; and museums, heritage and libraries can apply to the most appropriate Circle of the four offered. Participation in the each Circle is limited to ten people and will be filled on a first-come-first served approach for eligible applicants.

What is the Cost?

The Circle Project is subsidized by the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities and is offered for a fee of \$100 for six facilitated sessions. The estimated value of the program exceeds \$500 per participant.

What Is the Time Commitment?

Each Circle will run from April to October 2009. Each participant commits to one 3 hour meeting per month plus approximately 3 – 6 additional hours each month in preparatory and follow-up activities. There will not be an August meeting.

What Will You Get Out of It?

By participating in the CCCO Peer Learning Circle Project you will be able to:

- Build a peer-based network with diverse perspectives and experience
- Identify your key workplace or career issues and develop action-based responses in a collaborative and confidential environment
- Increase your capacity for enhanced problem solving and critical thinking skills
- Develop skills to “coach” colleagues

How Do I Find Out More? For more information and how to apply you are invited to attend a drop-in information session on Monday, March 9th from 3:30 to 5:00 at CCCO's offices, 27 Carlton St, Toronto, or contact:

Cultural Careers Council Ontario
416.340.0086 info@workinculture.ca

Carrie Brooks-Joiner
Project Facilitator
Carrie Brooks-Joiner & Associates
905-637-5338
cbrooks-joiner@cogeco.ca

Appendix II - Backgrounder



Peer Learning Circles 2009

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the CCCO Peer Learning Circle Project?

CCCO has received assistance from the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities to expand its testing of an innovative learning format. In 2007/2008 CCCO developed a pilot program which was targeted to Executive Directors of Arts Service Organizations. The 2009 Peer Learning Circle Project expands the opportunity to other cultural workers.

What is Peer Learning?

Peer learning is learning from, and with, peers in a mutually supportive environment. Using a group learning approach, the learning circles support the members to address complex and confidential issues they face in their careers. Some of these issues may be shared, some may be unique to the individual.

A Peer Learning Circle is a group of people who come together with a shared interest to form a community of learners. A Circle gathers for confidential sharing of experiences and challenges and draws on the collective experience and wisdom of the group to further individual goals.

Who Should Participate?

The project will consist of four separate circles, targeted to four types of workers in Ontario's arts and culture community:

- 5) Emerging arts professionals: administrators and managers with up to ten years of experience.

- 6) Curators and programmers: for film and theatre festivals, museums or galleries.
- 7) Managers/leaders from a specific region: people who supervise staff or departments in an arts and culture organization or facility. For this year, the circle will be for people in the Greater Bay area (St. Catharines, Hamilton, Burlington and Oakville).
- 8) Artists or creators: e.g. writers, actors, musicians, dancers, filmmakers, photographers, designers, craftspersons, visual artists, and other interpreters and creators.

Each circle may have no more than ten members, and will be filled on a first come, first serve basis for eligible applicants. (CCCO will retain a waiting list.)

What are the Benefits of Peer Learning Circles?

Participants will:

- Gain a peer-based network with diverse perspectives and experience
- Be able to identify workplace issues and action-based responses in a collaborative and confidential environment
- Increase their capacity for enhanced problem solving and critical thinking skills leading
- Gain skills, knowledge, tools and techniques

"The Peer Learning Circle offers an opportunity to confer with their peers that they don't generally have otherwise. The value in this is twofold. First, each member of the group can benefit from the knowledge of a number of people in similar positions meeting similar situations and challenges, and can thus become better equipped for their own position. Second, hearing from others about experiences similar to one's own is affirming and builds self confidence." Participant, CCCO's 2007/8 pilot program

Where Will the Circles be Held?

The Circles will be held at the Arts and Letters Club, 14 Elm Street, a short walk from the Dundas Street Subway Station. One circle (for managers) will be held in the Greater Bay area, location to be determined.

What is the Time Commitment?

The circles will run from April 2009 to October 2009 (no circles will be held in August). Participants commit to one 3 hour meeting per month, for six months, and follow up actions for the duration of the circle.

The four circle meetings will follow the following schedule:

Circle 1) Emerging Professionals: 9 to 12 am, April 7th, May 5th, June 2nd, July 7th, Sept. 8th, Oct. 6th (Toronto)

Circle 2) Curators/Programmers: 1 to 4pm, April 7th, May 5th, June 2nd, July 7th, Sept. 8th, Oct. 6th (Toronto)

Circle 3) Managers/Leaders 9 to 12 am, April 20th, May 25th, June 22nd, July 20th, Sept. 21st, Oct. 19th (Hamilton area)

Circle 4) Artists/Creators: 9 to 12 am, April 28th, May 26th, June 30th, July 28th, Sept 29th, Oct 27th (Toronto)

What Happens at the Meetings?

The Circle includes the 10 participants and a facilitator. Participants will discuss current projects and identify workplace challenges. They share insights, knowledge, and experience and support and challenge each other. Circle members identify individual goals, commit to action between meetings, and report on progress at subsequent meetings.

The Facilitator will keep the conversation on track, ensure everyone has the chance to participate, and that the process supports learning and meeting individual goals.

CCCO will ensure that there is regular evaluation on the process and outcomes.

What is Needed to Apply?

To be considered, you need to submit the following:

- Signed Application Form
- Letter of Interest
- Current Resume

How Will Participants be Selected?

Staff from CCCO and Carrie Brooks-Joiner, the Project Facilitator, will review all applications, and eligible applicants will be chosen, first come, first serve. Successful applicants will be asked to sign a Participant Release form.

Who will Facilitate the Meetings?

Carrie is the principal of Carrie Brooks-Joiner & Associates, a consulting firm which specializes in supporting the leadership and management of non-profit organizations. Her clients include government and organizations in the arts, heritage, social service and health sectors.

Carrie has been active in the cultural community for nearly three decades and brings her research, management and consulting experience to her commitment to strengthen the capacity of the sector. She is an experienced facilitator and has convened numerous roundtables, community consultations and planning retreats. Carrie teaches at the university level and is a frequent workshop leader and conference speaker.

As a volunteer, Carrie is a Past President of the Ontario Museum Association, Vice Chair of The Burlington Library Board and a former board member of Performing Arts Burlington.

Are the Conversations Confidential?

Yes. The discussions within the Circle are confidential to the participants.

What is the Cost?

The project is subsidized by the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities and the circles are offered for a fee of \$100 for six facilitated sessions. Participants from organizations may be eligible for travel assistance through the Ontario Arts Council's Compass Program. Contact Pat Bradley, Acting Compass Manager at 416-969-7433 for more information about that possibility.

What is the Deadline Date to Apply?

The deadline to submit an application is **March 27th, 2009.** Successful applicants will be informed by April 2nd, 2009.

How Do I Find Out More?

For more information, or to book a spot at the information session on Monday, March 9th from 3:30 to 5:00 at the Arts and Letters Club, 14 Elm Street, Toronto, call or email:

Cultural Careers Council Ontario
27 Carlton Street Suite
303 Toronto, Ontario M5B 1L2

Telephone: 416.340.0086
E-mail: info@workinculture.ca



carrie brooks-joiner
& ASSOCIATES

Carrie Brooks-Joiner
cbrooks-joiner@cogeco.ca
905.637.5338

This project is funded by the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities

Appendix III - Targeted Poster

PEER LEARNING OPPORTUNITY FOR

**ARTISTS, CREATORS,
CURATORS AND MANAGERS**

**Are you looking for inspiration,
support, and strategies for your
career or workplace?**

- Facing work issues in this struggling economy?
- Looking for the steps to move forward?
- Troubles with your board or colleagues?
- Feeling isolated or burned out?
- Are you struggling to define career success?

**One of CCCO's peer learning circles
may be just for you.**

This is a unique opportunity to explore individual career or workplace issues in a confidential and

supportive environment, and to emerge with new skills, strategies and networks.

For more details, go to CCCO's website at

www.workinculture.ca or call

- Cultural Careers Council
- Ontario
- 416.340.0086
- info@workinculture.ca
-
- Carrie Brooks-Joiner
- Project Facilitator
- 905.637.5338
- cbrooks-joiner@cogeco.ca
-

Circles are filling up fast. Deadline is March 27th.

Limited spaces available.

Appendix IV - Application Form



**CCCO Peer Learning Circles 2009
Application Form
Deadline: March 27, 2009**

Name: _____

Address: _____
Number Street Apt.

City Postal Code

Daytime Telephone Email

I am applying for (check or highlight one):

Circle 1 Emerging Arts Professionals

Circle 2 Curators and Programmers

Circle 3 Managers/Leaders – Greater Bay Area

Circle 4 Artists/Creators

To be considered, each applicant needs to provide:
This Application form, signed
Letter of Interest
Resume

Mail or email to:
Cultural Careers Council Ontario
27 Carlton Street, Suite 303
Toronto, ON M5B 1L2

Email: info@workinculture.ca

Signature

Date