

LEAN IN



For All Women

Lean In Circle Kickoff Guide

The
Women
at Work
Collection

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What to expect from your Circle

The Women at Work Collection is designed to provide Circles with research-backed strategies to help you thrive in the workplace. Each month, your Circle can select one of the Collection's 18 videos and work through the accompanying discussion guide. Use this kick-off meeting guide for your first Circle meeting, to get to know one another better and lay the groundwork for a successful Circle.

Meeting agenda

approx 90 mins

Introduction

5 mins

Icebreaker

10 mins

Agree to Circle Fundamentals

10 mins

Connection Card activity

45 mins

Wrap-up: Decide how you're going to run your Circle

10 mins

One Action

10 mins

For Circles with only 60 mins, here are suggestions to shorten this agenda:

- Spend 5 mins on icebreaker
- Spend 5 mins on Circle Fundamentals
- Spend 30 mins on Connection Card activity
- Spend 5 mins on wrap-up

Read the sections below aloud to your Circle so that everyone starts the meeting with a shared sense of purpose:

Why are we here?

- As working women, we continue to face barriers and bias that men do not face.¹ Around the world, we're still paid less than men for the same work.² When we negotiate, we often receive less than men do—even when we use the same language for our request.³
- These hurdles are higher if we're from a traditionally marginalized group. Women of color in white-dominated contexts, women with disabilities, or individuals with an LGBTQ+ identity are likely to face added layers of bias and prejudice.
- But despite immense challenges, we have been rising to the top. Around the world, over 30% of professional leaders are now women—which is all the more amazing, given that 50 years ago the percentage was close to zero.⁴
- And we have so much to offer: Women in leadership invest more time and energy in effective people management and allyship. Not only that, companies with more women leaders tend to be more innovative, more productive, and have happier employees.⁵
- For us to have a fair chance at work, we need companies and leaders to take action against systemic sexism. But in addition, there are research-backed steps we can take to help ourselves overcome bias, develop new leadership skills, and thrive in our jobs.
- That's what this Circle is for: We can come together to learn about research-backed strategies to succeed while offering peer mentorship and validation.
- *[Here, the Circle Leader can say a bit about why you created this Circle]*

Introduction (continued)

5 mins

What are some of the benefits of Circles?

- 86% of women in Circles attribute a positive life change to their Circle.
- Peer mentorship has many benefits: It helps build skills, expertise, and empathy with others.
- Sharing stories and advice with other women tends to be especially helpful, as the conversations are likely to be more validating and helpful when they're with others who closely share your identity.

What are the goals for this meeting?

- Getting to know one another better and lay the groundwork for a successful Circle
- Agree to a set of values for our Circle
- Make a few key decisions on how we're going to run our Circle

Icebreaker

10 mins

An icebreaker is a great way to get people talking. Given that this is your first meeting, start by going around your Circle and introducing yourself as if you're meeting everyone for the first time (even if you're not):

- My name is ...
- Something that brings me joy is ...
- I joined this Circle because ...

Agree to Circle Fundamentals

10 mins

Read the statements below aloud to your Circle:

You'll get the most out of your Circle if you feel like you can be vulnerable and safe. To facilitate that, we ask you to make certain commitments to each other—the Circle Fundamentals. We've seen these values help to create thousands of successful Circles.

Read and discuss our Circle Fundamentals below. If they don't feel quite right for your Circle, take some time to adjust them together. Once everyone is ready, go around your Circle one by one and commit to them with a quick thumbs-up or "I'm in."

- 1. Confidentiality:** What happens in your Circle should stay in your Circle
- 2. Compassion:** Practice empathy, consider different perspectives, and try your best to express yourself openly and sincerely
- 3. Communication:** Listen with intent and make space for everyone to talk without distraction or interruptions
- 4. Commitment:** Everyone should be invested in your Circle's success—this means showing up to meetings and being fully present

You may also want to re-read these fundamentals at the start of each Circle meeting.

Connection Card activity

45 mins

This activity features a series of connection questions to get to know one another on a deeper level in a short amount of time. They are focused on sharing personal stories and benefiting from each other's ideas, experiences, and support!

- Designed in partnership with Carole Robin at Stanford
- Important to do this in the first meeting, as it is a way to build a level of connection and vulnerability, being as open and honest with each other as we can, that will benefit us all in subsequent meetings

Instructions:

- **If you have the meeting guide printed out on paper**, cut out the questions on the dotted lines, fold them up, and place them in the middle of the table.
 - Take turns drawing a question and answering.
- **If members are viewing the meeting guide on their phones**, go around and answer the questions in order.
- It's fine to skip a question and move to the next one if you don't feel you have a good answer.
- When everyone has answered one question, go around the Circle one by one and answer a second until you run out of time.

Continue activity on next page

Connection questions:

1. How has your childhood or background shaped the way you show up at work?
2. What is one thing you wish men understood about the experiences of working women?
3. What is your greatest professional ambition, and why does it motivate you?
4. What is one challenge you've faced at work specific to being a woman, and how have you overcome it?
5. What is one piece of advice you would give to other working women?
6. What is one thing that you didn't expect to experience as a woman in the workplace, but experienced anyway?
7. Tell us about a time when another woman supported you at work.
8. When have you felt most powerful?
9. What are you most proud of?
10. What do you most regret?
11. Tell us about a time when you overcame adversity.
12. What are the three things you most value? How does your daily routine align with these values?
13. Who's had an impact on your life whom you haven't thanked? Why?
14. Who do you most admire and why?
15. Who do you most envy and why?
16. If you could give one piece of advice to your younger self, what would it be?
17. How would your closest friend describe you?
18. If you had to describe your life in three sentences, what would you say?
19. What is one thing in your life that you wish you could change?
20. What brings out the best in you?

Continue activity on next page

Connection questions:

21. A year from now, what will you wish you had done today?
22. If there was one more hour in the day, what would you spend it on?
23. What makes you happy?
24. What makes you sad?

Continue activity on next page

Connection Card activity (continued)

45 mins

Reflect on the exercise together

- As a full group, discuss the following questions, allowing people to contribute as they are moved to share:
 - Did the questions help you to feel a connection with other members of the Circle? How so?
 - Did you learn anything about yourself or others that you didn't expect?
 - Did you feel like you were able to open up, share, and be vulnerable with the group?
 - What (if anything) got in your way of opening up and sharing?

Wrap-up:

Decide how you're going to run your Circle

10 mins

- **Discuss with your Circle members whether there is a date and time that works best for everyone to schedule your upcoming meetings for.** For example, you may choose to meet for one hour on the first Monday of every month. Once you agree on a time that works, we recommend scheduling a series of meetings in advance so the time is held on everyone's calendars.
- **Decide how you will stay in touch between meetings.** For example, you may decide to set up a WhatsApp or text group, connect on social media, or stay in touch over email. Circle members tell us they get the most out of their Circle when they have a chance to connect with each other between their meetings as well, to share resources and cheer each other on.
- **Decide whether you will have one Circle Leader who runs every meeting or whether you would like to rotate the role of who leads the Circle each month.** We have seen both approaches work well. However, we recommend that one person takes the lead on logistics to make sure the meetings are scheduled even if you rotate who facilitates the conversation each month.
- **Before you break, make sure you have the basics covered for your next meeting:** day, time, location, and what topic you'll be discussing.
- *If there's time, you may also want to talk through what worked—and what didn't—in today's meeting and brainstorm improvements going forward.*

One Action

10 mins

- Think about one concrete action (big or small) you'll do to step outside your comfort zone or try something new in the next 30 days.
 - Did any of the Connection Cards resonate with you today? Identify an action you can take before the next meeting related to this card.
 - For example, you might say, "The card that read 'Who's had an impact on your life whom you haven't thanked?' made me think of my college research mentor. I plan to send her a card thanking her for her mentorship and sharing how it continues to impact me."
- Go around your Circle and **share your One Action with the group** (1 minute or less per member).
- Vocalizing your One Action to your Circle will help hold you accountable, giving you the little extra push you need to go for it.
- When you meet next time, you can check in on each other's progress.

Congratulations on a great meeting!

Endnotes

¹ Andrew M. Penner et al., "[Within-job gender pay inequality in 15 countries](#)," *Nature Human Behaviour* 7 (2023); Hannah Riley Bowles et al., "[Social incentives for gender divergences in the propensity to initiate negotiations: Sometimes it does hurt to ask](#)," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 103 (2007): 84–103; Madeline Heilman and Tyler Okimoto, "Why Are Women Penalized for Success at Male Tasks?" *Journal of Applied Psychology* 92 (2007); Joan Williams, "[Sticking women with the office housework](#)," *Washington Post* (April 16, 2014); Kieran Snyder, "[The Abrasiveness Trap: High-Achieving Men and Women Are Described Differently in Reviews](#)," *Fortune* (August 26, 2014).

² Andrew M. Penner et al., "[Within-job gender pay inequality in 15 countries](#)," *Nature Human Behaviour* 7 (2023).

³ Hannah Riley Bowles et al., "[Social incentives for gender divergences in the propensity to initiate negotiations: Sometimes it does hurt to ask](#)," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 103 (2007): 84–103.

⁴ World Economic Forum, [The Global Gender Gap Report 2022](#) (2022); Center for American Progress, "[The Women's Leadership Gap](#)" (May 21, 2017); United Nations, [The World's Women 1970-1990: Trends and Statistics](#) (1990).

⁵ Sangeeta Badal, "[The Business Benefits of Gender Diversity](#)," Gallup (January 20, 2014); Sara Ellison and Wallace P. Mullin, "[Diversity, Social Goods Provision, and Performance in the Firm](#)," *Journal of Economics and Management Strategy* 23, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 465–81; Katherine W. Phillips, "[How Diversity Makes Us Smarter](#)," *Scientific American*, October 1, 2014.

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