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Women Peer-to-Peer Networks of Learning: Top Tips for Hosting a Learning Circle

Background on the Learning Circle Model

Peer-to-peer learning is now an old practice of gathering groups of individuals who have shared identities, experiences, professions, communities, etc. to discuss a topic or suite of topics that are relevant to their lived experiences and their unique challenges. Farmer-to-farmer learning is a productive way to engage producers in learning about new technologies, conservation best-management practices, and other farm-level planning.

American Farmland Trust's learning circle model arose out of early partnerships with Women Food and Agriculture Network's Women Caring for the Land™ program, which has been developed and tested, and ultimately proven effective, as a way to specifically engage women landowners and producers in conversations about land management, particularly regarding agricultural best management practices for soil health and water quality. Learning circles resonate with the women who attend because they emphasize hands-on and visual learning, provide networking opportunities with other women landowners/producers, and offer "real time" information critical to the participants' needs.

**Women Food and Agriculture Networks
Women Caring for the Land
Curriculum Manual:**
<https://wfan.org/wcl-curriculum-manual>

Follow up with participants conducted by WFAN and AFT shows that women act after participating in learning circles, from talking with renters or family members about what they learned to implementing new practices on their land. As a result of this success, the program and learning circles continue to expand in popularity and broader implementation. For those looking to implement learning circles, we want to share a few tips on hosting them and identify some challenges you might run into.

Top Tips for Hosting a Learning Circle

Typically, a learning circle will have **four main components**, including: a set of lengthy introductions, a technical resource lead providing in-depth information on a specific topic (e.g., soil health, climate change, lease negotiations, etc.), a field tour or demonstration, and an evaluation and reflection period. The following tips are key elements to consider when planning a learning circle, which emphasizes group process and not so much the logistical planning.

- 1. Set some ground rules for how you want to interact with one another.** This can be a collaborative discussion or simply the facilitator front loading the discussion with what the ground rules for discussion will be. Return to these as needed throughout the day.
- 2. Take time for introductions and relationship building** at the very beginning and don't short-change this time. Ask participants to focus on their lived experience on the land, not their work experience or positions.
- 3. When hosting a meeting, emphasize non-hierarchical learning** and focus on inquiry and discussion (set the meeting up in a circle, not lecture-style). The participants have many of the answers among them.
- 4. Omit lectures or PowerPoints.** Demonstrations, such as the slake test or infiltration test can be done as part of the discussion. Don't use jargon and unpack your acronyms, make language and technical information accessible.
- 5. Be cognizant of power dynamics and emphasize a mostly woman-led and women-oriented effort.** Some persons identifying as men can be invited but think strategically about how this changes the group dynamics and plan accordingly.
- 6. Provide women with information** (handouts and discussion) on best practices and available resources and connect them to more resource providers.
- 7. Take women on a field tour of area farmland** to view conservation, or other relevant farm management, practices on the ground. This can be very powerful. No caravans, invest in renting a bus or getting several large vans so that the group can spend time asking/answering questions together.
- 8. Trust the power of building relationships between women and service providers.** This investment will go a long way in supporting women's empowerment and engaging them as more active decision makers on their land.

Handling Challenges

We have had mostly positive experiences working with hundreds of women at dozens of learning circles, and we know just how positive the experience can be for everyone involved. However, there are always challenges in facilitating meetings with diverse groups of attendees. The following are some key points we think you'll find useful if you run into some of these challenges.

❖ **How to respond when asked 'why aren't men allowed?'** In short, we emphasize the importance of creating comfortable spaces for women to find and access resources, information, and networks that they typically don't have easy access to in the agricultural services world, which is still largely male-dominated. This effort is less about excluding men and more about creating space for women to learn from one another and gain confidence.

❖ **How to diffuse conflict or deal with challenging personalities?** It is always important to acknowledge difficult dynamics in the room if they are preventing the group from progressing. It is important to legitimize the feelings and needs of an individual and look for constructive ways to engage them. Keep in mind that your role is to facilitate the group process, so you want to be supportive of individuals but also limit the negative impact of an individual's behavior on the group process. Be direct, respectful, and constructive! Engage the other participants in the conversation so it isn't just with the facilitator. The group will help diffuse some situations.

❖ **How to negotiate your role as facilitator and participant?** As facilitator, your job is to be in service of the group and support the participants to get what they came for. It is not about hierarchy, it is about supporting the process of the group to meet, learn, grow, share, and reflect. You are a part of the group, but you also have an important role and must always be "on." Consider choosing a co-facilitator to help you in doing the work of managing the group process as it can be a lot for one person to do. Choose your partners well and look to build relationships that can last over a series of learning circles.

To learn more about our programs and projects visit:

www.farmland.org/greatlakes OR www.farmland.org/women

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