

Creating out Loud: Working Agreements for Courageous Conversations





Please acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which you are meeting today:

- If you know who the Traditional Custodians are for the land on which you are meeting, name them.
- If you do not yet know who they are, please acknowledge the “Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we work and live.” You might then take some time after the meeting to discover whose land you are living and working on. These resources can help:
 - <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/map-indigenous-australia>
 - <https://aiatsis.gov.au/whose-country-am-i>

Take a moment to reflect on what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders have contributed – and continue to contribute – to this Country, and pay your respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

You might also wish to acknowledge any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in this meeting

I [Dr Kate Power] acknowledge the Turrbul and the Jagera peoples, who are the Traditional Custodians of the land on which I work – *Meanjin, now known as Brisbane*. I recognise their deep and ongoing connection to Country and acknowledge that they never ceded sovereignty.

I recognize First Australians’ rich artistic and cultural heritage – among the oldest living cultures in human history – and their important stories, music, languages and other contributions to this land.

I pay my respects to their Elders past, present and emerging – and I acknowledge and extend those respects to any First Nations people in this meeting today. Thank you both for hosting and for joining us.

Courageous Conversations

Creating Out Loud invites you to have big, expansive, courageous conversations with other people working in the arts and culture sector.

These kinds of conversations involve rethinking important questions and reaching new realizations, but also taking risks and the possibility of making mistakes and getting things wrong.

Set up the best conditions for these courageous conversations, by

1. creating a Working Agreement for your circle (see pages 4 to 6 in this Guide)
2. helping participants settle into – and know what to expect from – each conversation (see below).



Settling into a conversation involves signalling to yourself and your fellow circle members that you are stepping aside from “the everyday” to enter a different space – a learning space.

You can create a “threshold” for this space by using check-in processes to help people arrive and be present with one another in a fresh way. This could be as simple as taking a breath together and slowing down. Or you might ask a simple check-in question, to focus attention on the here-and-now. Creating Out Loud Discussion Guides suggest a check-in question for each session, but feel free to be creative! Each group can decide what works best for them.

Setting an agenda can also help people know what to expect from each meeting. All of the Creating Out Loud Topic-based sessions use the same basic agenda, establishing a familiar rhythm that carries through the whole program. Goal-focused sessions also follow one of two a standard agendas, although these are different to the Topic-based sessions.

Working agreements

Over time, peer coaching circles grow in empathy and rapport, as members commit to the group process, and build and maintain trust.



Because trust is so central to peer coaching, it often helps if circles begin their time together by establishing a ‘working agreement.’^[1]

Working Agreements foster safety and promote learning, by making explicit circle members’ expectations about how they will interact with each other.^[2] Some expectations will be very practical, relating to the logistics of the group. Others will be more general and focused on relationships.^[1] Some examples of each type are listed here below, and more information is provided on pages 7 and 8:

General expectations	Practical expectations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • confidentiality • authenticity • openness • respect • non-judgement • constructive mindset • two-way sharing • listening deeply to each other • take care of one another's vulnerability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • commit to the group process • turn off cell phones • be on time • check before inviting anyone new to join the circle • specific details about when, where, how often, for how long the circle will meet • whether / how circle members will stay in touch between meetings • what to do if you can't attend a session

While some of these expectations may seem like ‘common sense,’ teasing out the meaning of words like “respect” – and discussing what else matters to each circle member – can build self-awareness and mutual understanding. For example, some people find mobile phones distracting, but others use their phone apps to maintain focus. Understanding differences like this can help circle members relate better with one another.^[1]

Each circle can create its own Working Agreement, based on the personal experiences and priorities of its members.

- *You might like to use the space provided on page 6 to document your circle’s Working Agreement, but feel free to use whatever format works best for your circle.*
- *Simple questions like this can help you reach shared agreements about abstract words like ‘respect’ mean: “If this group were to act with respect towards each other, what would that look like?”*
- *Working Agreements are ‘live’ documents: Circles can revisit and renegotiate them at any time.*

Individual reflection

1. Think about your past experiences of working with others in a small group.

- What things allow you to do your best work in a group?
- What has worked well for you in past groups?
- If past groups have not worked well, how might this peer coaching circle be better?

Respond in whatever way works best for you... you might choose to write / draw / think / move.

2. Think about being in peer learning circle (and in an online environment, if applicable).

- What do you need, in order to participate fully and bring the best version of yourself to these sessions?
 - These might be practical things, e.g., having and following an agenda, making sure you have water with you, check-ins and check-outs
 - They might also be relational things, e.g., having “permission” to take time to think before responding, knowing it is okay just to listen.

3. Think about past experiences of good facilitation, when you felt you could really contribute well.

- Why was it good? What happened?

4. Think about moments in conversations that didn't flow well, when people got stuck.

- What happened there? What might have helped the conversation flow better?



Group discussion

Share your individual reflections with other circle members, and listen to their experiences. Ask for clarification, as needed.

- Jointly develop a set of practical / logistical and general expectations that all circle members can agree on. Choose things that make sense to you.
- Discuss what your circle will do, down the track, to address any behaviour that might fall outside the agreement and/or if circle members want to change any part of the agreement.

It often helps if one person writes down your circle's Working Agreement, and sends a copy to everyone else after the meeting.

Creating Out Loud helps circle members support one another in pursuing individual (personal and/or professional) goals.

Some circles also decide to pursue one or more shared goals, specific to their group. If your circle has a shared goal, include it in your Working Agreement.

OUR WORKING AGREEMENT

General expectations

Practical expectations

If we need to address any behaviour that might fall outside these expectations, our circle will....

If any of our shared expectations need to be changed, our circle will...

Our circle's shared goal(s) are... (Optional)

The logistics of “co-facilitation”

Creating Out Loud peer coaching circles are designed to run without an external facilitator. This means they are somewhat like a cooperative: circle members share responsibility for their own group – scheduling meetings, managing communication, choosing discussion topics, helping participants feel safe and able to contribute, and sticking to time.

Every circle will manage these issues differently, but some “co-facilitation basics” for Creating Out Loud circles are listed here below:



Schedule at least six sessions in advance

- Finding times that work for everyone might be hard, but scheduling every meeting at the outset can help.
- Don't worry too much if every one can't attend every session.
- Personal investment in the process and engagement with fellow circle members matters more than 100% attendance.



Decide which Discussion Guides you will use

- Follow Creating Out Loud's 6-week program OR create your own program using the Discussion Guide Library.
- Some circles might prefer Goal-focused Discussion Guides, or combine these with Topic-based discussions.
- Planning your program at the outset helps members commit to the process.



Choose a 'venue' that works for everyone

- Meet in a place all circle members can access without too much trouble.
- Face-to-face meetings work well for some circles.
- Others prefer Zoom, Skype or Teams meetings.
- You can also combine face-to-face and online meetings.



Choose a communication channel that works for everyone

- Circle members often like to contact each other between meetings, to make arrangements and share resources.
- Choose a communication channel that everyone can use, e.g., email, Slack, WhatsApp, Facebook or LinkedIn groups.



Plan to keep your circle on track and on time

- To make the most of their time together, some circles choose a facilitator and time-keeper for each meeting (these can be the same person).
- Rotating roles can lighten the load and make discussions more diverse.
- Other circles work together to co-lead each session.



Agree on a shared goal for your circle (optional)

- Creating Out Loud circles are an opportunity to support one another in pursuing individual (personal and/or professional) goals.
- Some circles also choose to pursue one or more shared goals, specific to their group.

You might like to include some or all of these logistical matters in your circle's Working Agreement.

Some general principles for courageous conversations

You might like to include some or all of these principles in your circle's Working Agreement.



THE WISDOM IS IN THE GROUP

By pooling together all of the different knowledge systems, levels of experience, and ways of seeing and thinking about the world that exist in our peer coaching circles, we can discover something new that couldn't be discovered alone.

Holding onto the idea that the “wisdom is held within the group” can help us to come to these conversations recognizing that expertise happens in many different forms. Each person has a unique offer they will bring to the group, and something they can contribute – even if they can't see it.

We can also help each other know when and where to look for expertise and/or help beyond the group.

HOLDING SPACE FOR DIFFERENCE

Welcoming difference and diversity enriches our conversations by lending surprising new insights. Because diversity can be both visible and invisible, we don't always know what forms of diversity are in the room.

Peer coaching circles can be better for everyone if participants hold space for different preferences, ways of engaging and processing information, opinions, and levels of understanding and expertise.

- ***Different ways of engaging with and processing conversations***

Not everyone feels comfortable speaking into a group. So if you are only hearing from a few voices, it can help to make space for – and gently invite contributions from – people who haven't spoken. But it's also important to know that the role of listening can be just as important as that of speaking.

Because engagement takes various forms, it helps to offer multiple ways for circle members to approach or respond to specific questions. Try combining individual reflection, smaller group discussions, entries in the “Chat” space (for virtual meetings), and drawing, writing or moving a response.

- ***Different opinions***

Valuing different opinions is important. Actively inviting them can also be helpful. Try asking:

- Does someone have a completely different opinion or opposite viewpoint?
- Is there something we are not seeing or understanding?

If no one expresses an alternate perspective, try inviting someone to play the role of the opposite view. This can help circle members consider alternatives and check for any missing information.

- ***Different levels of expertise/understanding***

People come to peer coaching circles with different levels of knowledge and experience. This can be frustrating, but it pays to respect where people are at – not expect them to be where you might want them to be. Try allowing people to learn and realize new things at their own pace. We all have unconscious bias.

It is also important to recognize and respect when circle members do have specific forms of expertise (e.g., lived experience of marginalization), whether or not they are an “official expert.”

CURIOSITY

Curiosity can be a guiding force for learning new things – and maintaining a spirit of wondering keeps curiosity alive. We can be curious about all sorts of things, both positive and negative.

People in your peer coaching circle might say things that intrigue or upset you. In both cases, it can help to be curious about their comments. Try asking:

- Can you say more about that?
- How did you come to that idea / belief / conclusion?

Conversely, you might accidentally say something that offends another circle member. In that case, try to be curious about why your comment hurt and how the hurt might be remedied.

LISTENING

As psychiatrist Karl A. Menninger wrote (quoting an article he had read in *The Ladies' Home Journal*), "Listening is a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force... When we are listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand."^[3, 4]

But there is a difference between "listening to understand" (trying to understand what someone else is saying) and "listening to respond" (thinking about what we might say next).

People are complex and often contradictory. And there can be multiple truths about a single situation. Validating other people's experiences means listening deeply, reflecting back, and honouring what they have said or are feeling.

We do not need to agree or disagree – rather only to hear and see the other, and to acknowledge what is true for them in that moment.

WHEN THINGS GET MESSY

It is perfectly normal – and quite common – for important conversations to feel hard. When things are important, big emotions often come up.

"We need to feel comfortable with things occasionally getting messy and confusing, knowing that this is just part of the way we work as humans. Controlling a group and keeping it 'tidy' will almost certainly keep a group away from the adventure of discovery they could be on"

– Steve Ray, Groupwork Facilitator^[5]

Awkward or difficult moments can bring new insights. But it can help to pause and slow things down. Steps to "de-escalate" tension include: regulating your own emotions, acknowledging other people's feelings, staying present (if safe to do so), modelling calmness and compassion, redirecting and problem-solving.^[6]

COMPASSION

Researcher and popular author, Brené Brown, is well-known for her work on vulnerability, courage and empathy. She also has this to say about compassion:

"Compassion is fuelled by understanding and accepting that we're all made of strength and struggle – no one is immune to pain or suffering. Compassion is not a practice of 'better than' or 'I can fix you' – it's a practice based in the beauty and pain of shared humanity."^[7]

Aim to build a Working Agreement that recognizes and respects the strengths and vulnerabilities of everyone in your peer coaching circle.

References

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6. Bates, D., *6 Ways to De-Escalate a Heated Argument*. 2021, Psychology Today.
7. Brown, B., *Atlas of the Heart*. 2021, New York: Random House.



Discussion Guides

- **Topic-based and Goal-focused Discussion Guides can be found at:**
<https://creatingoutloud.business.uq.edu.au/>

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The opinions in this Discussion Guide do not necessarily represent the views of The University of Queensland, funding / industry partners, or the individual members involved in the reference groups.

About Creating Out Loud

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Creating Out Loud was developed to support Queensland’s artists and arts managers as they recover from and rebuild business, artistic, and cultural practices following the COVID-19 pandemic.

For further information visit

<https://creatingoutloud.business.uq.edu.au/>



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This guide includes links to various web material. All links were working at the time of publication. Please note however that these links may become outdated over time.

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