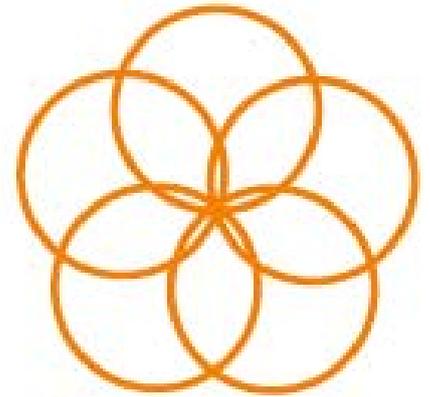


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female entrepreneurs mentoring  
& lifelong learning across europe

## MENTORING CIRCLES™ An Introduction.

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## MENTORING CIRCLES™ - An Introduction

### What is a Mentoring Circle?

Mentoring Circles were originally developed by the co-ordinator of the project, *Inova Consultancy Ltd* in the UK, and have been transferred to Malta (through our partners the Foundation for Women Entrepreneurs), Cyprus (Intercollege) and the Netherlands (VHTO) as part of this project.

Inova's Mentoring Circles™ are based on a method of learning called *action learning*. You may know a bit about this already. It's a method that uses real life and real time problems, issues and opportunities as a basis for your learning.

The key element to Mentoring Circles™ methodology is the 'questioning technique'. Think of the people in your Circle as a community of learners: together you help one another find new insights. This happens by asking one another questions about the situation you are facing. By suspending judgment and asking questions rather than giving advice, you have time and space to be able to reflect and for your ideas to develop. Sometimes it can be tempting to offer advice to other people in your Circle, but this isn't as helpful as you might think. When you discover something about yourself, you are much more likely to carry on and use your new knowledge, than if someone tells you what you *should* be doing.

Why do we use this approach?

- It helps you to find more insight into the situation you're facing, helping you to create more options and solutions
- It tests assumptions you have about your plans
- It helps you to reality check plans, ideas and solutions; are they realistic, comprehensive and appropriate to your situation?
- By bringing more brain power to look at issues, you have more opportunity to spot issues which you haven't already thought of.
- Your Circle can act as a sounding-board for ideas and plans – think of them as your very own brain-storming team. They can help you explore more innovative and creative ideas, or find new ways to look at things.
- It's a way of getting constructive criticism of your ideas, helping you to refine them into successful actions!



## So what happens in a Circle?

Each Circle has a trained facilitator who helps shape the sessions. You'll meet for 3-4 hours, for 3-4 sessions. Each person has a set time to use to explore an issue they are facing with the rest of the Circle.

At your first Circle meeting your facilitator will help your group create rules about the way you'll work together. This usually involves you discussing your expectations about:

- Confidentiality and respecting others' intellectual property (ideas)
- Attendance
- Use of time
- Questioning and levels of challenge
- Giving feedback
- Respect
- Communication style
- Different types of 'helping' in the group- what people would prefer

Your facilitator will help you develop action plans to go forward and test out new ideas or try out solutions. Next time you meet, you then bring any issues back to the Circle and report back about how your action plan went. Your Circle colleagues can help hold you to account, keep you on track, and give you confidence to push yourself out of your comfort zone.

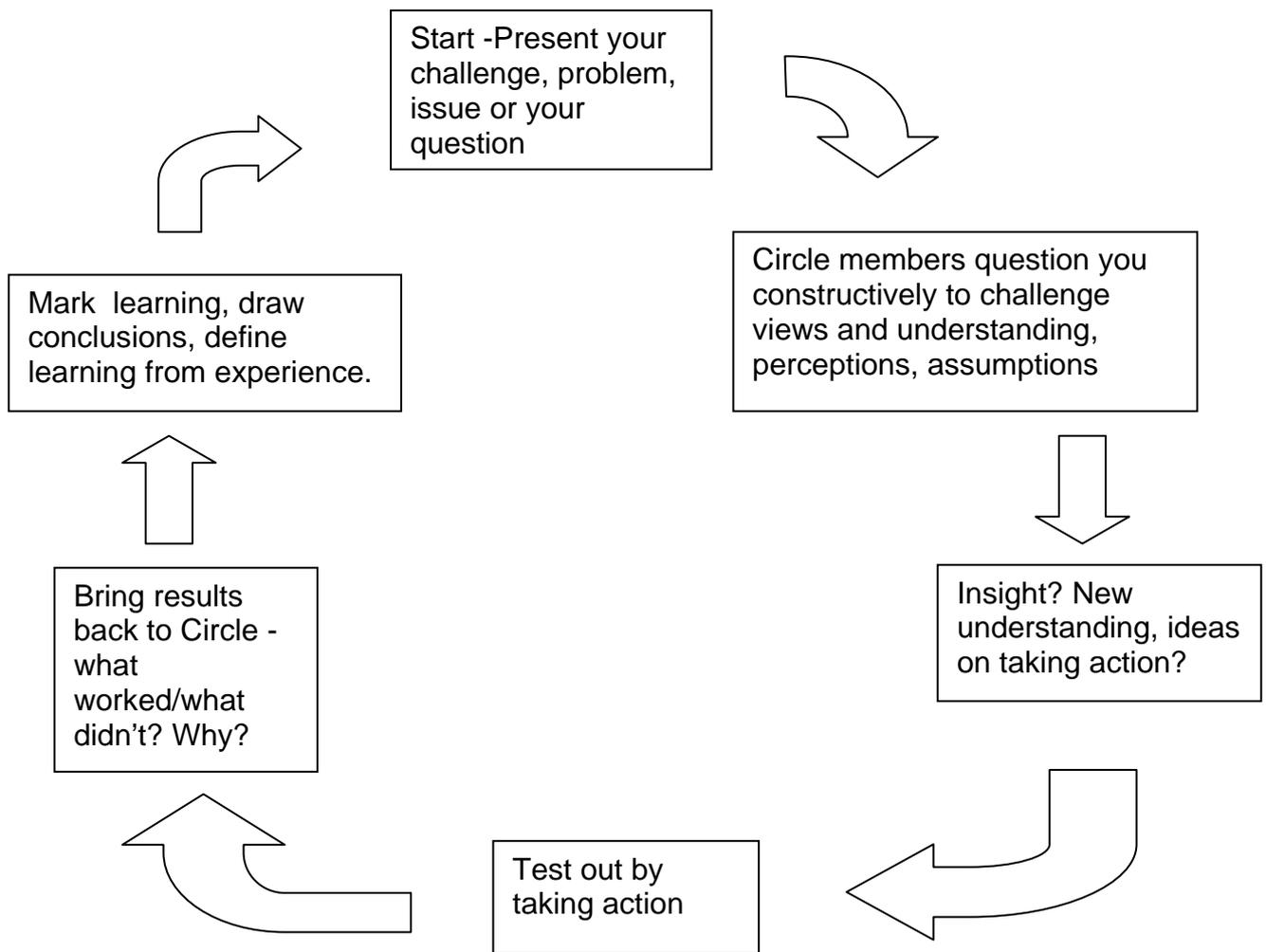


**Learning.**

We are all used to 'schoolroom' learning – being told something and expected to learn it by heart (for example the times-tables). However, there is another way, and some of our most useful learning as adults is achieved by learning through experience.

Mentoring Circles use this idea that learning through experience is one of the most powerful and effective learning experiences.

Here's how this cycle might work in a Mentoring Circle:





## Tips on communicating in a Mentoring Circle

Try to avoid giving advice. It's tempting to offer a story of your experience in a similar situation or details of how you did something. This may not be appropriate or relevant. Try to focus on questioning.

If you feel yourself making an observation or a statement, try to turn it into a question.

**For example:**

Advice = statements beginning with...	Turn it into a question
1. "You could try..." 	1. "What are the various options open to you to secure funding?"
2. "When I managed the restaurant we used to..." 	2. Have you thought about any potential problems or issues with that course of action?

We sometimes disguise our advice in questions. Leading questions also contain the main ideas we hope to lead the individual with.

Sometimes language can be too forceful. If you hear yourself saying, *should*, *must*, *ought*, you are probably offering advice. Think about whether you can re-phrase this into a question which is less forceful.



## How to get the most out of a Mentoring Circle

Our top tips for getting the most out of your Mentoring Circle:

1. **Attend all the sessions:** all Mentoring Circle participants must commit to attending all the sessions and will be asked to sign an agreement stating that they will take part in all meetings and complete all necessary paperwork. This is very important, as it is the support of the group which will encourage you to achieve your goals.
2. **Remember the ground rules:** the group will agree a set of ground rules to help everybody get the most out of the session. This will include agreements about confidentiality, avoiding discussion of sensitive topics, etc. This will help the group to stay focused and make sure that everyone can get what they want out of the sessions.
3. **Keep a learning log:** it can be helpful to write down your learning – this will help you to reflect on your experiences and keep a record of your thoughts or feelings about what has been discussed. You can look at this later to see what areas you want to look at more closely, or remember ideas or suggestions that were inspired from the meeting.
4. **Say what you mean:** the key to a successful Mentoring Circle is good communication – ensuring that you know what you want from each session and how you will discuss this with the group will help you to achieve your aims.
5. **Question, don't give advice:** make sure you ask questions that help each Circle member develop their own solutions, rather than giving advice or making suggestions, which can seem too forceful



**Quotes from past participants**

**“I have had ideas and dreams for a number of years but finally managed to take action only after attending the Mentoring Circles.” - Malta**

**“Everybody has improved themselves and we know better what we want to do in the future” – Cyprus**

**“The Circles helped me find new perspectives, and clear goals” – Greece**

**“I have met interesting women from diverse backgrounds with different ambitions, and am motivated and inspired” - UK**

**“Having heard stories about successful women I have received confidence to start my business” – Estonia**