

Creating out Loud: Working Agreements for Courageous Conversations (Easy Read)



Overview – Working Agreements

Purpose – What are we doing today?

This meeting gets the group ready to work together.



We will do three things:

1. Think about other groups people have been in.
2. Tell others what you need to be part of this group.
3. Develop a **Working Agreement**. That means how we will work together.

Agenda – Our meeting program

Activity	Timing (60 minute meeting)
1. Being here	
• Acknowledging Country	5 minutes
• Say hello	10 minutes
2. Getting along in our circle	5 minutes
2.1 Personal reflection	10 minutes
3. Group discussion – Working Agreements	20 minutes
4. What next?	5 minutes

1. Being here



Acknowledgment of Country

The facilitator can say:

“I acknowledge the Traditional owners of the lands where we work and live.”

“I pay my respects to Elders.”

“I acknowledge any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people meeting here today.”



Check in – Say hello to the group

Everyone sits in a circle.

Take turns to:

- Say your name.
- What do you do in the arts?

2. Getting along in our circle



The facilitator can say:

“Creating Out Loud invites you to have brave and daring group chats. We will get to hear about your ideas.”

“We will make a **Working Agreement.**”

“A Working Agreement explains:

- how to work together
- how to get along with others.”



“This could include:

- How to talk to each other.
- Taking turns when speaking.
- Listening to others ...
- General expectations.
- Practical expectations.
- Helping each other.
- Encouraging each other.
- It’s ok to be yourself.”

2.1 Personal reflection – Being in a group

Thinking by yourself

Think about being part of groups.

- What makes group meetings work well?
- What has been good in other groups?
- What would you like to change?



Think about what you need to help you be in the group.

- **Practical things.**

These might be having an agenda, making sure you have water with you, or help with reading or speaking.

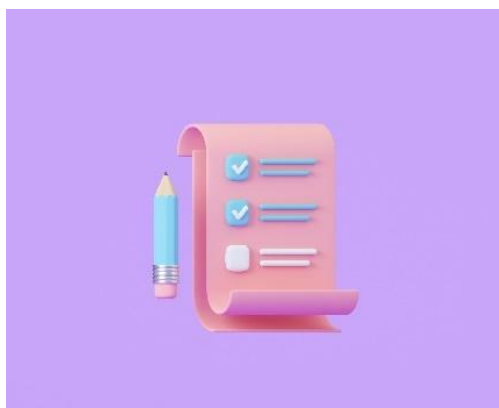
What do you need?

- **General things.**

These might be taking time to think, not being interrupted, or sometimes just wanting to listen. You might want what you say to be kept a secret.

What do you like?

What helps you take part?





Group leaders are called facilitators.

Think about good facilitators.

What makes them good?



Sometimes in a meeting, no one wants to talk.

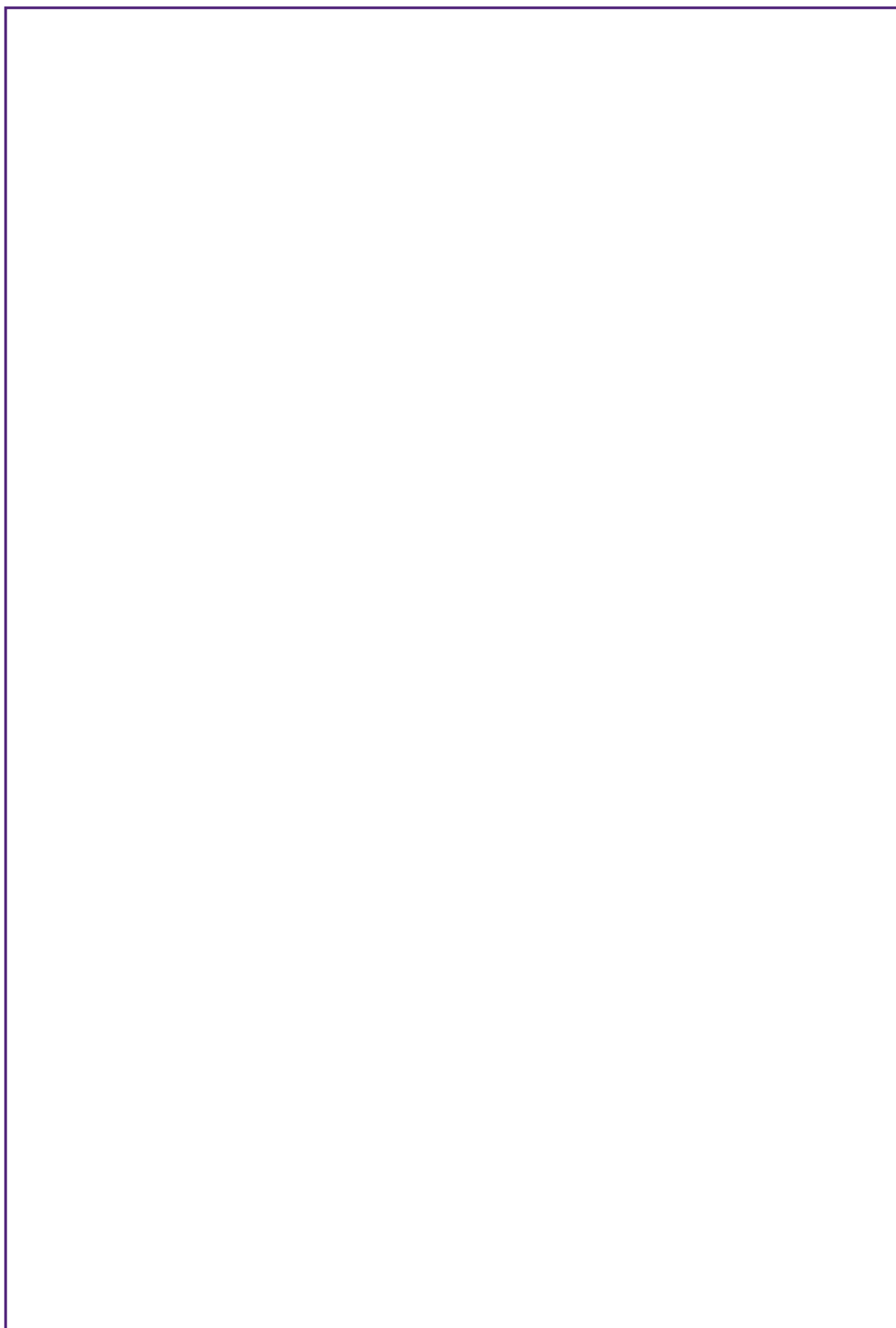
What can a facilitator do?



Use the space on the next page to record your answers.

You can write or draw your answers.

Or your support person might write for you.

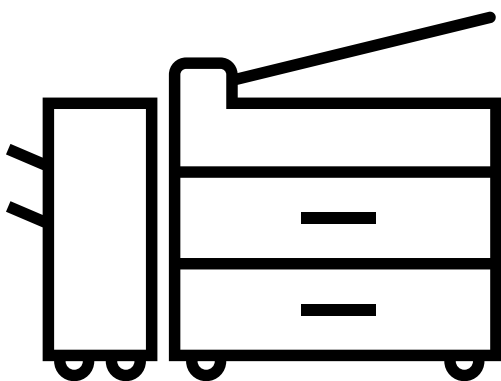


3. Group discussion – Working Agreement



The facilitator can say:

“Our meetings use peer coaching.
That means we help each other.
Trust is very important for peer
coaching.
We will make a working
agreement together.”



“Everyone will get a copy.”

Making our agreement



Share your ideas

Tell the group about your ideas.
Listen to everyone.
Ask questions if you don't
understand.



Work together to make a Working Agreement.

Include:

- **Practical things**
- **General things**

Choose things that make sense to you.



Decide what you will do if someone doesn't follow the Working Agreement.

A blank agreement to fill in

OUR WORKING AGREEMENT	
General expectations	Practical expectations
<p>If we need to fix any problems later, our circle will ...</p>	
<p>If we want to change anything, our circle will ...</p>	

4. What next?

Do something after the meeting.



Things you might like to do:

- Learn more about the Traditional Owners where you are.
- Put future circle meetings in your calendar.
- Choose a specific goal to work on over the coming weeks.

Next meeting you can tell the group about what you have done.

What one step will you take before the next meeting?



TIP:

How to achieve a goal:

- Choose one thing.
- Write it down.
- Tell the group.

Even small steps help you work towards your goal.



Additional resources

Set up the best conditions for these courageous conversations, by creating a Working Agreement for your circle helping participants settle into – and know what to expect from – each conversation.

Settling into a conversation

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.

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.

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

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 the following pages

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 10 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.



General principles for courageous conversations

You might like to include some or all of these “big picture” principles in your 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.

Set your own pace

Peer coaching relies on relational support – so building and deepening relationships is at the heart of its success.

- For individual participants, self-awareness develops through a cycle of self-disclosure, deep listening, and giving and receiving feedback.
- For the circle as a whole, empathy, rapport and trust build as circle members commit to and engage with the process.

But it's important for you to set a pace you're comfortable with.



Although the Discussion Guides invite you to reflect on and share your ideas and experiences on various topics, it is important that you feel free to be only as personal and detailed as you feel comfortable being.

Maintaining confidentiality

Knowing that your confidentiality is being maintained enables peer coaching circles to become a “holding environment for... individual learning and growth.”^[3]

Because maintaining confidentiality is central to building trust,^[4] you might like to clarify what – if anything – circle members are authorized to speak about outside the group, and under what conditions.

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.”^[5,6]

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 –only to hear and see the other, and 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.

“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^[7]

When things are important, big emotions often come up.

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.^[8]



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.”⁹

Compassion provides an important foundation for courageous conversations.



More Discussion Guides

Discussion Guides on other topics related to arts and culture can be found at: <https://creatingoutloud.business.uq.edu.au/>

References

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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.

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