



About Circles

What They Are and
How to Start Your Own



Introduction to Circles

Lean In Circles are small groups of peers who meet regularly to learn and grow together. We know there is real power in this kind of support: research shows we are able to learn and accomplish more in groups.

Today there are more than 33,000 Circles in over 150 countries. Circles meet everywhere from living rooms to company cafeterias—and they are spreading from city to city and country to country by word of mouth. The best part is, they work: 85 percent of members attribute a positive change in their lives to their Circle. Women are asking for more, stepping outside their comfort zones, and leaning in.

You can search for a Circle in your area—or start your own—by visiting our Circles Hub at www.leanin.org/circles.

The Circles Hub is a one-stop shop for all things Circles. Registering on the platform allows you to:

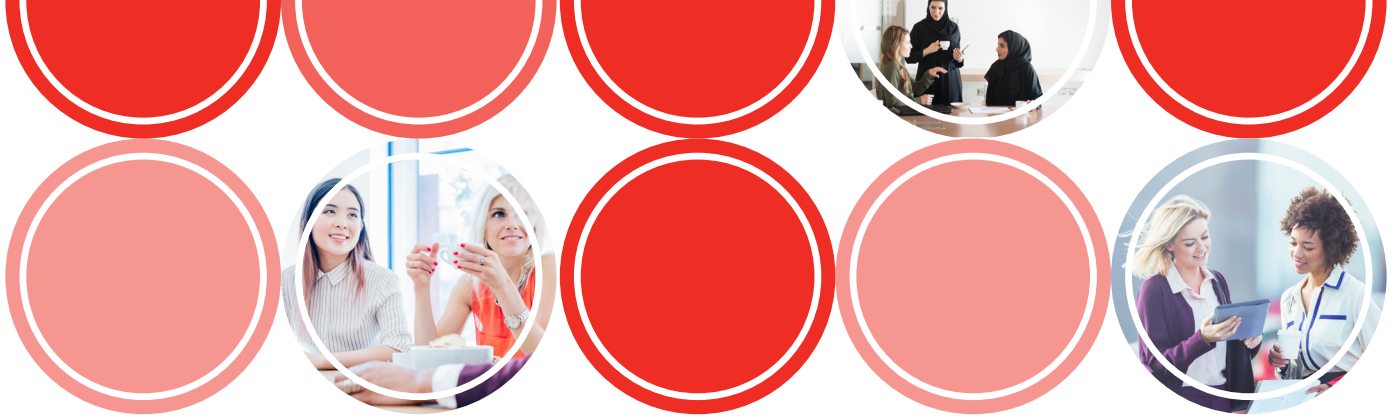
- **Join** an existing Circle
- **Start** your own Circle
- **Download** meeting guides and activities
- **Organize** your Circle using our group email, social feed, and shared library

You're welcome to use other platforms like Facebook, Google Groups, or Slack to stay in touch, but the Circles Hub is tailor-made to give you access to curated materials and help you find local networks to join. Just one note: the Hub and the materials on it are written in English, at least for now.

Spotlight: Lean In Asia

An incredible group of leaders from Malaysia, Japan, Pakistan, Singapore, and Thailand joined forces to launch [Lean In Asia](#). Their annual summit brings hundreds of women together from across the continent to discuss ways to work together to close the gender gap—because in their words, “equality should have no borders.”





How to Run Your Circle

Circles come in all shapes and sizes. To get the most out of your group, we recommend eight to twelve members (a good size to make sure everyone gets heard) at similar stages in life (because peers are more likely to have shared experiences).

A Circle can be a monthly roundtable at someone's home, a brown-bag lunch series at work, or even a virtual meet-up with people from around the world. The important thing is that you get together regularly and everyone participates actively.

We also encourage you to stick with it: Circles that meet for more than six months report higher satisfaction, and many Circles stay together—and support one another—for years.

YOUR CIRCLE, YOUR WAY

While there's no right or wrong way to run a Circle, Lean In has a few recommendations to set you up for success.

1 Review shared values

It's helpful for Circles to have shared values so members know what's expected of them and what they can expect from everyone else. Based on the recommendations of several experts in group dynamics and our own research into what makes small groups work, we've developed what we call our Circle Fundamentals:

- **Confidentiality:** Trust is critical. What happens in your Circle should stay in your Circle.
- **Communication:** Commit to share openly and honestly—and to listen with empathy.
- **Commitment:** Everyone should be invested in your Circle's success and be fully present at meetings.

“I like using the Circles Fundamentals as anchoring items and ‘rules of engagement.’ They create an environment that is safe for everyone.”



Anna Dapelo-Garcia
CIRCLE LEADER, LEAN IN LATINAS

2 Set shared goals for your Circle

Shared goals will help your Circle choose relevant topics for discussion, measure the success of your meetings, and stay on track as a group. One easy way to establish shared goals is to have each member write down her top three personal goals and then identify the most common answers across your group.

“We started off by inviting our own friends and friends of friends to our meetings. Slowly, once people saw what we were doing with our Circle, they wanted to be part of it.”



Abir Abdul Rahim and Sarah Chen
CIRCLE LEADERS, LEAN IN MALAYSIA



Spotlight: Letitia Clark, Lean In Orange County

In 2012, Letitia leaned in to her passion for public service through Emerge California, a training program for women who want to run for public office. When the program ended, Letitia started [Lean In Orange County](#) to share what she had learned with her peers. In 2016, her Circle inspired her to run for a seat on the Tustin City Council—and she won!

3 Decide on a moderator approach

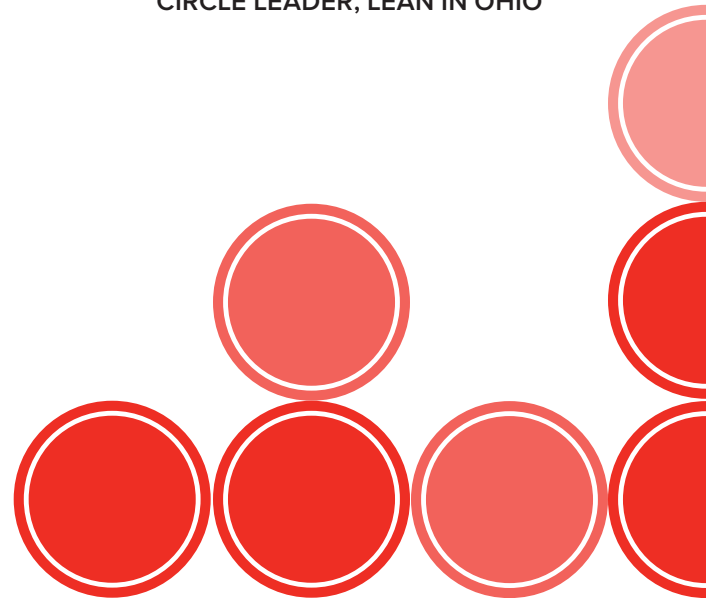
Circle meetings run best when a moderator plans the agenda and guides the discussion. Being a moderator takes work, but we also hear from moderators that it's deeply rewarding and it helps them build—and get recognized for—their leadership skills. We've seen Circles approach moderation in a few different ways, and they all work:

- A single moderator runs meetings for a set period of time
- One Circle member plans meetings and another member facilitates meeting discussions
- Everyone takes turns running meetings

“I'm such an introvert, but being a Circle moderator has made things totally different for me. It has definitely helped build my confidence. Now I can actually say that I'm a leader. I wasn't convinced of that before.”



Julene Allen
CIRCLE LEADER, LEAN IN OHIO





Running Circle Meetings

At Circle meetings, members come together to learn and grow. Many Circles alternate between meetings focused on creating personal connections and meetings focused on learning new skills.

We offer a range of materials to help run Circle meetings at leanin.org/education and leanin.org/meeting-guides. You can also design your own meetings around your Circle's interests. For example, you can come together to discuss shared opportunities and challenges or use expert articles or online talks as a starting point for discussion.



Lean In's Picks for Meeting Materials

Here are our favorite materials to help you connect with one another and build new skills together:

CONNECTING WITH ONE ANOTHER

- [Connection Cards](#): A deck of cards with personal questions used to build trust within your Circle as you quickly dive deep through a series of engaging conversations.
- [Your Childhood Self](#): An activity where you share childhood photos with your Circle to connect with your younger self and one another.
- [Lean In Bingo](#): A fun icebreaker designed to help you get to know your Circle members better.
- [“Is Fear Your Only Restraint?”](#): A blog post to kick off discussion on how fear of failure prevents women from leaning in to opportunities for growth.

BUILDING NEW SKILLS TOGETHER

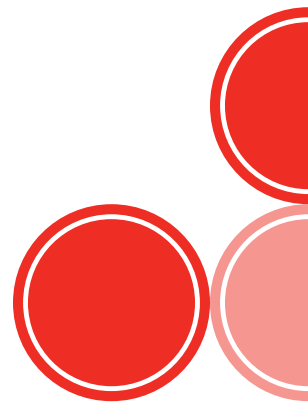
- [Centered Leadership](#): An expert video series that offers a practical road map to taking on the challenges of leadership.
- [What Works for Women at Work](#): Our expert video series will help you spot the four patterns of gender bias at work and discover strategies that successful women use to navigate subtle bias.
- [Negotiation](#): This expert video series teaches you how to negotiate effectively for what you want—and get what you deserve.
- [Power & Influence](#): An expert video about the body language of power and how to use it to increase your influence.
- [“The Confidence Gap”](#): An article that explores why confidence matters as much as competence—and how women can become more self-assured in every area of their lives.

This series of *New York Times* op-eds by LeanIn.Org founder Sheryl Sandberg and Wharton professor Adam Grant are great conversation starters:

- **“The Myth of the Catty Woman”**: We’ve all heard the myth that women don’t support each other. But here’s the catch: research shows it isn’t true. Women do support each other, and we go further faster when we do.
- **“Madam C.E.O., Get Me a Coffee”**: Women do the lion’s share of the office housework— administrative tasks that help but don’t pay off. Just as we need to rebalance housework at home, we also need to equalize office housework. The first step? Acknowledging the imbalance.
- **“Speaking While Female”**: When a woman speaks in a professional setting, she walks a tightrope. Either she’s barely heard or she’s judged as “too aggressive.” Learn more about the traps of speaking while female and how to counter them.
- **“When Talking About Bias Backfires”**: Most people assume that pointing out biases helps us overcome them. But new research suggests that if we’re not careful, making people aware of bias can backfire. Here’s how to talk about bias in a way that leads to positive change.

These Ted talks introduce valuable ideas and skills, and the transcripts and subtitles can be translated into [language]:

- **“Why We Have Too Few Women Leaders”**: In the TED talk that inspired Lean In, Sheryl Sandberg explores why a smaller percentage of women than men reach the top of their professions—and offers three key pieces of advice to women in leadership.
- **“The Power of Introverts”**: Many people think you have to be an extrovert to be a leader. Susan Cain busts this myth and makes a case for quiet leadership.
- **“How to Make Stress Your Friend”**: Stanford psychologist Kelly McGonigal explains why stress isn’t the enemy. Learn how to reframe the stress you feel and build personal resilience.
- **“My Year of Saying Yes to Everything”**: Award-winning screenwriter, director, and producer Shonda Rhimes shares the power of saying yes—and how it helped her to rediscover joy in her life.



MEETING BASICS

Whether you're using materials provided by us or forging your own path, we recommend that all meetings generally follow this structure:

1 Check-in

Kick off each meeting with an icebreaker or by sharing a personal update since your last meeting. Here are some ideas to get your members talking if they're feeling shy:

- Think through the best and/or worst thing that's happened in your work or personal life since the last meeting
- Explain what you're most looking forward to or most dreading in the coming month
- Complete a sentence like "Today I'm feeling _____" or "I most want to talk about _____"

2 Group discussion or activity

Circles harness the experiences and ideas of all their members. When planning each meeting, you can choose to focus on sharing personal stories, developing new skills by discussing articles or videos, or learning from the expertise of a guest speaker.

“Connection activities help us build a powerful community of people wanting to help each other. When one of our members was struggling to find a job, for example, our Circle jumped in to help with interview prep and to make introductions.”



Nuala Murphy
CIRCLE LEADER, LEAN IN BELFAST

3 One action

Close meetings by committing to a One Action, one concrete thing you'll do to step outside your comfort zone or practice a new skill before your Circle's next meeting. Think of your One Action as the little push you need to go for it—and be sure to share it with your Circle.

“After a skills-building meeting on Centered Leadership, everyone shared a One Action based on what personal strength they would focus on before our next meeting.”



Krystal-Elaine Long
CIRCLE LEADER, HAPPINESS IS SUCCESS

4 Wrap-up

Before you break, make sure you have the basics covered for your next meeting and end on an inspirational note. Try going around one by one and describe how you're feeling in three words. Best we've heard so far: "Ready for anything!"





Chapters—A Way to Bring Circles Together

Circles often connect with other groups in their local community or company to network and host events together. In some cases, they form a Lean In Chapter, a network of closely affiliated Circles. Chapters are a great way to create a larger community and support network. In fact, Chapter members are more likely to recommend the Circles program to a friend.

You can search for an existing Chapter to join or other Circles in your area to connect with at leanin.org/matching. Once you're in a Chapter, we've seen two approaches for managing meetings that work particularly well:

- Alternating between large Chapter events and smaller Circle meetings each month
- Participating in large monthly Chapter events that break into Circles for small-group discussion

Spotlight: Lean In D.C.

[Lean In D.C.](#) is a Chapter led by a group of millennial women with more than 1,500 members. For the past three years, Lean In D.C. has partnered with local businesses on Equal Pay Day to offer discounts commensurate with the gender pay gap. It was such a great idea that LeanIn.Org took the campaign national—in 2017, we worked with leaders and businesses in twenty-five cities to offer 20 percent discounts on everyday purchases from coffee to pizza to pet supplies.



Spotlight: Lean In Supper Club

At the [Lean In Supper Club](#), the food is great—but the company is even better. This Circle meets every month at different restaurants across London to network with women in a variety of industries. Its 200 members include artists, doctors, and librarians—and every member helps the others take risks and reach for their ambitions.

Spotlight: Lean In Military Chapter

In 2015, Secretary of Defense Ash Carter and the U.S. Department of Defense launched [Lean In Military Circles](#) across all branches of the military and DoD civilian personnel. Women who serve fight for equality with every step they take—and as the largest employer in the United States, the military's leadership can set the bar for every workplace across the country.





Before you go

Keep in mind that every Circle is unique. Beyond these basic guidelines, your Circle is your own—do what works for your members and don't be afraid to try new things!

You can also download our Marketing Kit at leanincircles.org/marketing-kit to get logos, images, and other materials to help you promote your Circle, and we're always available at circles@leanin.org if you have any questions.