Peer coaching circle: a timed format for 3 to 5 colleagues

Peer coaching works best when a small group of colleagues follows a format that keeps advice in its place. This kit sets up a peer coaching circle for 3 to 5 people: a 16-minute round with a presenter, coaches and a timekeeper, ground rules, a timekeeper sheet, a follow-up log and a 90-minute launch, then 60-minute meetings the circle runs itself. It is not therapy, and it lists the topics to take elsewhere.

90 minutes | 3–20 participants | Online and adaptable in person

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The outcome

By the end of the 90-minute launch each circle of 3 to 5 people has agreed its ground rules, run three timed rounds with a written next step and date for each presenter, filled in the follow-up log and set the dates and rotation for its next three meetings.

Before the session

- For trainers, L&D teams and team leads who want colleagues to coach each other, with 3 to 20 people in circles of 3 to 5. No coaching qualification is needed.
- Plan circles of four, plus one of five or one or two of three. Keep managers and their reports apart.
- Print per person: the topic sheet, ground rules, round timing card and “When to take a topic elsewhere”. Per circle: three timekeeper sheets, a follow-up log, a rotation sheet and a timer.
- Send the topic sheet a day early. Offer plain-text sheets and written questions. Cameras optional; anyone may pass.

Included in this kit

A facilitator run of show, participant worksheets with real tables, reference tables, debrief questions, adaptation notes and a follow-up plan. Use the editable Word copy to tailor examples and prompts before delivery.

Original material by Superglue. Timings are suggestions; adjust them to your participants. This resource has not been independently evaluated.

What is inside

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When to take a topic elsewhere

Read this page before the first round. A peer coaching circle helps colleagues think through ordinary work questions. It is not therapy, counselling, mediation or HR advice. The topics below need a different person or service. If one comes up during a round, the timekeeper stops the round politely and the facilitator follows up in private.

Follow your own organisation's policy and local law. This list is a guide, not clinical, HR or legal advice. If someone is in immediate danger, call the emergency services.

Topic	Where it belongs	Why a circle is not enough
Strong distress, low mood, anxiety or exhaustion that is affecting someone's health	A doctor or other health professional, or the employee assistance programme if your organisation has one	A circle of colleagues is not a place for treatment, and coaches are not trained for it.
Thoughts of self-harm, or a person at risk of harm	Emergency services or a crisis line now, then a doctor. Tell the facilitator.	Safety comes first. Confidentiality does not hold here.
Bereavement, a serious illness or a family crisis	The employee assistance programme, a doctor, a specialist service, and a manager for time off	The person needs support and time, not a next step by Thursday.
Harassment, discrimination or bullying	HR, the grievance procedure or an employee representative	It is a matter of rights and policy. Peers cannot investigate or act on it.
A performance, capability or disciplinary process	The person's manager, HR or an employee representative	A formal process has its own rules. Side advice can harm the person in it.
Pay, contract, legal or immigration questions	HR or a qualified adviser	The answer depends on law, contract and policy.
A safety risk, fraud or other wrongdoing	The safety reporting route or the speaking-up route	It must be reported and dealt with, not coached.
A conflict with a circle member, or a topic about someone in the circle	Outside the circle: the people involved, their manager or a trained mediator	Nobody can coach freely when they are part of the topic.

Ground rules for the circle

Read the rules alone, then agree them aloud as a circle. Add one rule of your own. Keep this page on the table at every meeting.

Rule	What it means in practice
1. The presenter owns the topic	The presenter decides what to share, what to answer and what to do next. Coaches help them think. Coaches do not take over the problem.
2. Questions before options	Options come only in phase 4, and only if the presenter asks for them. “Have you tried …?” is advice, so it waits too.
3. What is said here stays here	Nobody repeats a presenter’s story outside the circle. The follow-up log holds next steps and dates, not stories. Confidentiality has limits: if someone may be at risk of harm, or the law or a policy requires a report, it cannot hold. We say this before we start.
4. Peers only	Nobody in the circle manages another member, and nobody reports on the circle to a manager.
5. Anyone can pass	A presenter can pass on any question or stop the round, and a member can skip a turn as presenter. Nobody needs to give a reason.
6. Own work, nobody in the room	A topic is about your own work. Nobody in the circle is part of it, and it is not on the list “When to take a topic elsewhere”.
7. Their round, not our stories	Coaches do not tell their own stories (“That happened to me …”) in someone else’s round.
8. The timekeeper keeps time	The timekeeper ends each phase on time, even mid-sentence. Nobody takes it personally.
9. Our own rule	

Round timing card

One round takes 16 minutes and belongs to one presenter. The timekeeper calls the end of each phase. In a circle of three, the timekeeper also asks questions in phase 3.

Phase, minutes	Presenter	Coaches	Timekeeper
1. Present, 0–2	Says the topic as a question that starts “How can I …”, why it matters now and what they have tried.	Listen and note words. Do not interrupt.	Starts the clock. Calls time at 2:00.
2. Check the facts, 2–4	Gives short answers.	Ask short fact questions: who, what, when, how often.	Stops opinions dressed as questions. Calls time at 4:00.
3. Questions only, 4–9	Answers aloud, says “pass”, or says “I will think about that”.	Take turns. One open question each, then the next coach. No advice and no “Have you tried …?”	Keeps the turns moving. Tallies each question and any advice. Calls time at 9:00.
4. Options, if asked for, 9–12	Chooses: options or more questions. Writes the options down and says only “Thank you”.	If asked, each coach offers one option that starts “One option could be …”. No debate.	Asks the presenter: “Options, or more questions?” Calls time at 12:00.
5. Commit, 12–14	Names one next step, a date, and what they will report at the next meeting.	Listen. Do not improve the step.	Writes the step and the date in the follow-up log. Calls time at 14:00.
6. Check the round, 14–16	Says which question helped most.	Listen. No more ideas.	Reads the tally and one exact question. Ends the round at 16:00.

If a round goes off track

Any member may ask the timekeeper to pause or stop a round. The facilitator follows up in private.

What happens	What the timekeeper does	Words to say
A coach gives advice in phase 3	Say the words below. Tally it as advice.	“Can you turn that into a question?”
The presenter becomes upset	Stop the round. Offer a pause. Ask nothing more about it.	“Let’s stop here. You do not need to say more. Would you like a minute, or shall we move on?”
The topic is on the list “When to take a topic elsewhere”	Stop the round politely and point to the list.	“This sounds like it needs more than a circle can give. Let’s pause, and look at who can help.”
A coach starts telling their own story	Bring the turn back to the presenter.	“Thank you. What is your question for them?”
A phase runs over	End it. Do not take time from the next presenter.	“Time. We move to phase 4 now.”
The presenter has no next step	Accept a thinking step with a date.	“A step can be: decide by Tuesday which option to try.”

Topic sheet for the presenter

Fill this in before your round. Keep it private; you choose what you say aloud. Tick every box in the topic check. If a box stays empty, choose another topic.

1. My question: “How can I …”

_____

_____

_____

_____

2. Why it matters now

_____

_____

_____

_____

3. What I have tried

_____

_____

_____

_____

4. What I want from the circle: questions only, or questions and then options

_____

_____

_____

_____

Topic check	Tick
It is about my own work.	☐
I can act on at least part of it.	☐
Nobody in the circle is part of it.	☐
It is not on the list “When to take a topic elsewhere”.	☐
I can say it in two minutes.	☐
I am happy for the circle to know this much.	☐

Timekeeper sheet

One sheet per round. Call the end of each phase and make a mark each time a coach asks a question or gives advice before phase 4. Write one exact question worth keeping. This is a count to guide the check in phase 6. It is not a score of anyone.

Date: _____ Round: 1 / 2 / 3 Presenter: _____ Timekeeper: _____

Coach	Open questions	Closed or fact questions	Advice before phase 4	A question worth keeping
Coach 1				
Coach 2				
Coach 3				
Total				

Phases that ended on time: 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐

_____

_____

Options offered in phase 4 (if asked for)

_____

_____

Next step and date (copy it to the follow-up log)

_____

_____

The question that helped most, in the presenter's words

_____

_____

Follow-up log

One log per circle. Write the next step and its date at the end of each round. At the start of each meeting, each presenter reports in one minute: Done, Changed (with a new date), Dropped, or still Open. Write steps, not stories, and no details about other people.

Meeting	Presenter	Next step	Due	Report back at	Status	What happened

Rotation for the first four meetings

Write the members of your circle as Person A to E in the order you agreed. Each meeting has three rounds. The presenter moves one place each round, across meetings, and the next presenter keeps time. Everyone else coaches.

Person A: _____ **Person B:** _____ **Person C:** _____ **Person D:** _____ **Person E:** _____

Meeting dates: **1** _____ **2** _____ **3** _____ **4** _____

Meeting	Round	Circle of 3	Circle of 4	Circle of 5
Meeting 1	Round 1	A presents, B keeps time	A presents, B keeps time	A presents, B keeps time
	Round 2	B presents, C keeps time	B presents, C keeps time	B presents, C keeps time
	Round 3	C presents, A keeps time	C presents, D keeps time	C presents, D keeps time
Meeting 2	Round 1	A presents, B keeps time	D presents, A keeps time	D presents, E keeps time
	Round 2	B presents, C keeps time	A presents, B keeps time	E presents, A keeps time
	Round 3	C presents, A keeps time	B presents, C keeps time	A presents, B keeps time
Meeting 3	Round 1	A presents, B keeps time	C presents, D keeps time	B presents, C keeps time
	Round 2	B presents, C keeps time	D presents, A keeps time	C presents, D keeps time
	Round 3	C presents, A keeps time	A presents, B keeps time	D presents, E keeps time
Meeting 4	Round 1	A presents, B keeps time	B presents, C keeps time	E presents, A keeps time
	Round 2	B presents, C keeps time	C presents, D keeps time	A presents, B keeps time
	Round 3	C presents, A keeps time	D presents, A keeps time	B presents, C keeps time

Filled example: Person A’s round

A fictional circle of four meets for its launch on Thursday 15 October 2026. Person A, a training coordinator, presents first. The first five rows are Person A’s topic sheet; the rest is what the timekeeper wrote at the end of the round.

Part	Notes
My question	How can I get the three regional managers to send nominations for the January course by the deadline, without chasing each one by phone?
Why it matters now	Nominations close on Friday 23 October. Last time I made eleven phone calls and the course started with four empty seats.
What I have tried	Two reminder emails to all three managers, and a phone call to each in the last week.
What I want from the circle	Questions first, then options.
Topic check	All six boxes ticked. Nobody in the circle works with the three managers.
Phases on time	Phases 1 to 5 on time. Phase 6 ran 30 seconds over.
Options offered (phase 4)	Two. Person C: “One option could be to send each manager two names from last year’s list to confirm or change.” Person D: “One option could be to ask the one manager who was on time how they choose.”
Next step and date	Send each manager a one-line message with two suggested names, and ask them to confirm or change them by Friday 23 October.
Report back at	Meeting 2, Thursday 29 October: how many managers replied by the date.
Question that helped most	Person D’s question about last year. The presenter said: “I had not asked why one of them was on time.”

Filled example: timekeeper sheet

Round 1 of the same fictional launch. Person B keeps time; Person C and Person D coach. Totals: 5 open questions, 2 closed or fact questions, 1 piece of advice before phase 4. Share of open questions: 5 ÷ 7 = 71%. The count guides the check. It is not a score of the coaches.

Coach	Open	Closed or fact	Advice before phase 4	A question worth keeping
Coach 1 (Person C)	3	1	1	“What do the managers need to know before they can choose a name?”
Coach 2 (Person D)	2	1	0	“Which manager sent names on time last year, and what was different?”
Total	5	2	1	Share of open questions: 71%

Filled example: follow-up log

The fictional circle's log at the start of meeting 3. As it stood on Thursday 12 November 2026: six steps logged, two Done, three Open, one Changed, and one past its date (Person C's, six days).

Meeting	Presenter	Next step	Due	Status	What happened
Thu 15 Oct	Person A	Send each regional manager two suggested names to confirm or change	Fri 23 Oct	Done	Two of three confirmed by the date. The third replied on Monday.
Thu 15 Oct	Person B	Ask the finance contact for a 20-minute call about the budget template	Tue 20 Oct	Done	Call held. Two columns in the template removed.
Thu 15 Oct	Person C	Draft a two-paragraph proposal to replace the monthly status meeting with a written update	Fri 6 Nov	Open	Not started yet. Moved twice.
Thu 29 Oct	Person D	Book 30 minutes with the new starter to agree three tasks they own	Mon 16 Nov	Changed	First date missed: the new starter was away. Rebooked for Monday.
Thu 29 Oct	Person A	Write a one-page nomination guide and send it with the January invitation	Fri 20 Nov	Open	
Thu 29 Oct	Person B	Decide whether to keep the Friday drop-in, after writing two reasons for and two against	Thu 12 Nov	Open	

Facilitator run of show

1 Open: what a peer coaching circle is and is not | 7 minutes

Two minutes. Say: "In a circle, colleagues help one person think about a work question. The presenter owns the question and the decision. The others ask before they suggest, and a timekeeper gives everyone the same time." Three minutes: show the list "When to take a topic elsewhere" and let people read it. Say: "This is not therapy, and it is not a place for complaints, formal processes or anything about someone in your circle. If a topic is on this list, the right step is the person or service in the middle column." Two minutes: say the limits of confidentiality out loud: "What is said here stays here, except when someone may be at risk of harm or the law or a policy needs a report."

2 Form circles and agree the ground rules | 8 minutes

Two minutes: form circles of four where possible; a remainder of one makes one circle of five, of two makes two circles of three, of three makes one circle of three. Check that nobody sits with their own manager or direct report. Three minutes: each person reads the eight ground rules alone. Three minutes: each circle agrees the rules aloud, adds one rule of its own in the empty line, and writes its members on the rotation sheet as Person A to E. Say: "Person A presents first. The next presenter always keeps time."

3 Choose a topic | 6 minutes

Five minutes of silent writing on the topic sheet. Say: “Write your question so it starts with ‘How can I …’. Then tick the topic check. If a box stays empty, choose another topic.” Show the table “From a vague topic to a circle question” for one minute while people write. In the last minute, ask: “Who still needs a topic? It can be small. A meeting you want to change is enough.” Nobody reads a topic aloud now.

4 Walk through one round | 5 minutes

Show the round timing card. Two minutes: walk through the six phases and point to the timekeeper column. Say: “In phase 3 we only ask. ‘Have you tried …?’ is advice, so it waits for phase 4, and phase 4 happens only if the presenter wants it.” Two minutes: read the filled example of the timekeeper sheet so people see what the tally looks like. One minute: hand each timekeeper a sheet and the follow-up log, and start the clocks together.

5 Round 1 | 16 minutes

Person A presents, Person B keeps time, the others coach. Call only the start; the timekeepers call each phase. Walk between the circles and listen, but do not join a round. At 9 minutes, check that timekeepers ask the presenter: “Options, or more questions?” If a round goes off track, use the table “If a round goes off track”. In a circle of three, the timekeeper also asks questions in phase 3 and tallies only the other coach.

6 Round 2 | 16 minutes

Person B presents and Person C keeps time. Before you start the clocks, say: “Coaches: if you want to give advice in phase 3, turn it into a question. Timekeepers: end each phase on time, even mid-sentence.” Same 16 minutes. Check that every follow-up log has a step and a date from round 1.

7 Round 3 | 16 minutes

Person C presents. Person D keeps time, or Person A in a circle of three. Same 16 minutes. In a circle of four or five, Person D (and Person E) presents first at the next meeting; say so now so that nobody feels skipped. If a presenter wants to pass, the circle moves to the next person on the rotation sheet.

8 Debrief across the circles | 8 minutes

Bring everyone together. Ask for questions and phases, not topics. Three minutes: “Which exact question helped a presenter most?” Collect a few on a shared list or in the chat. Three minutes: “What did coaches do when they wanted to give advice in phase 3?” and “Which phase felt too short or too long?” Two minutes: read the totals from two or three timekeeper sheets, with permission, and say: “The tally guides the check. It is not a score.”

9 Plan the next meetings and close | 8 minutes

Five minutes in circles: agree the dates of the next three meetings, every two or three weeks, and write them on the rotation sheet. Each meeting lasts 60 minutes: 8 minutes to report back on the follow-up log, three rounds of 16 minutes, and 4 minutes to close. Decide who keeps the log between meetings. Three minutes: each person says or types one word about the circle, or passes. Say: “The circle is yours now. Close it after four to six meetings, and decide then whether to start again.”

Reference tables

From a vague topic to a circle question

All examples are fictional. A good circle question starts with “How can I …”, is about the presenter’s own work, and fits in 16 minutes.

Vague topic	Circle question	Why it works
“My team is a mess.”	“How can I get the weekly team update down from 60 minutes to 30 without losing the useful part?”	Specific, about the presenter’s own action, and small enough for 16 minutes.
“My manager never listens to me.”	“How can I prepare my next one-to-one so that my two requests get a decision?”	Moves from a complaint about someone to what the presenter can do.
“Should I quit?”	“How can I find out by December whether the new project role is open to me?”	A big life question becomes one concrete question about work.
“How do I fix our onboarding?”	“How can I get two experienced colleagues to give one hour each to the new starters’ first week?”	A whole system becomes one piece the presenter can move.
“A colleague in this circle keeps missing deadlines.”	Not a circle topic.	Someone in the circle is part of it. Take it to that person or their manager.

Debrief and next steps

Questions for reflection

- Which exact question helped a presenter see their topic differently, and in which phase was it asked?
- What did you do as a coach when you wanted to give advice during phase 3?
- As a presenter, what was it like to hear options without answering them?
- What would make you come back to your circle in two weeks, and what would stop you?

Adapt the session

- With 3 to 5 people, run one circle. In round 1 you can keep time yourself to show the role, and hand it to Person C for round 2. With exactly three, the timekeeper also asks questions in phase 3.
- For a 60-minute launch, keep the opening (5 minutes), the rules (6), the topic (4) and the walk-through (3), run two rounds (32) and close with dates and the rotation (10). Person C then presents first at the next meeting, so read the rotation sheet one round later.
- Online, give each circle a breakout room. The timekeeper shares a timer on screen or posts each phase in the chat. Coaches may type their questions in the chat and the presenter answers aloud or in writing. Cameras are optional.
- For quiet participants or people who prefer writing, allow written questions in phases 2 and 3, read out by the timekeeper. A presenter may hand over the topic sheet instead of speaking in phase 1. Anyone can skip a turn as presenter without a reason; the circle moves to the next person on the rotation sheet. Offer every sheet as plain text.
- For a programme with several circles, keep the same circles for four to six meetings, meet every two or three weeks for 60 minutes, and end with a closing meeting where each member says what they will keep. Do not collect the follow-up logs; ask circles only whether they met.

After the session

Within one working day, send each circle its rotation, its meeting dates, the ground rules and the list “When to take a topic elsewhere”. One member per circle keeps the follow-up log. Do not ask to see the logs: they belong to the circle. After the second meeting, ask each circle by message whether it met and whether the 16-minute round works. After four to six meetings, offer a 30-minute review to continue, change circles or stop. If someone brings you a topic from the list, do not coach it; point them to the service in the middle column.

Questions people ask

What is peer coaching, and how does a peer coaching circle work?

Peer coaching is colleagues at a similar level helping each other think through work questions, with no manager as coach. In this circle, three to five people meet for 60 minutes. Each 16-minute round belongs to one presenter: coaches check facts, ask open questions, offer options only if asked, and the presenter commits to one next step with a date. A timekeeper calls the phases and keeps the follow-up log.

Is a peer coaching circle a form of therapy or counselling?

No. It is a structured conversation between colleagues about work questions, and the coaches need no training in therapy. Distress, health, bereavement, harassment, formal processes, pay and legal questions, safety risks and conflicts within the circle belong elsewhere. The list “When to take a topic elsewhere” says where, and the timekeeper may stop a round at any time.

How is this different from the coaching questions deck?

The coaching questions deck is a set of 56 questions and a 45-minute practice in trios, for one-to-one coaching by a manager or a peer. This kit is a group format that colleagues keep running on their own: rotating presenter, coaches and timekeeper, timed phases, ground rules, a follow-up log and a rotation for the next meetings. The questions from the deck work well in phase 3.

How many people do I need, and what if the numbers do not divide?

Three to twenty people, in circles of three to five. Circles of four work best: a presenter, two coaches and a timekeeper. A remainder makes one circle of five or one or two circles of three; 10 people make one circle of four and two of three. The launch has three rounds, so in larger circles the others present first at the next meeting.

What is included in the free and editable files?

The open PDF has the list of topics to take elsewhere, the ground rules, the round timing card, the topic sheet, the timekeeper sheet, the follow-up log, the rotation for the first four meetings, filled examples and the 90-minute facilitator plan. Subscribers also receive the editable Word file, an Excel workbook with the launch plan, a circle planner that splits your group and sets the rotation and meeting dates, a timekeeper tally, and a follow-up log that counts the days to each due date, and a CSV of the launch plan.

Use and sharing

Free to use and adapt in your own training sessions, including paid client work. Do not resell or redistribute the unmodified download as a standalone product. Share the resource page instead.