

GIVING CIRCLE LIFE CYCLE

The Giving Circle Life Cycle is a framework of stages based on experiences that many giving circles had expressed. Due to the variation between giving circles stemming from the “intentional autonomy” within AAPIP’s Giving Circle Model, these stages are fluid rather than linear and may occur at different times, can happen simultaneously, or giving circles may experience stages multiple times or not at all.

STAGE 1: GROWTH

In the beginning, giving circles experience a stage of rapid growth, whether it is in membership numbers or amount of giving. The giving circle as a whole is growing and the members themselves grow individually as well. In this phase, members are typically energetic about the giving circle and are very engaged, motivated, and passionate.

CULTIVATION

For some, the formation of a giving circle is preceded by a period of cultivation, which requires the investment of time to think and plan for the creation of the giving circle before it is formally established. This involves contemplation of the development and determining the first steps to forming the circle. This phase does not yet involve the recruitment of members, but rather is meant for the founder(s) to strategically think through and plan the giving circle’s formation.

FORMATION

All giving circles start somewhere. It can begin with anyone, from a single individual, family members, a group of friends, a group of co-workers, or acquaintances. Within this stage, the group of people comes together with the initial purpose to pool their money and fund a cause. It is a time for members to collectively brainstorm, develop the groundwork, and decide on the giving circle’s mission, goals, and purpose.

“We’re new and still trying to figure things out. We’re a group of really close friends.”

MEMBERSHIP EXPANSION

After establishing the groundwork, members are often excited and want to expand their giving circle. Most of the focus of this stage is building giving circle membership. Some circles choose to be intimate and focus purely on personal recruitment, such as one-on-one asks to their close friends. Other circles focus on outreach and visibility, utilizing tools such as social media to recruit members. In this stage, most giving circles are growing or are aiming to grow larger in membership size.

“For our giving circle, the goal is growth in membership.”

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT:

How can we ensure that our giving circle mission continues to align with our personal and community values?

How do we deepen our work to achieve our goals while remaining realistic about our capacity?

What is our role in understanding and/or meeting the needs in our community?

INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT

Along with membership expansion for the giving circle, there are also moments of individual growth for giving circle members. Part of the impact of a giving circle is the influence it has on its individual members. Some members are coming from backgrounds outside of philanthropy and nonprofit/charitable work and are growing in their knowledge of the field throughout this stage. This new knowledge is empowering for members and allows them to feel part of a greater cause, and therefore helps them understand that as individuals, they can be philanthropists and contribute to their communities.

GROWTH IN GIVING

Once membership is developed, the main focus of the giving circle shifts to the funding aspect of the giving circle. Many giving circles begin this stage of giving by only collecting funds from within the giving circle's members. Each member contributes a certain amount of money and the collective amount is given to community organizations. Giving circles with aspirations to grow larger outreach beyond just their circle to other funding sources such as businesses for corporate matching. Many giving circles also raise funds and recruit through creative member engagement events as well.

STAGE 2: MAINTENANCE

In this next stage, the giving circle's growth begins to plateau and many internal situations arise. At this point, giving circles have reached out to as many people as they can and/or want to and have established giving and recruitment processes. They are now in a stage of maintenance, where giving circles are more constant and no longer going through rapid growth.

MEMBERSHIP TRANSITION

As a circle ages, membership may fluctuate. As giving circle members experience life changes (new job, moving, family additions, etc.), circles see a decrease in membership involvement. It is normal for members to take breaks from the circle and return later on. Members are often in and out of circles, but there tends to be a core group of members who stay and are present regularly throughout all phases.

BURNOUT

Burnout is common for giving circle members during the maintenance phase. After years of fundraising and recruitment, it can become difficult for giving circles to maintain the momentum and energy from beginning stages. This affects membership involvement and can contribute to shifts in leadership. Each giving circle addresses burnout in their own way, such as taking a break to regenerate or hosting a social event to reenergize.

“People come in and drop out all the time.”

LEADERSHIP CHANGE

Along with membership transitions, many circles undergo a shift in leadership. Leadership change can occur for different reasons, including leaders getting tired or members seeing a need for a new leader to bring about change for the giving circle's processes.

“Know that leadership is going to change as different life things happen.”

“So many people may step out as they are busy and then come back later when they're ready.”

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

What can we do to anticipate and prepare for change?

How can we engage with larger movements in the community to re-connect with our values and purpose?

What have we personally gained from our giving circle involvement, and how can we use it to engage each other and the community in our mission?

STAGE 3: MOVING FORWARD

The final stage determines the direction in which the giving circle is heading towards for the future. The variation in types of giving circles means there are also many options for the future of a giving circle. There are four main options within this stage--continuing, expanding, ending, and unknown—but there have been many different paths that other giving circles have taken. This stage often involves a process of reflection, reevaluation, and strategic planning to move forward.

CONTINUING

Some giving circles are content with the current state of their giving circles and plan to continue it as is and remain in the maintenance stage. They do not expect to recruit anymore or to implement any changes to their membership, fundraising or other processes.

EXPANDING

Other giving circles want to continue to grow. They return to the stages of growth and aim to recruit more members and raise more money. They have the aspiration to grow larger, have a greater reach in community, and/or become more formalized.

ENDING

Giving circles also have the option to end. Because of the voluntary nature of giving circles, there is flexibility for members to decide not to continue their giving circle. Some giving circles know their circle will come to an end and see the ending as a strategic move. There are also giving circles that have ended temporarily but then resume the giving circle after taking a break.

UNKNOWN

There are other giving circles that express that they are unsure of the future to come for their circle and are comfortable with the open possibilities.

EXAMPLES:

One giving circle sees no need to expand, and in fact, plans to end its giving circle in the future. With aging members and changing life responsibilities, this giving circle is purposeful about plans to end their circle and leave a legacy by helping the next generation start a youth giving circle.

Another giving circle encountered burnout among its membership and opted to take a hiatus from giving circle activities for a year to plan. The members were able to change the way they operate to make the work more sustainable and managed to provide more community funds the following year.