

Circle of Influence Exercise

The aim of Circle of Influence exercise and the resulting conversations is to help people take responsibility for their work concerns, and thus be more proactive, productive and happier.

Here's how to run the exercise – it can be done individually but it's best with a group:

Materials

Flip chart / Sticky notes / Pens / Paper

First - Good Day / Bad Day - 10 mins

Before you begin the Circle of Influence exercise, a gentle way to begin is to ask participants to take a sheet of blank paper fold it in half and draw two pictures: A picture of what makes a good day and a picture of what makes a bad day - at work. No words, just bad art.

Talking through the pictures brings up common themes as well as providing ideas for the main exercise.

How to do the Circle of Influence Exercise (30 minutes)

Draw a large circle. As big as you can. This is the Circle of Concern. Inside it are all the things you are bothered about related to work.

Draw a smaller circle inside the big circle so that it looks a bit like a fried egg. This smaller circle is called the Circle of Control. Inside here, are all the things you have control over.

People usually feel there aren't many items that they can actively control. They may have a lot of stress and anxiety over the things they've written down and will feel they don't have any control over them. Having no control is alarming. So, draw another circle in between the first two – between the circles of Concern and Control. This is the Circle of Influence.

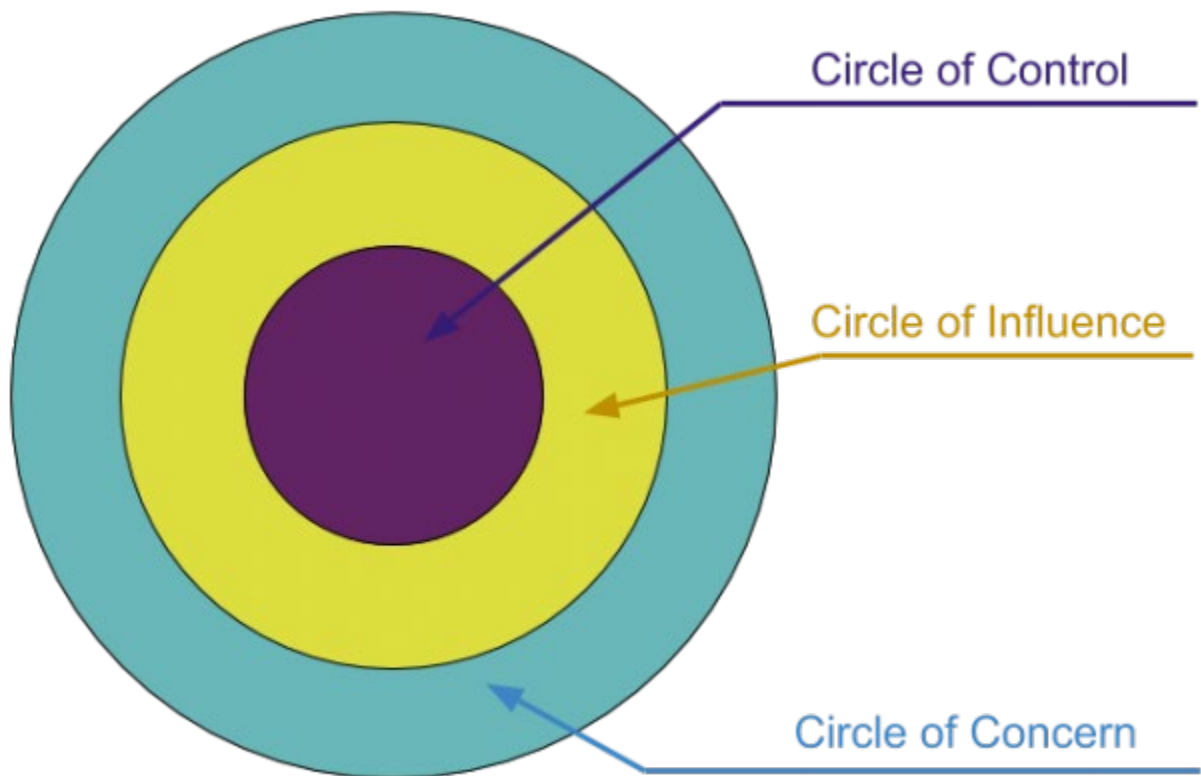
From your Good Day: choose the three things that - if you had them - would make the most long term positive difference to your day.

From your Bad Day: choose three things - that if these were gone or changed or made better - would make the most long-term positive difference.

Write each thing on one Post-it note. If you are doing this in a team it helps to put your initials on the Post-it notes. If you are doing this alone you can choose more than six things.

Place them into the circles depending on where you think that thing lies. Do you have control over it or not?

Once all the Post-it notes are in the circles, stand back and see where you are.



Get team members to look at the ways they could influence some of the things that are out of their control (in the circle of concern). Maybe they can't control them, but could they influence them? E.g. could they forge a better relationship with the person outside of the team who's firing requests at them, and get to the root cause of that?

Go through all the notes that are in the Circle of Concern and together try to move them into the Circle of Influence.

When you explore these further, if you think about them differently, you'll find that some of the concerns can go straight into the Circle of Control.

You may also discover solutions and suggestions in the group.

Benefits of the Exercise

Circle of Influence is a great tool for building resilience. If anyone feels out of control, you can question all of the things where they feel that loss of control, and see if they can have more agency about them.

For the things they simply can't control, get them to stop worrying about them. You can't affect government policy, or the weather... so just put those outside and park it.

At the very least, what is left is awareness of the factors that are outside their circle of influence.

Often it turns out, they realize they can influence more than they think, or they can change their attitude and their response to them. Even the act of acknowledging this creates some relief. In a team, you're trying to get to a point of safety where team members feel confident enough to be able to talk about the things they're frightened of and neutralize those fears.

Doing that as a group means you really get to know each other, building empathy about what concerns you and where your stress comes from. Solving those problems together helps that too. This is really good for building the rapport of a team: a little bit of vulnerability draws people in.

And it gets away from just focusing on conversations about the mechanics of the work, to acknowledging the emotional response, to the experience of doing the work, to the culture, and how we might be unconsciously creating problems for ourselves and our colleagues.

People are not naturally drawn to these conversations, so we have to find these tools like Circles of Influence to make it easier to talk about this stuff.

The Emotional Arc

What's nice about using the Circle of Influence exercise is the emotional arc that often accompanies it. At the beginning, people are often reluctant to participate. So we usually start with people writing on their own. An awkward phase follows where we try and fit things into the Circle, so we get people standing up around the chart, and have a sort of cluster. People often start venting, expressing their anger and their frustration – it can be quite upsetting. When we get to the phase about the ways we can move things into the Circle of Control, even just having that conversation is empowering for some groups of people. The emotional arc when someone realizes they can influence something they were worried about and felt they couldn't control is really heartwarming.

Based on the work of Stephen Covey from “Seven Habits of Highly Effective People”, and ThenSomehow.com (2019)