THE CAJM LISTENING CIRCLE

FACILITATOR PLAYBOOK

A concise guide for leading conversations that build relationships, develop leaders, and build people power

PURPOSE
This playbook is designed to reduce anxiety and increase confidence. Read it before facilitating, keep it nearby during the circle, and return to it during follow-up.

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The mission of the Capital Area Justice Ministry is to build people power for local community justice.

How to Use This Playbook

The Listening Circle Manual explains the full organizational process. This playbook focuses only on what a facilitator needs to do before, during, and immediately after a Listening Circle. It is intentionally concise. You do not need to memorize it, and you do not need to perform it word for word. Use it to understand the purpose of each step, practice the suggested language, and lead with your own natural voice.

GUIDING STANDARD

Your success is not measured by how much you spoke. It is measured by how well others were heard.

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PLAY 1

Prepare Yourself

What posture should I carry into the room?

The most important preparation happens before you arrange the chairs or review the questions. It happens inside the facilitator. Enter the room ready to listen, not ready to prove that you are prepared. Participants do not need an expert who has every answer. They need a steady leader who is curious, present, and willing to receive their stories with care.

Before the circle begins, slow down and set aside distractions. Remind yourself that you are not there to persuade, preach, counsel, or solve every problem. You are there to protect the process, invite honest stories, and help people hear one another. When you remain calm and genuinely interested, the group is more likely to become calm and honest as well.

The Facilitator Mindset

- Listen more than you speak.
- Ask more questions than you answer.
- Seek understanding before offering an opinion.
- Remain curious instead of becoming defensive.
- Respect every story without promising an immediate solution.
- Trust the process without trying to control every moment.

COACH'S TIP

Take one quiet minute before participants arrive. Ask yourself: Am I ready to hear something I did not expect?

REMEMBER

You are not preparing to lead a meeting. You are preparing to receive people's stories.

PLAY 2

Prepare the Space and Team

What needs to be ready before participants arrive?

A Listening Circle begins before the first question. The physical environment, the welcome at the door, and the coordination among the host, facilitator, and note-taker all communicate whether participants matter. Arrive early enough that setup is complete before anyone walks in.

Arrange chairs in a circle or around one table so that everyone can see one another. Avoid classroom seating or a visible "front" of the room. Confirm that the space is accessible, quiet, and free from unnecessary interruptions. Place name tags, revised Participant Interest Cards, pens, water, and the report form where they can be reached easily.

Confirm the Team

The host welcomes people and creates hospitality. The facilitator guides the conversation and protects participation. The note-taker records themes, values, commitments, and potential leaders without attempting to capture every word. Review these roles together before the gathering and agree on how you will handle time, follow-up, and any care concerns.

Before People Arrive

- Review the purpose and selected questions.
- Confirm the safeguarding and CAJM staff contacts.
- Decide who will explain confidentiality and consent.
- Agree on a subtle time signal between the facilitator and note-taker.
- Plan who will contact each participant afterward.

COACH'S TIP

Hospitality begins at the door. Greet people by name and introduce those who do not know one another.

REMEMBER

The room should communicate: You belong here, your time matters, and your voice is welcome.

PLAY 3

Open the Circle and Build Trust

How do I create safety and clarity in the first ten minutes?

The opening should be warm, clear, and brief. Participants need to understand why they were invited, what kind of conversation this will be, and what will happen with what they share. Do not overload the opening with organizational history. Give people enough information to participate with confidence.

Suggested Opening

SAMPLE LANGUAGE

Thank you for being here. CAJM's mission is to build people power for local community justice. Before we decide what to research or ask public officials to do, we need to listen to people who are living with challenges in our community. Tonight is not a debate, and we are not expected to solve every problem. Our purpose is to hear one another's experiences, notice the values and concerns we share, and explain how these stories will help shape CAJM's work.

After the purpose, explain confidentiality in plain language. Themes may be shared with CAJM without identifying the storyteller. A person's name, direct quotation, or identifiable story will not be used publicly without permission. Also explain that confidentiality may be limited if someone is in immediate danger or if a disclosure may involve a legal reporting duty.

Community Agreements

- Speak from your own experience.
- Listen to understand, not to prepare a rebuttal.
- Share the time so every voice has room.
- Respect privacy and the dignity of every person.
- Participants may pass on any question.
- We are here to understand concerns, not debate solutions tonight.

COACH'S TIP

Ask the group whether they can agree to these expectations. A simple verbal “yes” creates shared ownership.

REMEMBER

Trust grows when people understand the purpose, the boundaries, and what happens next.

PLAY 4

Ask Questions That Invite Stories

How do I move people from opinions into lived experience?

Opinions often produce debate. Stories produce connection. A facilitator should ask questions that help participants describe something they saw, experienced, or carried personally. Do not ask every question in the manual. Select a few strong questions and follow the stories that reveal values and community conditions.

Begin with a Low-Risk Question

Start with a question that allows everyone to speak without immediately disclosing something painful. You might ask, “What is something you value about this community?” or “What gives you hope when you think about our community?”

Move into Story Questions

- Tell us about a time when you or someone close to you faced a community problem that felt unfair, unsafe, or unnecessarily difficult.
- What experience has stayed with you because you believed people deserved better?
- When has a public system, institution, or service failed to work the way it should?
- What pressure are families, young people, elders, workers, or congregations carrying that is not receiving enough attention?

Use Simple Follow-Up Questions

- What happened?
- Who was affected?
- How did it affect you?
- Why did that matter to you?
- What value was being honored or violated?
- Who else has experienced something similar?

COACH'S TIP

When someone gives a broad opinion, say: “Can you tell us about a time when you saw or experienced that?”

REMEMBER

Do not chase every topic. Follow the stories that reveal people, values, and patterns.

PLAY 5

Listen Like an Organizer

What should I listen for beneath the words?

Listening like an organizer means hearing more than the facts of one story. You are also listening for the value underneath the story, the institution connected to the experience, the pattern that may be appearing across several people, and the leadership potential within the room. This does not mean analyzing people while they speak. It means remaining attentive to what the stories are teaching the group.

Listen on Four Levels

Listen For	What It May Reveal
The experience	What happened, who was affected, and which system or condition was involved.
The emotion	Fear may point to safety; frustration may point to fairness; grief may point to dignity, love, or belonging.
The pattern	A concern repeated across different stories may signal a broader community problem.
The person	Someone who connects stories, invites others, asks strategic questions, or offers responsibility may be ready for a next step.

When you hear a possible value, reflect it gently rather than declaring it. You might say, “It sounds like dignity was important in that experience. Does that fit what you were feeling?” This allows the participant to confirm or correct your understanding.

COACH'S TIP

Leadership potential is not limited to the loudest person. Watch for the person who listens well, connects others, and accepts responsibility.

REMEMBER

We are not only listening for issues. We are listening for people who may be ready to lead.

PLAY 6

Guide Participation Without Controlling

How do I protect every voice and keep the circle focused?

Facilitation requires enough structure to protect the purpose and enough flexibility to let people be real. Your authority comes from stewarding the process, not controlling the people. Intervene when one person dominates, the group begins debating, or the conversation moves too far from lived experience. Do so respectfully and without embarrassing anyone.

Useful Language

WHEN SOMEONE SPEAKS TOO LONG

"I want to pause you there because your story is important, and I also want to make sure we hear from everyone."

WHEN QUIETER VOICES HAVE NOT SPOKEN

"We have heard from several people. I would also like to make room for anyone who has not spoken yet."

WHEN THE GROUP BEGINS DEBATING

"Let's return to our agreement. Tonight we are here to understand experiences, not to settle the debate."

WHEN PEOPLE RUSH TO SOLUTIONS

"That may be an important idea for research. Tonight, let's stay with the experiences so we understand the problem before choosing a solution."

Do not fear silence. Count quietly to five before rephrasing a question. Some participants need time to gather their thoughts, especially when the conversation becomes personal. Participants should always have permission to pass.

COACH'S TIP

Interrupt the pattern, not the person. Affirm the contribution, restate the purpose, and invite the next voice.

REMEMBER

Protect the purpose, protect the time, and protect the dignity of every participant.

PLAY 7

Respond to Difficult and Emotional Moments

What do I do when the unexpected happens?

Strong stories may bring tears, anger, silence, disagreement, or disclosure of a serious concern. These moments do not mean the circle has failed. They require the facilitator to slow down, remain calm, and stay within the role. Compassion does not require you to become a counselor, investigator, or crisis professional.

When Someone Becomes Emotional

Do not rush to fill the silence or immediately offer advice. Thank the participant for trusting the group, allow a pause, and ask what would be supportive in that moment. Do not press for more detail. After the circle, make sure the appropriate host, clergy leader, or designated contact follows up.

When Safety May Be at Risk

If a person indicates that they or someone else may be in immediate danger, do not promise secrecy. Pause and contact the designated safeguarding lead or CAJM staff contact. Volunteer facilitators should not interpret reporting requirements or carry the response alone. Contact emergency services when there is immediate danger or a medical emergency.

When Conflict Rises

Lower your voice, restate the community agreements, and return the conversation to personal experience. If necessary, pause the discussion and speak privately with the people involved. The goal is not to force agreement. The goal is to protect dignity and keep the space safe enough for continued listening.

COACH'S TIP

Your calm presence gives the group permission to slow down. Do not let urgency push you outside your role.

REMEMBER

Respond with compassion, protect privacy, contact the right person, and do not carry the responsibility alone.

PLAY 8

Close Well and Complete Follow-Up

How do I turn a good conversation into the beginning of a relationship?

A Listening Circle should not end with "Thank you, good night." Participants need to hear what was learned, what will happen next, and how they can remain involved. The closing is also the appropriate moment to make a clear Network Member invitation. Listening comes first. The invitation grows out of the relationship that has been built in the room. A clear closing protects trust because it shows that CAJM is not collecting stories and disappearing.

Suggested Closing

"Thank you for trusting this circle with your experiences. Tonight we heard concerns, but we also heard values, wisdom, and a desire for change. CAJM will bring what we are hearing across our congregations together, synthesize recurring themes, and work with Team Leaders to prepare shared problem areas for the Community Problems Assembly. The Assembly determines which problems move into research; research then helps CAJM define specific issues before campaigns and public action are developed."

"But CAJM is not only listening for issues. We are listening for people. We do not want to take your story and say, 'Thank you, we'll take it from here.' We want to invite people who are ready to stay connected and help shape what happens next."

Making the Network Member Invitation

The 4-3-2-1 Network Member Model

CAJM uses 4-3-2-1 as a simple way to explain the minimum Network Member commitment: 4 big meetings, 3 people invited and brought to the Nehemiah Action, an investment of at least $200 in CAJM, and 1 beloved community that we are building together. The numbers are memorable, but the purpose is deeper than attendance, turnout, or money. 4 keeps us organized. 3 grows our people power. 2 builds our financial independence. 1 reminds us why we do all of it. Together, the model gives people a concrete way to move from concern to commitment and from an individual story into organized people power.

4 = Participate in the four major Network gatherings: Community Problems Assembly, Rally, Nehemiah Action, and Justice Ministry Celebration. 3 = Invite and work to bring at least three people with you to the Nehemiah Action. 2 = Invest at least $200 in CAJM, helping build the local financial power that sustains our justice work. 1 = Help build one beloved community where people across congregations and differences act together for justice.

Use natural language, but make the invitation clear: “If you are ready to take that next step, I would like to invite you to become a CAJM Network Member. We describe that commitment with a simple 4-3-2-1 model: 4 big CAJM meetings during the organizing year; invite and work to bring at least 3 people with you to the Nehemiah Action; invest at least $200 in CAJM; and help us build 1 beloved community where justice can take root. Four keeps us organized, three grows our people power, two builds our financial independence, and one reminds us why we do all of it.”

“If you are ready to say yes today, you can indicate that on the Participant Interest Card. If you are interested but want to know more before deciding, there is a place for that too. Either response gives us permission to follow up with you personally.”

Do not pressure anyone for an immediate commitment. The goal is a clear invitation with clear expectations. The 4-3-2-1 model gives people a memorable picture of what Network Membership means without turning the close into a sales pitch. Someone who says “yes” is expressing a desire to become a CAJM Network Member and embrace the 4-3-2-1 commitment. Someone who checks “tell me more” is asking for a follow-up conversation before deciding. Listening Circle attendance by itself does not make someone a Network Member. Personal follow-up within one week confirms the commitment and connects the person to their Team Leader and next step.

The Participant Interest Card is not a substitute for relationship. It records the response to the invitation. The personal follow-up within one week confirms the commitment, answers questions about the 4-3-2-1 model, and organizes the person toward the next step.

SAMPLE LANGUAGE

Thank you for trusting this circle with your experiences. We heard concerns tonight, but we also heard values, wisdom, and a desire for change. Our next step is to combine themes from Listening Circles across CAJM, identify recurring community problems, and move those concerns into our Annual Community Problems Assembly and research process. We will follow up within one week, and we invite you to stay connected in the way that fits you best.

Before Participants Leave

- Invite questions about what happens next.
- Make the Network Member invitation, explain the 4-3-2-1 expectations, and ask participants to complete the revised Participant Interest Card.
- Name who will follow up and by when.
- Thank the host, note-taker, and participants.

After the Circle

- Meet briefly with the host and note-taker while the conversation is fresh.
- Complete and submit the report within 48 hours.
- Send every participant a thank-you and next-step message within one week; personally follow up with those who said yes to Network Membership or asked to learn more.
- Arrange personal one-to-one follow-up with potential leaders and confirm Network Member commitments.
- Request separate permission before using any story publicly.

COACH'S TIP

The Listening Circle ends when the follow-up is complete, not when the chairs are put away.

REMEMBER
People should leave feeling heard, respected, connected, and clear about what happens next.

The 90-Minute Flow at a Glance

Use this page as a day-of reference. The times provide structure, but the facilitator should protect the purpose rather than follow the clock mechanically.

Time	Segment	Facilitator Focus
0:00-0:10	Welcome and purpose	Explain CAJM's mission, the purpose, confidentiality limits, and what happens next.
0:10-0:15	Community agreements	Ask the group to agree to listening, privacy, shared time, and no debate.
0:15-0:25	Opening connection	Use one low-risk question so every person has an early opportunity to speak.
0:25-0:55	Story round	Invite lived experiences and use simple follow-up questions.
0:55-1:10	Values and themes	Reflect what has been heard and ask what values or concerns appeared repeatedly.
1:10-1:20	CAJM pathway	Explain how stories move into themes, research, issues, and action.
1:20-1:30	Closing and next steps	Collect interest cards, name follow-up, and close with appreciation.

FLEXIBILITY
A meaningful story may need more time. Adjust another segment rather than cutting off the person abruptly. Preserve enough time to explain next steps and close well.

Facilitator Language Bank

Use these phrases as starting points. Speak naturally and adapt the words to your voice while preserving their purpose.

To invite a story	"Can you tell us about a time when you saw or experienced that?"
To go deeper	"How did that affect you or someone you care about?"
To identify a value	"What mattered most to you in that experience?"
To clarify	"When you say that, what does it look like in everyday life?"
To summarize	"What I hear you saying is ____. Did I understand you correctly?"

To share the time	"I want to make sure we create room for everyone."
To redirect debate	"Let's return to what people have personally experienced."
To hold a solution	"Let's record that idea for research and stay with the problem tonight."
To honor emotion	"Thank you for trusting us with that. We can take a moment."
To allow choice	"You are welcome to pass if you do not want to answer."
To name a pattern	"We have heard this concern in several different stories."
To invite leadership	"Would you be open to a one-to-one conversation about staying involved?"

What Do I Say When…?

These short scenarios can be reviewed before the circle or practiced during facilitator training.

SOMEONE SAYS, "THE REAL PROBLEM IS POLITICIANS."
"Can you tell us about an experience that led you to feel that way?"

SOMEONE BEGINS PREACHING OR TEACHING THE GROUP.
"Thank you. I want to bring us back to personal experience so we can hear how this has affected people directly."

TWO PEOPLE BEGIN ARGUING.
"I am going to pause us. We do not have to agree, but we do need to hear one another without debating. Let's return to what each person experienced."

SOMEONE SPEAKS FOR A LONG TIME.
"I want to pause you there so we can protect time for others. What is the one part of your story you most want us to remember?"

NO ONE ANSWERS THE QUESTION.
Allow silence, then say, "Take a moment to think. I can also ask the question another way."

SOMEONE ASKS, "WHAT IS CAJM GOING TO DO ABOUT THIS?"
"Tonight we are listening for patterns. The concerns that appear across circles will move into our assembly and research process, where solutions are tested."

A PARTICIPANT WANTS TO TELL SOMEONE ELSE'S PRIVATE STORY.
"Please protect their identity and share only what is necessary to help us understand the concern."

A STORY MAY REQUIRE IMMEDIATE CARE.
Pause, protect privacy, and contact the designated safeguarding lead or CAJM staff contact. Do not manage the situation alone.

Day-of Checklist and Report Reminders

Before the Circle

- Host, facilitator, and note-taker confirmed.
- Room arranged so participants can see one another.
- Selected questions, interest cards, pens, report form, and refreshments ready.
- Confidentiality language and safeguarding contacts reviewed.
- Follow-up assignments agreed upon.

During the Circle

- Explain the purpose, agreements, confidentiality limits, and next step.
- Ask for stories rather than general opinions.
- Listen for values, patterns, institutions, and emerging leaders.
- Protect participation without humiliating anyone.
- Leave enough time to explain what happens next, make the Network Member invitation using the 4-3-2-1 model, and complete the Participant Interest Card.

After the Circle

- Record the top three recurring themes.
- Name the values underneath the stories.
- Identify institutions or systems mentioned.
- Include only brief anonymized examples.
- Record research questions, commitments, and potential leaders.
- Submit the report within 48 hours.
- Complete participant follow-up within one week, including Network Member confirmation and next-step organizing.

PRIVACY REMINDER
Store names and contact information separately from the Listening Circle report. Never use a name, direct quotation, photograph, recording, or identifiable story publicly without specific permission.

FINAL TEST
The circle was successful if people were heard, relationships grew, leaders emerged, and CAJM became better prepared to act together.

The CAJM Facilitator Commitment

Facilitation is not a performance. It is a leadership practice rooted in humility, curiosity, dignity, and hope. Before leading a Listening Circle, read this commitment quietly or with your facilitation team.

OUR COMMITMENT

As a CAJM Listening Circle facilitator, I will enter the room as a learner. I will listen more than I speak, ask before I assume, and seek understanding before solutions. I will honor every person's dignity, protect the purpose of the circle, and create room for voices that are often overlooked. I will not use people's stories without permission, promise what CAJM cannot deliver, or carry difficult situations alone. I will listen for values, relationships, community patterns, and emerging leaders. I will follow through on the commitments made in the room because trust is built not only by how we listen, but by what we do afterward.

Before You Facilitate: Final Self-Check

Before participants enter the room, ask yourself four questions. Am I ready to listen without rushing toward a solution? Am I prepared to protect the dignity of every person, including someone whose perspective differs from mine? Can I explain the 4-3-2-1 Network Member invitation clearly without allowing it to take over the Listening Circle? Do I know exactly who will follow up with each participant after the gathering?

If the answer to any of those questions is no, take a few minutes with the host or Team Leader before beginning. Good facilitation is not about having perfect words. It is about being prepared enough to stay present when the conversation becomes real.

The Facilitator's Last Three Questions

Did people have room to tell stories rather than simply state opinions? Did we recognize both recurring concerns and people who may be ready for deeper leadership? Did everyone leave knowing what happens next? If those three things happened, the Listening Circle has done what it was designed to do.

Remember the organizing sequence: stories build relationships; relationships reveal shared themes and leaders; shared themes move through organizational synthesis and the Community Problems Assembly; selected problems move into research; research helps CAJM cut specific issues; organized people then move into campaign and public action. The facilitator protects the beginning of that process by listening well and following up faithfully.

A Brief Source of Inspiration

Isaiah 50:4 describes "the tongue of the learned," translated from the Hebrew phrase lishon limmudim, meaning the tongue of those who have been taught, trained, or disciplined as learners. The central insight is the order: the ear is awakened before the tongue is prepared. CAJM draws on this in moderation as an interfaith-compatible leadership principle. Effective leadership does not begin with speaking. It begins with listening.

CARRY THIS WITH YOU

If we get the listening right, everything else gets stronger.

The Listening Circle Manual contains the full organizational framework, forms, safeguarding protocol, annual timeline, and accountability standards. This playbook should be used alongside that manual and the CAJM facilitator training.