CHAPTER 8:

Addressing Challenges

AS THE LEARNING CIRCLE PROGRESSES, challenges to how the Learning Circle runs may emerge that could impede the process.

Common challenges include:

- Budget constraints;

- Resistance to change;

- Unwillingness of participants or organizations to compromise on priorities or timelines;

- Restrictive food safety regulations or differing perceptions about food safety and allergies;

- Restrictive contracts with school food service providers that limit efforts to serve more healthy, local and sustainable food;

- Gaps in connections with farmers, food harvesters, hunters, fishers and foragers;

- Limited access to or availability of locally produced and processed foods;

- Inadequate food distribution systems;

- Lack of/limited infrastructure within schools to grow, prepare and/or serve local foods;

- Lack of/limited skills and knowledge within the school community to grow, prepare and/or serve local foods;

- Lack of/limited support for food service staff and teachers to provide enhanced food services or education;

- Food literacy is not considered a priority;

- Limited staff to champion and/or implement F2S activities;

- Difficulty meeting varied stakeholder needs;

- Challenges recruiting F2S Learning Circle participants who are able to stay the course for 24+ months and attend all gatherings;

- Miscommunication throughout the process;

- Changes in school staff or administration and loss of champions; and

- Changes in political will, funding or priorities.

Addressing the Challenges

Building partner engagement – Despite best efforts, organizations and individuals who are seen as important partners may be reluctant to make a commitment to the F2S Learning Circle or their representation may change over time. This may result in loss of champions at the table. How groups address this challenge will vary, but the following considerations may help strengthen the process:

Recognize and honour each participant's contributions at each gathering

○ Emphasize that the process is dependent on the participation of everyone, many of whom are passionate volunteers.

○ Clearly communicate the value of participation in the F2S Learning Circle to the home organizations of the participants (e.g. presentations to management, lunch and learns, resource distribution).

○ Prepare facts sheets and other materials that document the purposes and accomplishments of the F2S Learning Circle and share these widely among participants and in the community.

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Building trust – Many participants may have limited experience with the concept of Learning Circles and as such, they may be reluctant to share information on certain topics or may express concerns about confidentiality and information sharing. Actions to consider include:

○ Ensure terms of reference (including explicit agreements about information sharing) are collectively agreed upon, well understood, regularly reviewed and updated.

○ Understand that it may take time to develop the familiarity and trust needed to share experiences that are both positive and negative.

○ Ensure the coordinator is able to model openness and honesty with regard to their experience.

○ Openly acknowledge missteps and oversights and lessons learned.

○ Provide opportunities for enjoyable team building, networking and socializing.

Attendance – Increasingly, organizations are being asked to accomplish much more with fewer resources. This could lead to stress and constraints on the ability of participants to take part in the full F2S Learning Circle process. Some strategies to mitigate this are:

○ Make sure you set meeting dates early and send out reminders well in advance, as well as immediately before meetings.

○ Inform participants and their supervisors at the start of the process about the exact commitment that is needed.

○ Keep in contact between meetings with updates and other information.

○ Ensure participants are welcomed into the meeting space.

○ Regularly express appreciation for the time and energy that is being devoted to the process.

○ Select an appealing meeting location that aligns with the values, vision and goals of the group and is food centred. Ensure the location is away from the normal work environments of participants, but still easily accessible.

○ Ensure that the foods served align with the values, vision and goals of the group – fresh, healthy, local sustainable, and culturally appropriate foods! Understand that food and refreshments are an incentive to attend.

○ If non-attendance is a persistent problem, it may be time to have a one-on-one conversation with participants to understand the barriers.

○ Rotating or replacing a participant (by alternating members of an organization) is not encouraged as it can affect group cohesion and the completion of work. However, in some cases participants may need to have alternates available to attend, and should commit to keeping those people updated.

Dealing with difference and conflict – Healthy conflict can be an important part of group development and a driver of systems change. What is important is that the group feels supported moving through the conflict in order to reach a deeper level of agreement and understanding. Over time, many participants come to understand that encountering differing viewpoints and perspectives is a valuable part of the process. Suggested actions include:

○ Encourage a group culture that recognizes that participants are not attending as formal agency representatives, but as professionals with unique insights and knowledge.

○ Reiterate the vision of the F2S Learning Circle and the agreed upon terms of reference at frequent intervals.

○ If a conflict becomes irreconcilable or begins to impede the progress of the group, it may be necessary to deal with the issues outside of the gatherings.

○ Look at conflicts as opportunities to broaden the conversation. What does the conflict illustrate about the larger disconnects within the food system that are impeding F2S? How can improved relationships at the F2S Learning Circle level be mirrored in actions to better connect food systems stakeholders? Conflicts may highlight opportunities for additional knowledge sharing and development.