



January, 1990 *BUT STILL WORTHWHILE*

## RESOURCE BRIEF

### The Role of the Participant

*WORTHWHILE FOR BOARD MEMBERS*

The participants are the most important ingredients in a study circle. Their interest, enthusiasm, and commitment, along with the skill of the leader, ultimately determine the success of a study circle.

The goal of a study circle is not to master a text or to learn a lot of facts, but rather to deepen understanding and judgement. This can occur in a focused discussion when people exchange views freely and consider a variety of viewpoints. The process — democratic discussion among equals — is as important as the content.

The following points are intended to help you make the most of your study circle experience and to suggest ways in which you can help the group. Although this advice will be self-evident if you have experience in discussion groups, these points will be a valuable reminder to even the most experienced participant.

- **Make a good effort to attend all meetings.** The comfort level of the group depends upon familiarity with other partici-

pants, not just as acquaintances or members of the same organization, but as peers in this particular group with its own special history and fellowship.

---

*Everyone in the group, including you, has unique knowledge and experience; this variety makes the discussion an interesting learning experience for all.*

---

- **Communicate your needs to the leader.** The leader is responsible for guiding the discussion, summarizing key ideas, and soliciting clarification of unclear points, but he/she may need advice on when this is necessary. Chances are you are not alone when you don't understand what

someone has said.

- **Help keep the discussion on track.** Make sure your remarks are relevant; if necessary, explain how your points are related to the discussion. Try to make your points while they are pertinent.

- **Address your remarks to the group rather than the leader.** Feel free to address your remarks to a particular participant, especially one who has not been heard from or who you think may have special insight. Don't hesitate to question other participants to learn more about their ideas.

- **Listen carefully to others.** Make sure you are giving everyone the chance to speak. Keeping a pen handy to jot down your thoughts may help you listen more attentively since you will not be concerned about losing the point you want to make.

- **Speak your mind freely, but don't monopolize the discussion.** If you tend to talk a lot in groups, leave room for quieter people. Be aware that some people may want to speak but are intimidated by more assertive people.

- **Don't withdraw from the discussion.** You have a responsibility beyond that of listening. Everyone in the group, including you, has unique knowledge and experience; this variety makes the discussion an interesting learning experience for all. Failing to speak means robbing the group of your wisdom.

- **Engage in friendly disagreement.** Differences can invigorate the group, especially when it is relatively homogeneous on the surface. Don't hesitate to challenge ideas you disagree with. Don't be afraid to play devil's advocate, but don't go overboard. If the discussion becomes heated, ask yourself and others whether reason or emotion is running the show.

- **Remember that humor and a pleasant manner can go far in helping you make your points.** A belligerent attitude may prevent acceptance of your assertions. Be aware of

how your body language can close you off from the group.

- **Maintain an open mind.** You don't score points by rigidly sticking to your early statements. Feel free to explore ideas that you have rejected or failed to consider in the past.

- **Use your critical faculties.** Don't accept without question the statements made by authors of the readings, the leader, or other participants. Think about whether statements are provable; decide whether assertions are based on fact or opinion, feelings or reason, primary or secondary sources; and be on the lookout for deceptive argument techniques such as bandwagon or scare tactics, personal attack, faulty deductive reasoning, and vague generalizations.

- **Strive to understand the position of those who disagree with you.** Your own knowledge is not complete until you understand other participants' points of view and why they feel the way they do. It is important to respect people who disagree with you. They have reasons for their beliefs which are usually not dumb or unreasonable. You should be able to make a good case for positions you disagree with. This level of comprehension and empathy will make you a much better advocate for whatever position you come to.

*Excerpted from a 32-page pamphlet, "Guidelines for Organizing and Leading a Study Circle." Write or call for more information on the Study Circles Resource Center, its services, and its other publications.*