



Your Organization's Best New Asset: A Giving Circle

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This is the final article in a series about giving circles. Giving circles, groups who pool donations and decide together which causes to support, are a powerful tool for providing anyone – at any age, in any place, at any giving level – with access to an exciting, intentional giving experience. Giving circle members learn and do something about the issues that mean the most to them within their community of friends, family, fellow program alumni – anyone.



As part of our effort to expand and strengthen giving circles in the Jewish community, Amplifier: The Jewish Giving Circle Movement is proud to present this seven-part series to help you start and sustain a giving circle inspired by Jewish values. This series draws upon Amplifier's Resource Library and the experiences of dozens of giving circles already in the Amplifier network.

Part 7 – Your Organization's Best New Asset: A Giving Circle

By Joelle Asaro Berman

"Giving circle." What does that term mean to you? What is your immediate reaction to it?

As an organization professional, it's possible that giving circles are new to your world, a mysterious undertaking with unclear benefits and risks. They may sound like a fundraising gimmick – just a different way to think about donor giving levels. At worst, you may fear that giving circles will siphon off money that may have instead funded your organization or its annual campaign.

Let us put you at ease.

Giving circles can be your organization's best new asset. They are a highly malleable, customizable tool for creating a culture of giving in your organization. They can also help you achieve many of your organization's goals in a meaningful way that will leave your members feeling transformed and deeply committed to your mission.

Here's how:

1. With giving circles, you're prioritizing the education, networking, and engagement of your audience. This pays off in a multitude of ways – some of which are financial.

Giving circles enable you to offer a new kind of value to your stakeholders: an opportunity for your audience to deeply encounter the issues at the core of your work. With a giving circle, your organization can provide a new kind of educational experience around your mission, an understanding of the challenges facing your field and what's needed to make real impact. Members emerge more deeply committed to your mission, and become invested ambassadors for your organization.



JCF Israel Giving Circle

For example, the Jewish Community Federation and Endowment Fund (JCF) of San Francisco created a giving circle to generate additional funding for one of its focus areas in Israel, while also encouraging members to contribute to the Federation's annual campaign. Throughout the giving circle's process, the Federation provided circle members – young couples with a desire to learn more about Israel, but little knowledge of Israel's social issues – with data on unemployment, education, and underserved populations. Circle members learned about how the Federation evaluates potential grantees, but ultimately made their own funding decisions.

This project required an investment of staff time from the Federation; it also catalyzed \$24,000 in new funding for the kinds of organizations that the Federation cares about (with an emphasis on the Federation's existing grantees), as well as a couple of dozen new stakeholders who now have a much deeper understanding of how Federation works and what it supports.

Sigalit Rubinson, the Israel and global program officer at JCF who staffed the circle, summarizes the impact: “Our Federation’s experience bears out that giving circles are helpful tools for communal connection and heightening awareness of key issues. This experience deepened our members’ relationships through discussions on shared values and love for Israel. Giving circles embody education with action, and reward participants with doing good together.”

By staffing or hosting a giving circle, your organization can also leverage the multi-touch engagement of the experience, building a deep sense of community between your audience members. Strengthening these bonds between members within your organizational framework will also bring members much closer to your work.



Bronfman Youth Fellows Alumni Advisory Board discusses the Alumni Venture Fund giving circle.

“This past year, our giving circle experimented with our first co-deliberation between American and Israeli alumni leaders,” shares Naamah Paley, who runs the [Alumni Venture Fund](#), a giving circle for alumni of the Bronfman Fellowship program. “This allowed us to use our giving circle as a mechanism to foster dialogue and build bridges between our communities, which is a critical part of our the Bronfman Fellowship’s mission.”

Giving circles also empower people to enter Jewish conversations, tackling discussions about Jewish values, communal issues, and their visions for the Jewish people and the world. It’s a deeply powerful, meaning-making experience, and your organization is providing it.

“Our giving circle has created a sacred space for our members to come together to grapple with their individual and collective charitable interests and priorities,” shares Jami Bachrad, IKAR’s development director. “By learning together about a variety of causes and opportunities for giving, participants’ connections to our own IKAR community as well as to the greater community are deepened simultaneously.”

These efforts pay off. They build your brand as giving circle members spread the word of their experience. And research shows that giving circle members not only give more, but are more likely to join boards, donate expertise, and get their friends involved.

2. Giving circles also make it possible, in some cases, to fundraise for programs and projects within your organization.

At the JCC of Manhattan, a group of parents with young children in the JCC's preschool wanted a way to stay in touch once their children aged out of the program. The JCC formed a giving circle, Atid, that enabled the group to continue to connect with each other within the context of the JCC, and to learn about (and then fund) some of the JCC's many programs and services. Atid members allocate the circle's funds to the JCC programs that they feel most resonate with their collective philanthropic values.

"Atid members have the opportunity to connect to the JCC in an elevated and meaningful way, gaining greater insight into our institution," says Joy Levitt, CEO of the JCC of Manhattan. "The members have built a cohesive community while making an impact on critical program needs. They have also leveraged their gifts into a significant grant pool and provide funding where it is needed most."

Some giving circles, like the Bronfman Fellowship's Alumni Venture Fund, exist exclusively to support the entrepreneurial projects of program alumni. Giving circle members – also Fellowship alumni – learn about the important work that their fellow alumni are doing across the world and choose which projects to support.

"Our Alumni Venture Fund benefits the Bronfman Fellowships and our alumni community in a wide range of ways," says Paley. "We're able to engage alumni as funders, grantmakers and grantees; and we can further the ideals of our organization through distributing alumni funds to support projects that align with our values."

The giving circle model is flexible; design it with your organization's needs, mission, and audience in mind, and it will help you accomplish a wide range of strategic goals.

3. Giving circles will make you a smarter fundraiser, and they create a stronger culture of philanthropy in the broader Jewish community.

By hosting a giving circle, your organization is training members to become more intentional, thoughtful givers. The result is both narrow and broad: you gain deep knowledge on your members' giving preferences, enabling you to sharpen your fundraising strategy, and the community as a whole benefits from having more – and more thoughtful – givers.



“Hosting giving circles have given me great insight as I fundraise for Challah for Hunger,” says Carly Zimmerman, CEO of Challah for Hunger, who hosts a [giving circle](#) for alumni. “During the giving circles, students and alumni speak frankly about ‘why’ and ‘how’ they give, and these experiences have immeasurably informed my work as a fundraiser.”

By creating a space where members can reflect on their giving, you can help them connect their giving preferences to new kinds of philanthropic activity. Even if the circle’s money doesn’t support your organization, it’s still good for the Jewish people – and good for humanity – for all of us to create more thoughtful, intentional, collaborative givers. You may be starting people on a philanthropic journey that initially aligns with your organization’s mission, but ultimately, a rising tide lifts all boats: hosting or facilitating giving circles is an investment in the Jewish philanthropic future.

The more we can provide the incredibly meaningful experience of collective giving to people who are inspired by Jewish values, the broader and more lasting the impact on the Jewish community and the world will be.

If you would like to explore what a giving circle could look like at your organization, we’d love to help. Check out this [resource](#) for a deeper dive on hosting a giving circle, and email us at [Hello@AmplifierGiving.org](mailto>Hello@AmplifierGiving.org) when you’re ready to get started.

Joelle Asaro Berman is responsible for overseeing the Natan Fund's Amplifier program, a global network of giving circles motivated by Jewish values and inspired by changemakers who are making a difference around the world. Joelle can be reached at joelle@natan.org or on Twitter: @joelleab.