



How to start a digital Junto and mutual aid club

What are Ben Franklin Circles (BFCs)?

The Ben Franklin Circles are a bold initiative that brings people together driven by two main goals:

- To improve ourselves
- To improve the world

Inspired by Benjamin Franklin’s Junto or “club for mutual improvement,” the Ben Franklin Circles were designed to bring people together in small groups to explore civic virtues as a lens into how we can improve ourselves and the world. BFCs ask questions like “How can I live a just life?” and “How is humility key to leadership?”

With the outbreak of the Coronavirus, we are now using the Junto model to connect people virtually during a period of social isolation and support one another and our communities during a time of need.

Why Ben Franklin?

Founding father, master inventor: Benjamin Franklin was also a pioneer of both self and community improvement.

In 1727 Franklin formed the Junto, a mutual-improvement club made up of individuals with an array of interests and skills. The twelve members meet weekly and asked a series of questions designed to find ways to support one another and society – questions like, “Do you think of any thing at present, in which the Junto may be serviceable to mankind? to their country, to their friends, or to themselves?” and “In what manner can the Junto, or any of them, assist you in any of your honourable designs?”

Together, the members of Franklin’s club helped promote one another while also introducing major civic initiatives including a lending library, a volunteer fire department and more. Our goal with Ben Franklin Circles is to make Franklin’s model adaptable and available to everyone and anyone interested in conversations and action about self-improvement and community engagement.

What is a “Digital Junto”?

In 2020, amid a global pandemic, groups of individuals coming together with the purpose of helping one another is more important than ever. To help foster Ben Franklin Circles as mutual aid clubs, we have created the following guidance for running a digital “Junto.”

To start, we’ve updated the list of questions Franklin’s club would ask one another. And, we created guidance for how to convene people digitally and explore these questions together.

The goal: gather a small group of 8 to 10 people, meet regularly on Zoom or another digital platform and use the questions provided to both give and receive the help we need to navigate the challenges we currently face.

The “Junto” Questions

Franklin’s Junto had a standing list of 24 questions they used to guide their weekly discussions. We have updated and edited that list to include the following 10 questions. Please remember, these are a just suggested questions. You can omit and substitute with your own or just choose one or two and focus on those.

- What is one challenge you are currently facing? How can this group help?
- Is there someone you’ve heard of that needs help? How can we help them?
- What is a need we see in the larger community? How can our circle connect with and contribute to the community?
- Is there a young person or group of young people we can mentor and encourage?
- What is a story you’ve heard this week of someone doing good or innovative work in the community? How can we amplify that?
- What is one thing you’ve seen, heard, read this week that you’d like to share with the group? (news article, podcast, a piece of music or art)
- What is one new thing you’ve learned this week about yourself (particularly related to the current situation of the Coronavirus pandemic)?
- Is there anyone we should invite to be a part of this Circle?
- Can we improve anything about the circle itself?
- Based on our conversation, what is one thing you will take away and/or commit to doing in the next week.

And...then what?

Now that we’ve explained the concept and goal, the following steps will help you to get a group up and running. There are no rules — just recommendations.

1. Decide on the group format — Open or Closed?
2. Pick a meeting time.
3. Choose a digital platform.
4. Invite people to join.
5. Host your first meeting!

1. Decide on the group format — Open or Closed?

Open Group

<p>Pros</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Good structure for public institutions (schools, libraries, churches, etc.) that want to keep the group open to the community• Lower commitment for group members; they can drop into a meeting at anytime• Ability to reach more people as word of the group gets out	<p>Cons</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Requires ongoing promotion of the group to the community for each meeting• Less intimate group dynamic
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Closed Group

<p>Pros</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Stronger group dynamic; allows for deeper relationships, more intimate discussions and more trust between group members• Up-front commitment from the group; once group is formed, the circle leader does not need to continue to promote each meeting	<p>Cons</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Initial legwork to form the group with committed participants
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Fun Fact: Did you know Ben Franklin was an early inventor of the pro-con list? As he wrote to a friend in 1772 about his process for making difficult decisions, “My Way is, to divide half a Sheet of Paper by a Line into two Columns, writing over the one Pro, and over the other Con.”

2. Pick a meeting time and frequency.

As the host, you can pick the time and frequency of your meetings: weekly, bi-weekly and monthly. We recommend your group meet regularly, at least once a month, but you can choose your own meeting timeline.

Tip:

Be consistent. Have the same day and time each month to make it easier for planning and to ensure good attendance at your meetings. Decide in advance when you want your meetings to be (first Tuesday of the month, every other Saturday, etc.) and at what time (we recommend two-hour meetings). Get it on peoples' calendars in advance.

3. Pick a Digital Platform.

Please consult our [digital guidance](#) for Ben Franklin Circles here.

4. Invite people to join.

Once you determine if the group is Open or Closed, the next step is to figure out who you will invite and how you will reach them.

Private invitations

One option is to handpick your group members. You can start with people you know or would like to know, or do some research to find interesting people in your community. One of the goals of Ben Franklin Circles is to facilitate connections between diverse groups, so we recommend at least starting with acquaintances rather than close friends and family. (That being said, if you want to start a circle with your immediate family and friends, please do!)

Tips:

- Start a list of people you know who you think would be good candidates. Good candidates are people who are open to new experiences, open to other ideas and opinions, willing to share and good listeners.
- The ideal group size is 8 to 12 people. If you ask 15 to 20 people, you should be able to land on that number.
- If you can't come up with 15 to 20 people to ask, then start with a shorter list, and as you send invitations, ask them to identify one to two people who might be a good fit.
- Another way to build your invitation list is to reach out to people you don't know but you have *heard* about — like leaders in your community. One Circle host built a dream list of community leaders she wanted to invite. She found their contact information, invited them to chat one on one and personally asked them to join.
- You can also draw from existing networks you're a part of. One Circle host teamed up with a co-host, and they each asked 10 people to participate. Another host reached out to five people and asked them to identify two to three people to invite and built the list that way. What they all had in common was that they pre-vetted the invitees and made personal asks.

Open call

Another way to reach out to potential members is an open call. The open call requires more marketing, like social media to drum up participation. The Circle host needs to promote each meeting, not just the first one. There is some stickiness with these meetings, and even in open groups, people keep coming back. Remember to publicize the specific meeting time and place, as well as what the group is.

Tip:

Consider a co-host. Working with a co-host can be a big help. A co-host can also help you recruit group members and assist with some of the logistics of each meeting. You can always identify a co-host after your first meeting, or work with one right from the start.

5. Your First Meeting

Congratulations! You made it to your first meeting. You can use our first meeting guide as much or as little as you need. The first meeting can be a little intimidating, but we've provided some tips below to get the conversation started (and trust us, that's the hardest part).

Welcome your guests, and ask everyone to introduce themselves.

Try an open-ended question to make everyone comfortable. For example, "What made you want to come today?" Or try an icebreaker. Here's one we like:

Rose, bud, thorn: This is a very quick and easy way to have people share something personal. Go around the circle. Ask everyone to say their name and (briefly!) share:

Something in their life that's going well (blooming, like the rose)

Something in progress (the bud)

Something they're struggling with (the thorn)

Set the tone and expectations

About Ben Franklin Circles

- National small group conversation initiative inspired by Ben Franklin's mutual improvement group, The Junto.
- Ben Franklin Circles were developed by 92nd Street Y as a tool to bring people together for conversations about members' goals and aspirations through the lens of civic virtues.

About this Group

- Introduce the origin of the group, how it started, its purpose.
- Share your reasons for deciding to host. What does it mean to you personally?
- Ask everyone to share why they are there / what they hope to get out of it.

Introduce Group Guidelines/Ground Rules. For example:

- Be Respectful
- Seek Understanding, Not Agreement
- Maintain Confidentiality
- Differences are a Benefit, Not a Deficit

Discussion

Choose a combination of the updated Junto questions from below. The goal is not to put anyone on the spot. Rather, the questions are designed to uncover ways your members can help one another, share opportunities and respond to needs they see in the community. You don't have to ask all of them. Pick & choose as appropriate.

- What is one challenge you are currently facing? How can this group help?
- Is there someone you've heard of that needs help? How can we help them?
- What is a need we see in the larger community? How can our circle connect with and contribute to the community?
- Is there a young person or group of young people we can mentor and encourage?
- What is a story you've heard this week of someone doing good or innovative work in the community? How can we amplify that?
- What is one thing you've seen, heard, read this week that you'd like to share with the group? (news article, podcast, a piece of music or art)
- What is one new thing you've learned this week about yourself (particularly related to the current situation of the Coronavirus pandemic)?
- Is there anyone we should invite to be a part of this Circle?
- Can we improve anything about the circle itself?

Commiments/Final Thoughts

Ask your group, based on your conversation, to share is one thing they will take away and/or commit to doing in the next week.

Encourage group members to set actionable goals and to come up with something that they will find useful. Remind them that commitments can be focused on self-improvement and/or community improvement. For those who struggle, encourage them to pick one small specific action.

Guide for Future Meetings

You and your group will determine how often you want to meet – whether it's weekly, bi-weekly or monthly. Your meetings will follow the same general format as above.

- Welcome and check-in (Is there one piece of news you'd like to share with the group since we last met?)
- Briefly review ground rules
- Choose the Junto questions you plan to explore together
- Set commitments

You can also structure your conversation around a specific topic or article. You can always use Franklin's [13 virtues](#) as a good place to start. We've also created a list of [13 additional topics](#) that lend themselves well to the concept of mutual aid - empathy, gratitude, courage, equality and curiosity are all relevant. Or, ask your members to suggest a general theme for each session and an article, podcast or piece of art to share. Then use the Junto discussions to deepen the discussion of that topic. Email us at benfranklincircles@gmail.com for more thoughts or guidance.

Host Tips

Now your Ben Franklin Club is up and running. Here are some general thoughts to keep in mind.

1. What makes a good club facilitator

- You're comfortable leading a conversation about life's big issues
- You're a good listener who can ask questions and get others to share
- You're able to manage time and keep meetings on track
- You're ready to see the club through to its natural conclusion

2. Ground rules

- Everything shared in the Circle is confidential
- Don't judge others' commitments—offer constructive feedback
- Attend the meetings—your fellow members are counting on you

3. And don't forget ...

- Document your meetings
- If everyone approves, share or send us photos, short videos, blog posts, etc.
- Take notes
- Assign a different note taker at each meeting
- After meetings, send a short wrap-up email including members' commitments
- We're here for you!
- Check back on the Ben Franklin Circles website for news and new content
- Reach out with questions and suggestions

4. Establish a way to stay connected between meetings

- Email, text, Google, Facebook, WhatsApp—pick what works

5. Suggest Accountability Partner

- Ask if members want to pair up with partners to stay in touch and track progress throughout the month

Join Us! Be Part of the Ben Franklin Circle Host Community

We're excited to be able to connect hosts running Circles around the country. You can learn from one another and we can learn from you!

Please tell us how your Circle is going and send us any stories you feel comfortable sharing. Of course, you can keep your Circle meetings private but if you want to spread the word, here are a couple ways to reach out.

- [Join our closed Facebook Group for Circle Hosts](#)
- Follow us on social media and we will follow you back
 - Facebook:
 - Twitter:
 - Instagram:
- Want to share some off the record thoughts? Email us at benfranklincircles@gmail.com