



Fish Bowl

What is a fishbowl process?

Fishbowls involve a small group of people (usually 5-8) seated in circle, having a conversation in full view of a larger group of listeners. Fishbowl processes provide a creative way to include the “public” in a small group discussion. They can be used in a wide variety of settings, including workshops, conferences, organizational meetings and public assemblies. Fishbowls are useful for ventilating “hot topics” or sharing ideas or information from a variety of perspectives. When the people in the middle are public officials or other decision-makers, this technique can help bring transparency to the decision-making process and increase trust and understanding about complex issues. Sometimes the discussion is a “closed conversation” among a specific group. More often, one or more chairs are open to “visitors” (i.e., members of the audience) who want to ask questions or make comments. Although largely self-organizing once the discussion gets underway, the fishbowl process usually has a facilitator or moderator. The fishbowl is almost always part of a larger process of dialogue and deliberation.

When to use it

- As an alternative to traditional debates
- As a substitute for panel discussions
- To foster dynamic participation
- To address controversial topics
- To avoid lengthy presentations.

As a facilitator, how do I implement a fishbowl process?

1. Analyze the appropriateness of this technique to the objectives of the event.
2. Obtain agreement from the event organizers to implement a fishbowl.
3. Communicate ahead of time with anyone you specifically want to participate in the fishbowl, explaining how the process works and what their role will be.
4. Make sure that the physical space permits a fishbowl setup:
 - A few chairs in an inner circle (elevated if necessary to be visible to all)
 - Concentric rings of chairs and/or round tables around the inner circle;
 - Aisles to permit easy access to the inner circle
 - Microphones if needed
 - Easel stands or paper on walls for written or graphic recording of key ideas is sometimes helpful
5. To begin, invite the representatives to sit up front, explain to the group how the process will work, and open the floor with a provocative question, inviting the representatives in the fishbowl to comment.

Timing (approximately 1 hour 30 minutes)

- Introduce the method and the objectives/guiding questions of the discussion (10 minutes)
- Fishbowl discussion (1 hour)
- Debriefing (20 minutes).

Some variations for conferences

- **Keynote speaker fishbowl.** Instead of giving a 45-90 minute presentation with little or no time for questions or discussion, give the speaker 15 minutes to present some thought-provoking ideas, after which, he/she joins the small circle of the other fishbowl members (who can be pre-selected, or who emerge spontaneously from the audience). From here the speaker participates in –but does not dominate– the ensuing conversation.
- **Panelists’ fishbowl, version 1.** After the traditional panel discussion, ask the panelists to sit in a fishbowl and to talk with each other, in front of the whole group, about their responses to each other’s presentations.
- **Panelists’ fishbowl, version 2.** One panelist starts with a question, which the next panelist answers; panelist #2 asks a question to panelist #3, and so on.
- **Heterogeneous fishbowl.** One person from each main viewpoint on the topic under discussion is invited to sit in the fishbowl.
- **Homogeneous fishbowl.** People who share similar opinions, experience, culture, etc. are invited to sit in the fishbowl. In the next round, representatives of a different point of view take the fishbowl seats. Having two or more rounds for each group allows for more depth and responsiveness.
- **Visitor’s fishbowl.** Place an extra chair in the fishbowl and invite persons from the group, one at a time, to join the discussion. Set a time limit for how long one person can occupy the visitor’s chair – or establish a ground rule that when a new “visitor” wishes to join in, that person stands behind the visitor’s chair, thus signaling that the current visitor should conclude his or her comments and give the chair to the person waiting.
- **Fishbowl battle.** Instead of the typical 4-5 seats in the middle for the talking participants, here it’s a one-on-one debating the pros and cons of xyz. There are two chairs (or standing positions) which anyone can come and occupy to advance an argument in favour or against, one by one. People can switch sides but there’s always one pro followed by one con (or the other way around), until the discussion peters out and is finalised with whatever remaining views.

Tips and Lessons Learnt

Keys to a successful fishbowl

- Speakers, panelists, or other “experts” who are willing to let the content emerge from the comments and questions of the group, rather than controlling the flow of ideas
- A topic that really interests the group
- A facilitator who understands the principles of Open Space technology

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