



# Fishbowl

**PURPOSE** Fishbowl is a conversational process that fosters understanding of an issue, proposal or problem facing an organization.

**DESCRIPTION** Fishbowl conversations create understanding about the diversity and range of opinions and viewpoints within a group around the fishbowl focus. As a result, participants begin to develop consensus, come to agreements, and identify options, next steps and resources for resolving an issue, proposal or problem. In addition to building shared understanding and agreements, fishbowl conversations model active listening and demonstrate how a group can constructively and productively engage in difficult conversations around issues that matter to organizations.

Fishbowl conversations involve a discussion group of 5-8 participants surrounded by a larger observation group. Just as people observe the fish in a fishbowl, observers watch and listen to the conversation of the discussion group. Fishbowl conversations typically last about thirty minutes followed by a whole group dialogue among participants and observers where observations, patterns and themes are identified.

**PREPARATION** Before facilitating a fishbowl conversation, make sure you have carefully considered the following questions:

- What is the purpose for participating in or observing this conversation?
- Have we selected an issue, problem or proposal that is clear, connected to purpose, and meaningful to participants?
- Will the issue, problem or proposal encourage expression of diverse opinions and viewpoints?
- How will participants for the fishbowl conversation be determined?
- Will the fishbowl conversation be *closed* (with a fixed group of participants) or *open* (leaving space for observers to participate in the conversation)?
- What questions will help the whole group recognize emerging consensus, agreements or options on the fishbowl focus?

**INSTRUCTIONS**

*Step 1: Select and prepare the discussion group*

The discussion group includes 5-8 people who will conduct their conversation in view of the observers and who have knowledge and experience with the fishbowl focus. It is not uncommon for some participants to be anxious about having another group witness their conversation. Acknowledge that some anxiety is not unusual and that it typically dissipates once the conversation begins. This group assembles in a small closed circle

of chairs (a *closed* fishbowl) in the center of the meeting space.

*Step 2. Determine whether the fishbowl will be open or closed*

In an *open* fishbowl, one chair in the discussion group circle is left empty. Any member of the observer group can, at any time, occupy the empty chair and join the fishbowl. When this happens, an existing member of the fishbowl must leave the fishbowl and free a chair.

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## INSTRUCTIONS *continued*

### *Step 3. Assemble the observers*

The larger observer group arranges their chairs in concentric circles around the discussion group.

### *Step 4. Hold the fishbowl conversation*

The discussion group engages in conversation around the fishbowl focus. The observers listen to and observe the conversation—what is talked about as well as how the discussion group interacts with one another. Observers are invited to record observations for sharing out later in the whole group conversation.

### *Step 5. Harvest the dialogue*

After an agreed upon amount of time, usually about thirty minutes, the discussion and observer groups come together to share observations and to identify patterns and themes that emerged as well as to identify next steps. These are charted and made visible to all participants.

## APPLICATIONS

We have used fishbowl conversations to help groups grapple with instructional and organizational issues and to work toward shared understandings and agreements. We have also used fishbowl conversations to model how a conversational process can safely and constructively surface diverse opinions and ideas to inform a range of instructional, organizational and leadership topics.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

### Internet

For more information about Fishbowl and its many applications, visit [www.nwlink.com/~donclark/hrd/learning/fishbowls.html](http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/hrd/learning/fishbowls.html)