

# FISHBOWL

The art of active listening



## What it is

- The Fishbowl is a tool for facilitating dialogue between experts in a way that exposes others to their knowledge while expanding the collective understanding of a subject.
- Knowledgeable people (the fish) sit in circle to discuss a series of directional questions, surrounded by a larger group of observers in an outer circle (the bowl).
- The inner circle is the stage for speaking and contributing. Those in the outer circle must listen actively and move into the role of fish when they wish to participate in the conversation.



## 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.



## How it is applied

1. Identify two to three experts (or participants who have experience) on the issue to be discussed.
2. Brief the experts/participants on the Fishbowl process.
3. Set up a small circle of chairs surrounded by a larger circle, with three or four additional chairs to facilitate mobility.
4. Open the session with the experts in the centre circle.

5. Explain the process, the objectives and the issue that will be discussed.
6. Opt for one of the two types of Fishbowl: open or closed.
  - An *open fishbowl* contains several empty chairs in the centre circle from the outset. Any member of the audience can join the discussion by occupying an empty chair at any time. A “fish” must voluntarily leave the centre circle to free a chair. The discussion continues with participants frequently entering and leaving the Fishbowl. Participants can have more than one opportunity to move into the inner circle.
  - In a *closed fishbowl*, the facilitator splits the participants into two groups (or more as needed) and assigns the role of speakers to one group, and the role of observers to the other. The initial participants in the inner circle speak for some time about the chosen subject. When time runs out (or when no new points are added to the discussion), the first group of participants leaves the fishbowl and a new group from the audience enters. The new group continues discussing the issue. This may continue until all audience members have spent some time in the fishbowl. The closed fishbowl approach is only appropriate when all participants have at least some level of knowledge about the subject.
7. The outer circle must always observe silently, and this principle should be enforced diligently by the facilitator. Participants in the outer circle can prepare questions and comments so that they are ready to move into the inner circle.
8. Once the topics or the time allocated have been covered, the facilitator should summarize the discussion and open the floor for a debriefing, after removing the inner circle of chairs. During the

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debriefing, review key points, interesting comments and the group's feelings regarding particular issues. Participants must be allowed to develop their own conclusions and express themselves freely.

9. Providing the participants with an overview document of the lessons learned and a list of key resources can be helpful after the exercise has ended.

## How to adapt it

Divide the participants into two groups. Each group prepares two to four questions for the other group. The first group then sits in the inner circle and discusses the questions posed. When everyone in the inner circle has had a chance to speak, change roles so that the second group moves into the inner circle and examines the second set of questions. Observe the fishbowl rules throughout.

A Feedback Fishbowl is a variation which systematizes interaction between the inner and outer circle. The "fish" discuss the issue for 15 minutes, then turn their chairs around to face the outer circle. The outer circle puts their comments and feedback directly to the "fish" in front of them. Then members of the inner circle again face the centre and incorporate the new information into the conversation (while the outer circle remains silent). After the conclusion of this round, the two groups change places, and the process is repeated.

Another variation is to invite people with similar opinions or experiences to sit in a Homogeneous Fishbowl. This arrangement aims to provide the

outer circle with evidence and logic to support a cohesive perspective. This helps to avoid wasteful disagreements at the early stages of the discussion and creates clear concepts for debate.

In contrast to the previous variation, in a Heterogeneous Fishbowl, one person from each divergent viewpoint is invited to sit in the fishbowl. The debate must be carefully managed by the facilitator to ensure that it is productive and examines the full variety of opinions equally.

Multiple Fishbowls are ideal for addressing issues with large groups, or for cases when there are language barriers between participants. Assign a moderator to each fishbowl to provide clear instructions as well as support throughout the exercise. After the first discussions, representatives from each fishbowl form a new central fishbowl, and continue the conversation. According to the composition of the group, decide if the debriefing would be more effective in the large group or back in the original multiple fishbowls. Ensure that each moderator records the reflections so that these can be shared in a resource for all the participants.

Roleplays can be conducted in closed fishbowls. Divide participants into as many groups as the number of roles you have prepared. Each group then prepares a role, although only one of their members will play it. The roleplay is then held in the middle of the room while the other participants observe from outside. After the roleplay, close the session with a debriefing. If the debriefing takes longer than the roleplay, it means the exercise was thought-provoking!

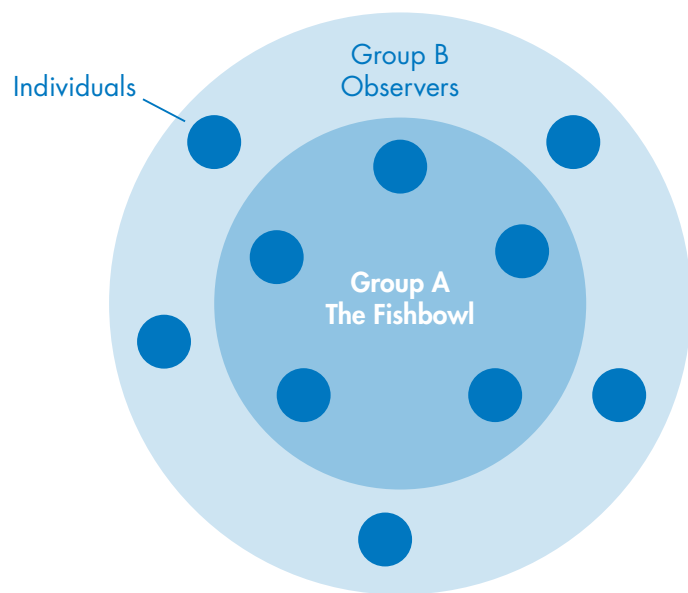
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## What to consider

- The way to request a place in the inner circle should be decided at the outset of the session. Often, simply standing up to indicate interest is enough. A tap on the shoulder may also be helpful, but be wary of cultural taboos. Much depends on the culture and composition of the group.
- More reserved groups may require encouragement to take up a place in the inner circle. This can be helped by well-formulated objectives and introductions to the subject matter.
- You can place limitations in the interest of time or fairness, such as everyone being required to make a minimum (or maximum) number of contributions in the centre circle.
- If the outer circle participants want to make more contributions after the fishbowl session has ended, open a blog, wiki or discussion forum to continue capturing their comments, reflections and questions.
- Consider appointing a note-taker/rapporteur to write down the key points of the fishbowl discussion on a flipchart and present a summary to the group after the fishbowl has ended.



## 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).

## What you will need

- One chair for every participant (plus three or four empty chairs)
- Flip chart and markers for the note-taker.

## OHCHR applications

During the *Share, learn, innovate!* workshops, different groups of OHCHR participants brainstormed on the potential application of the Fishbowl method. Here are some of their ideas for when it is appropriate to apply this tool:

- As an innovative format for coffee briefings
- To facilitate discussion on focused topics during section meetings
- To discuss both substantive and administrative topics during branch or division retreats
- For small expert meetings
- During the Heads of Field Presences meeting.



## Where to learn more

Comprehensive book from Learning Resources and Information: *The Winning Trainer. Winning ways to involve people in learning.* Julius E. Eittington 1996. Gulf Publishing Company, Houston Texas. Pp. 67-70.

Collaboratively written instructions from the KS Toolkit:

<http://www.kstoolkit.org/Fish+Bowl?f=print>

Using the fishbowl for awareness-generating activities: <http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/activities/fishbowl.html>

A general article on the Fishbowl method with additional resources: <http://itcilo.wordpress.com/2009/02/16/facilitate-a-fishbowl-discussion/>

“ I was pleased to skip the boring part of my long PowerPoint presentation and move directly to the much more interesting group discussion. Although I used to be rather sceptical about untraditional presentations and debates, this set-up was highly stimulating for in-depth participant involvement. ”

(A. Rosemberg,

*International Trade Union Confederation: on being an expert in a fishbowl*)

“ The facilitator explained the fishbowl principles and objectives to the group. The inner circle began with experts from three well known international organizations. After a short introduction explaining the roles of the experts, two of them gave a PowerPoint presentation on the subject itself. A participant from China, a government official from Nepal and an enterprise manager from South Africa were the first to join the inner circle. During the one-hour fishbowl discussion 12 people contributed to the inner circle dialogue, demonstrating the low entry-barrier to discussion with experts during a fishbowl. The other participants observed and reflected in silence. ”

(M. Lisa, ITC-ILO training expert)

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