

FISHBOWL

/ Maximizing participation in direct conversations with experts /

WHAT IS THE FISHBOWL?

The fishbowl is a method to organize presentations and group discussions that offers the benefits of small group discussions – most notably, a spontaneous, conversational approach to discussing issues – within large group settings. This is done by arranging the room so that the speakers are seated in the centre of the room with other participants sitting around them in a circle watching their conversation ‘in the fishbowl.’

Best used in conferences, workshops and town hall-type meetings, the Fishbowl focuses the entire group’s attention on a discussion among 3 - 6 people. Other people present become observers, active listeners, and potential participants through a rotation process which reduces the distance between speakers and audience. The Fishbowl is especially useful as an engaging alternative to PowerPoint presentations or panel discussions, as a way to allow direct conversations with experts, as a means of providing noteworthy participants with a prominent platform while still maintaining interactivity, or for discussing controversial issues that people may feel strongly about. This method requires a facilitator. It is versatile and can be adapted easily (see the multiple Variations below).

REQUIREMENTS:

- *Facilitator*
- *12 - 30 people (or more: see ‘Variations’ below)*
- *Open space or large room with enough space for participants to move around easily*
- *Chairs (arranged as per illustration below)*
- *Microphone(s) (optional)*
- *45 - 90 minutes*
- *Optional: Rapporteur*



WHEN AND WHY TO USE

The fishbowl method can be used to:

▲ **Foster dynamic group interactions and active participation.** In large group settings, it is often challenging to engage all participants. With the Fishbowl, one group of participants discusses an issue, while the other group observes the discussion. There is an evolving conversation as participants move in and out of the Fishbowl to share what they know or ask questions. The element of change helps keep participants on their toes wondering who will come in next, and what they will say, and keeps energy levels up.

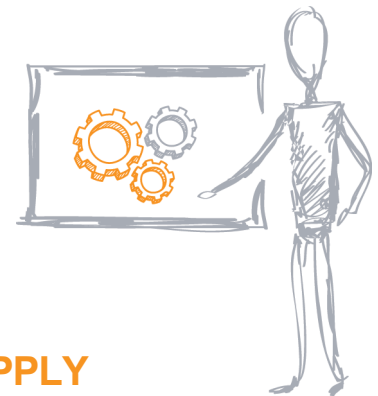
▲ **Discuss or introduce controversial topics.** Start the Fishbowl discussion with 3 - 6 people who have diverse views, yet also understand the topic and its pros and cons broadly. The observers will be able to see various facets and viewpoints emerge through the discussion, which facilitates a more objective exploration of the topic and its related issues.

▲ **Showcase expert panel discussions.** In this case, the Fishbowl begins with a panel discussion among experts or other noteworthy participants, such as high officials or leaders of organizations. The discussion is led by the facilitator. As the panel discusses the issue at hand, observers participate by active listening. An empty chair is placed in the Fishbowl so

that any observer can come forward and participate by asking a question or contributing an idea. This contributes to making the panel discussion more relevant and engaging than a panel discussion in the standard format.

▲ **Avoid PowerPoint presentations.** When there are 3 - 4 presenters who have been invited to share their knowledge on the same theme, the Fishbowl method can provide a breath of fresh air for the audience. Lengthy PowerPoint presentations scheduled back-to-back can easily diminish attention in a workshop, whereas the Fishbowl can set a more informal and dynamic pace and keep interest up. (Note that the Fishbowl replaces slides with conversation – often a trade-off worth making.)

The Fishbowl is similar to the Expert Interview. Key differences include that the physical setup for the Fishbowl has the conversation right in the middle of the room, surrounded on all sides by the audience, and the Fishbowl allows anyone to step into or out of the conversation – hence even the experts may be replaced by participants, should the occasion demand. The net effect, in the Fishbowl, is a greater sense of an intimate and spontaneous conversation.



HOW TO APPLY

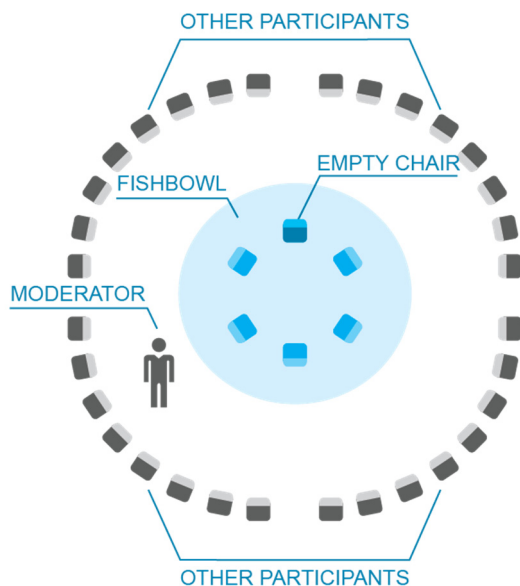
Prepare in advance

1. Choose an engaging topic before convening the Fishbowl. The best topics are compelling for the audience and broad enough to have conversations about.

2. Identify 3 - 6 experts or noteworthy participants who can initiate the Fishbowl conversation, and brief them on the Fishbowl process. This group will begin in the inner circle; all other participants will start in the larger group of observers/ active listeners. You may do the selection and briefing as part of advance planning, or at the event itself.

Set up the room

3. Arrange chairs in a circle for the small group (see illustration), making sure to include one or two empty chairs, i.e. if there are five people in the small group, six or seven chairs are needed in the small group circle. Add an outer circle of chairs around the small group for the remaining participants, leaving enough space for movement. For best results, the facilitator should remain standing in order to be clearly seen by all, and to move around the room to remind participants of the “rules” or encourage them to join or leave the inner circle.



When you are ready to start

4. Seat the participants (inner and outer circles) and introduce the session. Describe the topic for discussion and provide an overview of the process. If notes of the session are required, ensure the rapporteur is ready.

5. Invite the Fishbowl participants to begin the discussion. You may wish to ask a specific person in the Fishbowl to kick things off, or you may invite anyone in the Fishbowl to start. Participants in the outer circle observe the discussion as active listeners.

6. After about 10 - 15 minutes, invite a participant in the outer circle to join the Fishbowl. S/he can occupy an empty chair in the inner circle and ask a question or otherwise join the discussion. Only the inner circle can speak or contribute to the discussion.

7. Continue the discussion and the rotation process. Outer circle participants are free to join in the discussion, provided that someone from the inner circle, including the experts or anyone who has stepped in, frees a chair and joins the observers. One way to do this is to have the person who wants to join to signal in some way to the facilitator, or for them to tap on the shoulder of someone in the inner circle as an indication that they want to take over their chair. If you have a lot of participants wanting to ask questions, you may need to jot down their names so they can join in order.

8. In order to keep the discussion lively and informative, encourage participants to step away from the Fishbowl once they have contributed their thoughts. This frees up room for others to share their views on the topic.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS



▲ Brief the experts in the process so that they know the Fishbowl is for conversations (not for presentations) and so that they are comfortable with leaving the Fishbowl after an initial discussion period of 15 minutes. As people move in and out of the Fishbowl, there is a dynamic flow of ideas which makes the discussion richer.

▲ Consider setting a time limit for any speaker in the Fishbowl, e.g. 3 minutes – especially if you are addressing a controversial or sensitive topic.

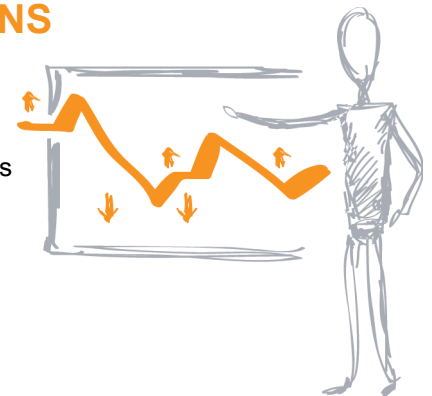
▲ To maintain focus and clarity, ensure all conversation in the room takes place only in the Fishbowl. Any input from someone in the outer circle can only be contributed if they move to an empty chair in the inner circle.

▲ To encourage the group to focus on the discussions, you may wish to have the rapporteur record the key points on a flipchart visible to everyone. The flipchart can be transcribed afterwards, if needed.

▲ If the Fishbowl tool is new for most of your participants, or if your meeting culture tends towards presentations rather than conversation, then consider privately asking 1-2 participants – ideally, team leaders – to prepare a question or two before the meeting. At the Fishbowl, they should be among the first to join the inner circle and ask their questions. This will help get the flow of conversation going.

VARIATIONS

There are several variations to the Fishbowl and these can easily be further adapted.



▲ **More empty chairs:** In larger groups, i.e. 30 or more participants, always begin the Fishbowl discussion with two empty chairs in place of one. This allows for quicker rotation of participants in and out of the Fishbowl.

▲ **Rotating and non-rotating participants:** If you are inviting in external experts, you might wish to keep them in the inner circle continuously while having a couple of chairs set aside for rotating participants. Just be sure to be clear to the invited experts and other participants who can rotate and who will remain in the inner circle throughout.

▲ **Closed Fishbowl:** This works best with smaller groups. Begin by dividing participants into two groups of equal size. One group becomes the Fishbowl, and the other becomes the outer circle. Participants in the Fishbowl are given an allotted time for discussion. Then the groups swap roles: The entire inner circle moves back to take the place of the observers, while the former observers move in to the Fishbowl to begin their discussion.

▲ **Heterogeneous Fishbowl:** Given a topic having multiple distinct viewpoints, invite one person from each main viewpoint to sit in the Fishbowl. The ensuing discussions will be varied and will cover many facets of the topic.

▲ **Homogeneous Fishbowl:** People who share similar opinions, experiences, culture, etc. are invited to sit in the Fishbowl and start their discussions on a specific topic. In the next round, representatives of a different viewpoint move to the fishbowl while the earlier group moves back to become observers. This is a great way to get people to appreciate diversity and encourage future dialogue among people with opposing views, contrasting experiences or different cultures.

▲ **Convening Cases:** This approach works best for learning among a small group of panel members (2 - 3) and a small audience. Designate panel members ahead of time and have each write up a brief (1 - 2 page) summary of a case: a challenge they recently faced, or a problem they want input on, and their actions, whether already taken or planned. The day before the event, panel members share their papers with each other for reading. At the event, each member has 5 minutes to present their case. For the next 15 - 20 minutes, the other panel members give their opinion on the case based on the written summary and presentation; crucially, the author of the case may not speak during this time. Members of the audience take turns to sit

at the empty chair with the panel and give brief comments. The case is concluded with 5 minutes for the author to respond to the comments. The process is repeated for each panel member. The value of this approach comes from the panel members' change in perspective, compelled by the fact that they cannot speak while others comment on their case, and from the value of fresh perspectives on the issues presented.



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