

FISHBOWL CONVERSATION

What is a Fishbowl Conversation?

A useful technique for a large number of people (potentially up to 50) to have an intimate and dynamic conversation about a topic or issue that the group needs to discuss.

Why use the Fishbowl Conversation?

Fishbowl Conversations are used to discuss issues with a large group, making no distinction between speakers and audience. This places all participants at an equal level, removing hierarchy in the conversation, and encouraging varied and dynamic discussion, rather than domination by one person or group. The Fishbowl Conversation also gives a specific focus or agenda to a topic needing to be discussed.

When and how would you carry out a Fishbowl Conversation?

By way of set up, you need to put *five* chairs in a cluster in the middle of a room, and then arrange all the remaining chairs in concentric circles around that central cluster. The conversation takes place in the central cluster only.

The rules for the session are simple:

- One of the five chairs *must* remain empty.
- Only someone in one of the five chairs may speak.
- Anyone from the wider group may sit down in the empty chair when they have something to contribute *but...*
- Conversation stops when all five chairs are occupied and will only start again when one person leaves the central cluster and a fifth chair is again empty

You will need some *light* facilitation if people don't get the rules immediately. You must have a clearly defined topic or people will join the cluster to air views, not to take part in a discussion. A clearly defined topic about which there are clearly conflicting views is a good one. The fishbowl will usually last about an hour.

What to do after the Fishbowl Conversation has been completed?

You could record proceedings on video or voice recorder but it may be preferable for a notetaker just to capture important points/outcomes and circulate these after the session. A fishbowl conversation should end with an agreement about the documented outputs, e.g. how widely should they be shared? Is there anything which is confidential? Any learning about the fishbowl process, questions, and approach should be noted, and shared with others in order to develop and improve this tool.

FISHBOWL CONVERSATION: CHECKLIST FOR FACILITATOR

1) A brief explanation/description of the topic being discussed

- Summarise the topic and provide some wider context to the attendees at the start of the Fishbowl Conversation to focus attention

2) Explain the planned objectives and outcomes of the conversation

- This covers the area/subject/project/activity for review. Clarity about the purpose of the fishbowl will help keep conversations on track
- If you are concerned that conversations may go off-track, then having a ‘parking-lot’ flipchart is a good idea. These wider points can then be recognised (not dismissed) and recorded for future discussion
- The facilitator may ask the project/team lead to start by answering a question about the issue, to set the scene
- The facilitator may wish to get the conversation flowing by asking for contributions based on attendees birthday months, i.e. those born in January answer first. This approach avoids periods of silence, domination by confident speakers, or any organisational hierarchy from those attending

FISHBOWL CONVERSATION TEMPLATE

Date:

Attendees:

1	Details of the conversation – arranged topic	
2	Detail of the conversation – additional topics raised	
3	What action needs to be taken as a result of this conversation(s)?	