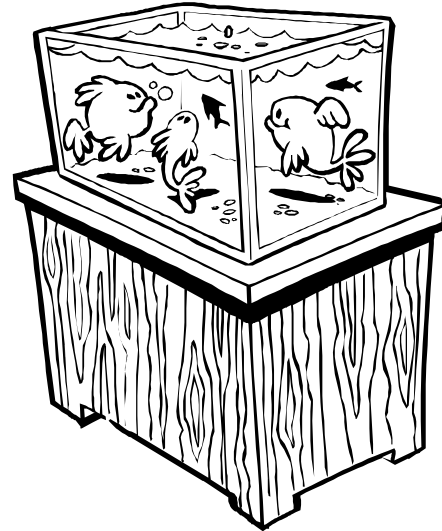


Fishbowl Exercise Framework

Background: A Fishbowl is a dynamic group involvement exercise framework that is used for a wide variety of situations. Fishbowl exercises are used to place a small group in a situation while another group observes the first. Fishbowls are used by a diverse group of professionals including educators, trainers, consultants, facilitators and psychologists for a multitude of reasons.

The most common configuration is to have an "inner ring," known as Group A, which is the discussion or role play group, surrounded by an "outer ring," known as Group B, which is the observation group. Just as we can observe fish from all angles of the fishbowl, the "outer ring" observes the discussion, interaction and results of the "inner ring".

The fishbowl will normally have 4 to 8 participants in group A, and several observers in group B. This tends to get the discussions going better as people are normally somewhat self-conscious about being observed. As participants get used to each other, the size of the group can be reduced. If the anxiety of being observed is

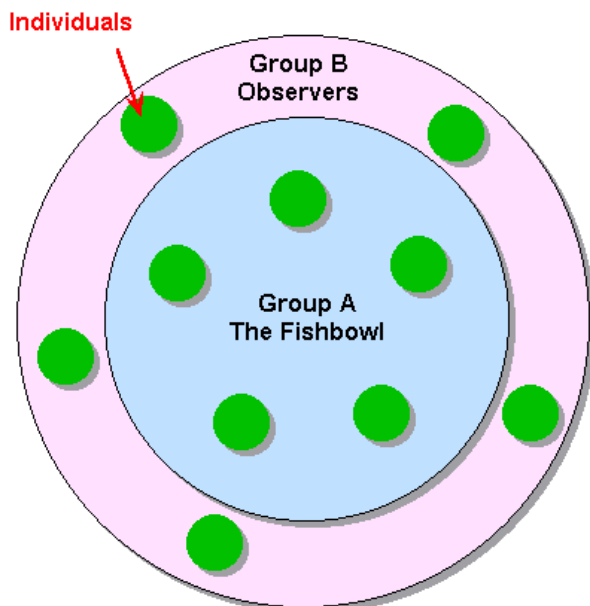


too great to do the activity, have them discuss it. The anxiety should dwindle once it comes out in the open. They will get a lot more out of the activity if they are not inhibited in the discussion. The most you should ever have in a group is 20 (10 participants and 10 observers). When a group gets too large some of the participants will tend to "hide" or not contribute.

In the fishbowl process Group A is given an assignment, such as a discussion or exercise to perform within a set period of time, while group B silently observes. Occasionally the two groups can swap positions doing the exercise a second time with Group B doing the exercise and Group A observing.

Other alternative configurations can include:

Place one or two empty chairs in the inner-circle with Group A. A person from the outer-circle, Group B, may sit in it at any time and interject her or his viewpoint or comment for 1 minute (or a given time period.)



Every 3 or 5 minutes, a member of the outer-circle, Group B, replaces someone in the inner-circle, Group A. This continues until everyone has had a chance to participate and observe.

Group B observes the process, the content, or both depending on the desired outcome. In the Facilitator Feedback diagram, shown below, the participants mainly observe the process as the desired outcome is to provide useful feedback to a practicing facilitator. A facilitator may use a fishbowl exercise with the observers concentrating on the content of a discussion so that a process or procedure might be improved.

After the activity, Group B provides feedback to Group A. This can be done several ways; group to group, in pairs, or individually. The feedback, however, is not designed to be one way.

The most important part of any fishbowl planning is to ensure the facilitator has some pre-planned questions to ask the participants once they are assembled back into a large group. This is where the real reflection often occurs.

Sometimes the questions may be revealed before the exercise, so observers will look for specific things. For example, in a discussion on leadership questions might be:

- Was there one leader or did leadership shift?
- If one leader, how did the leader emerge? Was there a struggle for leadership? Did those who 'lost' still participate?
- What factors determined who was leader? Was it good ideas? Charisma?

Reading the group? Good synthesis? A loud voice?

- If leadership shifted, when did it shift? What was going on when it shifted? What caused it to shift?
- Did the leader provide the solution or the process?

Application: Self-observation is a necessity for developing a group. So a Facilitator may use the fishbowl when they are performing a developing task with the team or group. This framework provides a wonderful way for the group to observe its task and maintenance behaviors while it addresses important issues.

When training facilitators the Facilitation Fishbowl is used to provide valuable feedback by trainers and other facilitators.

Resources:

<http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/hrd/learning/fishbowls.html>

