

METHOD FISH BOWL



Area of CoP Activity: Creating Knowledge
Learning and Developing Practice

CoP Lifecycle Phase: Inquire
Grow
Sustain

CoP Success Factor: Community Interaction
Learning
Leadership
Sharing Best Practice
Illustrating Results and Performance

EIGE Step: Step 2: Analysing and Assessing the State-of-Play
Step 4: Implementing a GEP
Step 5: Monitoring Progress and Evaluating a GEP

Group Size: Unlimited

Difficulty Level:

Time Needed:

Facilitator Preparation:

Participant Preparation:

Description: Fish Bowl method is a dynamic alternative to classic discussion formats such as panel discussions as everyone can participate rather than only an exclusive group of people. It includes small rounds of talks in major events and brings vitality as well as spontaneity in conventional activity and event formats.

More Information: www.partizipation.at/fishbowl-en.html
www.debonogroup.com/six_thinking_hats.php

FISH BOWL¹

Short description

Fish Bowl method is a dynamic alternative to classic discussion formats such as panel discussions. In this activity, everyone can participate rather than only an exclusive group of people. It includes small talking rounds in major events and brings vitality as well as spontaneity into conventional activity and event formats.

When to use

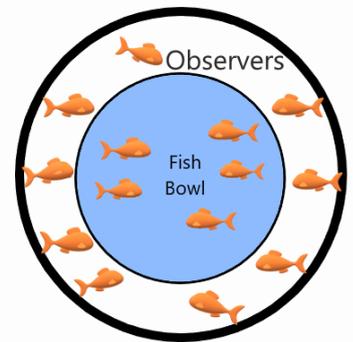
Fish Bowl is a helpful and supportive method for the presentation of group results and to dispute questions and provocations, as well as open discussion processes. Partial interests can be represented not only in small but also in large groups. Everyone can participate and include their arguments, questions and suggestions. It is also a good alternative to a standard plenary discussion when working with a large group.

How to

A: Brief explanation

Fish Bowl consists of two circles of chairs: The inner circle consists of 4 to 6 people (depending on the overall size of the group) and the outer circle contains the observers. Sometimes, if the group is large there need to be more outer circles around the inner circle of 4-6 people. Usually there should be more observers than the participants in the “fish bowl” One chair in the inner circle remains free and everyone from the outer circle can join if they want to actively engage in the discussion. If someone of the inner circle doesn’t want to participate anymore, one is free to leave the inner circle at any time.

Only people in the inner circle can talk whereas the rest of the group listens and can participate by moving into the inner circle. One person should moderate this session, to keep it structured and to support the flow of the discussion. One person should also take minutes of the discussion to write a summary in the end. Depending on the group size it might be helpful to have several people taking notes so that nothing gets lost.



B: Detailed step-by-step guide

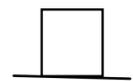
- If the issue is complex, distribute the central question(s) to the participants before the event and let them prepare.
- Participants sit in a small circle of chairs (in the “fish bowl”) in the middle of one or several larger circle(s) of chairs (depending on the group size) with the observers. Only the “fish in the bowl” are allowed to speak in the form of a discussion. People from the outer circle listen but can join the inner circle at any time to take over an active part of the discussion.
- There are two variants here: 1) a chair is kept free for such cases, or 2) one stands behind a chair and signals to those in the inner circle that one person has to free their place, which leads to a continuous change without disturbing the flow of discussion. This dynamic prevents a stagnation of the discussion.
- The facilitator moderates the discussion and if they feel necessary or fruitful, they can guide the flow of the discussion by suggesting also their own point of view. However, we would recommend that the facilitator stays outside both circles to keep the circle dynamics stable.
- Fish Bowl does not have a specific ending point. It might help to define a timeframe (e.g. 45 minutes for discussion). Fish Bowl can end by asking for feedback from the outer circle on what has been discussed in the inner circle (this can be done verbally or by using a feedback form).
- It is also helpful if someone keeps the minutes of the discussion in order to wrap this method up with a short summary. This can be then circulated to the participants.

Additional ideas / information

- The question for discussion should be so open that it can lead in different directions. It might be helpful to phrase the topic as a provocation or provocative statement (causing a strong reaction) in order to start the discussion.

¹ Adapted from Participation & Sustainable Development in Europe, <https://www.partizipation.at/fishbowl-en.html>.

- You could send your central question/focus to the participants beforehand to allow them to think of different arguments and ideas, but this is not necessary.
- The discussion can be followed by a feedback round. With the help of a questionnaire or freely in the round, feedback on the course and the results of the discussion can now be presented.
- To make the Fish Bowl even more creative it could be implemented in the form of a theatre play and to assign each seat a different role to include various perspectives. The role of the seat stays the same even when someone else is taking the seat. This person then needs to adapt this role / position. Role examples: The Optimist, The Pessimist, The Devil's Advocate, The Emotion, The Reason, The Fact, etc.
- You could also get inspiration from Edward De Bono's Six Thinking Hats². You will then need to have a big enough group to have 6 chairs (hats) and enough observers to create a good rotation of ideas:



The White Hat calls for information known or needed. "The facts, just the facts."



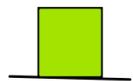
The Yellow Hat symbolises brightness and optimism. Under this hat you explore the positives and probe for value and benefit.



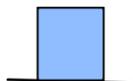
The Black Hat is judgment - the devil's advocate or why something may not work. Spot the difficulties and dangers; where things might go wrong. Probably the most powerful and useful of the Hats, but can be a problem if overused.



The Red Hat signifies feelings, hunches and intuition. When using this hat you can express emotions and feelings and share fears, likes, dislikes, loves, and hates.



The Green Hat focuses on creativity, the possibilities, alternatives, and new ideas. It's an opportunity to express new concepts and new perceptions.



The Blue Hat is used to manage the thinking process. It's the control mechanism that ensures the Six Thinking Hats® guidelines are observed.

To adapt the Fish Bowl to online communication, ask the participants to have a post-it note ready with the word "fishbowl" written on it, or an image of fish. Invite 3-5 volunteers to "join" the fishbowl, while the rest of the participants stay silent and listen as the observers. The participants within the fishbowl stick their post-its somewhere visible. Make sure that everyone within the fishbowl contributes to the discussion, and when the discussion begins to die down, invite one of the observers to join the fishbowl, and one volunteer to leave the fishbowl. The person who joins needs to stick their post-it note somewhere visible to the rest now to indicate that they are within the fishbowl. The person who leaves the fishbowl needs to remove his or hers post-it.

For the success of this activity, it is crucial that it is clear who is allowed to speak and who is not. Instead of using post-its, you can always think about another way to define and make visible the speakers. The exchange of people in the inner circle of the bowl (the speakers) may not happen as spontaneously as face-to-face, however, facilitated well, it can prove to be a productive way to encourage the participants to speak. This activity becomes more effective with practice.

- To use the Fish Bowl activity virtually, an online meeting space is needed (like Zoom, Zoho meeting, Vispa, Whereby, GoToMeeting, BigBlueButton, Slack, Braincert or Samepage). Depending on the number of participants not every application can be used depending on their limitations. Some web-based applications, such as Zoho Meeting, have a "raise-hand" function that might be helpful for participants to signalise their interest in joining the inner circle.



² http://www.debonogroup.com/six_thinking_hats.php

REFERENCES

Participation and Sustainable Development in Europe. 2019. Available from: <https://www.partizipation.at/en.html>.