

Building Dynamic Groups



Fish Bowl

Basic Principles

This is a type of group discussion that can be utilized when there are two distinct groups. Each group has an opportunity to discuss the issue while the other group observes, much like looking at the fish in a fish bowl. The facilitator is responsible for encouraging discussion during the small group discussion, keeping the discussion only among the inner circle, and then drawing out individual and group reactions during the combined discussion later. The goal of this technique is for one group to experience the others' discussion, but is not discussed until the group discussion time. This technique can be utilized to create "buy-in" by two opposing sides.

Key Principles

Chairs are positioned into two circles – an inner circle facing each other and an outer circle surrounding the inner circle. One group takes their position in the inner set of chairs; the other group takes their position in the outer circle. The facilitator initiates a discussion (see Group Discussion) of the issue among members of the inner circle. Members of the outer circle are able to view the discussion but are asked not to discuss anything among themselves. The inner circle discussion is limited to a set time (20 minutes). At the end of the designated time, the groups trade places and the same format is followed for the second group.

After completing the second discussion, the inner chairs are added to the outer circle so that both groups are seated in one circle. The facilitator initiates a discussion between the two groups about their observations of the other group. The facilitator encourages discovery of "the other group's" point of view. The concept of a "fish bowl" is to observe, discover, and analyze another group's thought process. The combined group discussion should focus on bringing out discoveries about the other group. The facilitator must focus the discussion on facts rather than presumptions. This technique can be used in problem solving by assisting groups to gather insight about another group. Fish bowl discussion can be used as a consensus building technique in a planning or problem-solving process.

Reference: Many sources are available for this technique.