

Fishbowl Dialogue

ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION Participants discuss an issue in a role-play format to represent the different perspectives of a variety of stakeholders. Chairs are placed in a circle with one empty chair and multiple concentric circles for those listening to the discussion. The people who are listening can join the discussion by coming up to sit in the empty chair and bring in the view of a stakeholder that isn't already being represented.

PURPOSE To see an issue from multiple perspectives; to understand the mental models that drive the behaviors of diverse stakeholders.

INTENDED OUTCOMES Participants will gain a deeper understanding of mental models and their impact on structures and behavior patterns; they will increase their capacity to see an issue from multiple viewpoints

SKILLS DEVELOPED Empathy; critical reflection; systems thinking

TOTAL TIME 1 hour, 15 minutes

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS At least 12

MATERIALS Chairs in concentric circles

SETTING Open space

INTRODUCTORY FRAME

One of the habits of systems thinkers is the ability to change perspectives and take in all the different viewpoints of a situation. This helps us to understand the different concerns and beliefs that generate and uphold structures and patterns. We need to be able to identify all of the different stakeholders who are concerned with or involved with an issue and understand their perspective so that we can come up with a solution that addresses these concerns and ultimately benefits everyone.

We will choose five different stakeholders to represent and ask for a volunteer to become that character – the person speaking for them will wear a sign around their neck. We are going to use a structure called a “fishbowl”, which is a technique for discussing topics in large groups.

Four to five chairs are arranged in an inner circle. This is the fishbowl. The remaining chairs are arranged in concentric circles outside the fishbowl. Our fishbowl will be filled by the different stakeholder positions, while the rest of the group sit on the chairs outside the fishbowl. In an open fishbowl, one chair is left empty – this can be filled by any member of the audience who

would like to come up and add their thoughts, questions or the perspective of a different stakeholder. The moderator introduces the topic and the participants start discussing the topic. The audience outside the fishbowl listen in on the discussion. The discussion continues with participants frequently entering and leaving the fishbowl.

Tip: It is useful for a co-facilitator to be attuned to the listeners who want to enter into the dialogue and communicate this information with the moderator.

PROCESS

Set up the chairs in the fishbowl structure.

- As a group, choose an event or situation to explore more deeply.
- Ask the group to choose five specific stakeholders, (Optional: you can add characters/perspectives that will be impacted but do not have a “voice”, such as a Future Being and a Nature Being to participate in the role-play) and seven volunteers who will begin to represent these characters.
- Some other stakeholders might be: non-profit conservationist, local business person, corporate industry executive, activist, government official, fisher person, farmer, community member, scientist, student, etc. Ask them to try to authentically represent the stakeholder as accurately as possible, without villainizing or caricaturizing them.

Note: This activity can be used with actual stakeholders to facilitate a community dialogue, rather than role-playing different perspectives. It might also be useful in a community dialogue setting to establish group agreements or ground rules for the conversation, so that the facilitator can keep the group focused and productive, especially if it is a contentious issue.

- The facilitator should moderate the discussion, working to be inclusive, draw out the different perspectives and make sure that everyone gets a chance to speak.
- Ask each participant to introduce themselves and make an opening statement and share their perspective and main concerns about the issue. In the course of the conversation, the facilitator should try to draw out the following:
 - ❖ What are the values, concerns and underlying beliefs of each stakeholder about the issue?
 - ❖ What is their opinion about the systems and structures in place? Who benefits? Who is impacted? Who decides?
 - ❖ What recommendations do they have for solutions that will benefit all or the majority of stakeholders?
- When there are 10 minutes left, can ask for a closing statement and a commitment they can make to move the process forward.
- Thank everyone for their participation.

REFLECTION

- How can our advocacy goals take into account the needs and concerns of all stakeholders?

Source: modified from Teaching with Primary Sources Program at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville