



Methods Toolkit

Friday Roundtable Discussions Question Process & Fishbowl Conversation

Objectives and Context

This method is used to engage large groups in a fully participative conversation. Combining elements of appreciative inquiry and a fishbowl discussion the method outlined here is designed to engage a group in a listening exercise followed by a process of discussion and summarizing. The fishbowl report-out conversation is again designed to allow anyone to speak up and summarize what they have heard and what they find most important or compelling. While the process is structured around some initial questions relevant to the group and the conference context, the conversation is allowed to evolve in the directions most relevant and important to the participants. Notes taken during the questioning/listening and summarizing steps will be captured and shared as a part of the conference documentation.

Number of Participants

Any number of participants from 20 to 200+. One facilitator can lead any size group in a conference setting.

Timing

Depends on the degree to which the group seeks to come to a conclusion or consensus on the issues discussed. 2 hours is a comfortable amount of time for the questioning/listening, discussion and report out steps used here. The process could be consolidated to 90 minutes for groups <100 and might be extended to 3 hours for larger groups where summarizing and concluding was important.

Materials

Colored question sheets are provided for each of the four groups – one page per person where they can take notes as they listen to others' answers. Flip charts and pens or a poster board and Post-it Notes can be provided at the discussion tables as groups summarize themes that emerge.

It is helpful to have an overhead projector when introducing the topics, questions and process. This can also be accommodated with handouts. It is helpful to have a bell to indicate time to rotate groups.

Pre-Work

Selection of a topic and creation of four initial questions. In our process the tenor of the four initial questions was informed by the four Innovation Styles^{1®}: visioning, exploring, experimenting and modifying. While a topic and questions were prepared ahead of time, we left open the possibility for adjustment and re-direction based on conversations and “buzz” that we heard during the first two days of the conference and on the online Innovation Café.

Room Layout / Set-up

The group needs to be divided into four sub-groups, most easily accomplished with tables or chairs arranged in the four quadrants of a room. Tables (preferably round) are not needed though can easily be accommodated. Some kind of color identification with signage, cards or table cloths helps distinguish the different groups. It is helpful if the four question sheets are similarly color-coded. It is helpful if chairs can readily be moved to accommodate changing dyads during the initial questioning/listening process. Sub-groups will then reconvene to discuss what they have heard. For a group of 80 people there would be four groups of two tables/clusters each with 10 people ($4 \times 2 \times 10 = 80$).

¹ Innovation Syles[®] is a registered trademark of Global Creativity Corporation

The fishbowl report out process requires a central focus with, in our case, five bar stool chairs. There needs to be sufficient space for an interchange of people coming from the larger group to the center. Microphones for each chair help ensure that each person is heard.

Instructions

Step 1: Organize the Group

5 minutes

As people come into the room they are organized in to four groups in equal numbers. If you don't know the precise numbers of people, handing out an ordered set of colored question sheets as people come in the room (1, 2, 3, 4, 1, 2, 3, 4, etc.) helps keeps the groups even and also helps mix the participants with people that they may not know. People sit in groups of chairs or at tables according to their color/question assignment.

Step 2: Introduce the Topic and Process

5-10 minutes

The facilitator sets the stage for the discussion by introducing the topic and the four questions to be explored. The facilitator briefly explains the questioning process and how the rounds of questioning/listening will proceed.

Step 3: Questioning and Listening Process

40 minutes

There are three rounds of questioning and listening. Two groups are matched together and participants form dyads. (If there is an extra person they can join to others to form a triad.) Each person in turn asks their question, listens with attention but mostly without comment, and takes notes. Each person is given 5 minutes to answer – this can sometimes seem longer than is comfortable but the intention is to continue to sit with the question and see what thoughts emerge rather than engage in a back and forth. After 10 minutes the facilitator indicates it is time to switch around and a different set of groups are paired.

Round 1: Groups 1 and 2; Groups 3 and 4

Round 2: Groups 1 and 3; Groups 2 and 4

Round 3: Groups 1 and 4; Groups 2 and 3

Step 4: Regrouping

20 minutes

Participants return to their four groups. In clusters of 8-10 people they share what they have heard in answer to their question and look for themes and contrasts. This is mainly a dialogue but groups are encouraged to create a flip chart or poster summarizing what they have heard.

Step 5: Fishbowl Conversation

up to 40 minutes

The whole group comes back together for a single conversation. Five chairs are arranged in the center. Four participants are invited to come to the center and discuss the key messages that they have heard during the previous conversations and/or something in particular that they are taking away from the discussion. A typical contribution might start with *"What struck me from our conversation was..."* and end with *"What I am taking away from this is..."*

Anyone can come up to participate in the fishbowl and all are encouraged to do so. One of the five chairs always remains empty, a place to welcome the next participant. As a fifth person joins the group one of the other four voluntarily leaves, opening up a spare chair once again.

The fishbowl conversation can begin with one of the four groups/questions and slowly move through the other groups or it can be an open forum for conversation informed by the preceding process.

Step 6: Conclusion

5 minutes

As the fishbowl naturally winds the facilitator brings the conversation to a conclusion. Participants are asked to leave their notes behind in order that we can summarize the discussions as part of the conference proceedings. The intention is that the group leaves the room in a mood of satisfaction and reflection.