

March 2009

Spurring Dynamic Dialogue through Fishbowl: Learning from and in Practice

IN THIS PRACTICE NOTE...

Facilitators of events and convenings that feature a panel of accomplished individuals are keen on spurring a dynamic conversation among the discussants that does not exclude the rest of the participants. Fishbowl offers a solution to this conundrum by beginning with an “inner circle” of dialogue, then encouraging the contributions of all participants as the conversation unfolds.

We have learned from our work that a dynamic dialogue is more likely when it is grounded in participants’ experience. Participants are more likely to learn from discussants (because they can relate to the topic from experience and directly apply what is learned to their work). They are also more likely to contribute to the conversation (because they have experienced the issue first hand).

This Practice Note shares lessons learned from using fishbowl about the experience of leading large scale change initiatives.

The Experience ...

Leading large scale change entails orchestrating collaboration among multiple groups; engendering the requisite shifts in organizational cultures; and importantly, reflecting on what is being learned through the change effort, while the work is still in process.

The Research Center for Leadership in Action and [Accenture](#) have developed a quarterly breakfast series for senior- to mid-level managers in both New York City and State government. The primary aim of the series is to engage in off- the- record, and therefore more candid dialogue around the multiple leadership challenges of implementing large-scale change in the highly volatile and visible world of government.

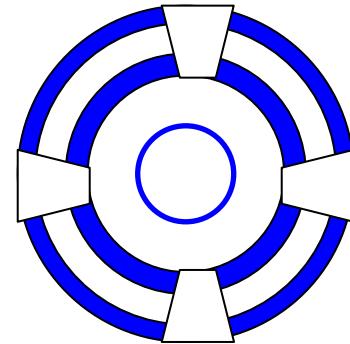
Since 2006 facilitators of the [Leading Large Scale Change](#) (LLSC) series have been using fishbowl to promote learning about how successful complex change initiatives are designed and managed. The physical arrangement of fishbowl contributes to a dynamic dialogue. Yet like any conversational tool, its success depends on the skill and savvy of the facilitator.

RCLA Practice Notes offer practical guidance about sound leadership practices by drawing on leaders' experiences using various techniques, tools, and approaches in dealing with critical social issues. More information is available at www.wagner.nyu.edu/leadership

Fishbowl at a Glance

Fishbowl is a conversational tool that relies both on the facilitator and the physical setup in the room to foster a lively exchange of knowledge based on experience. It is designed to feature a group that has something to offer – much like a panel in a traditional setting – while inviting and welcoming any of the participants to be part of the select group.

A fishbowl is set up by physically arranging the seats in a room in concentric circles. The central circle is the smallest and is initially reserved for the facilitator and invited guests (discussants). The circles subsequently enlarge in size as they extend from the middle circle outwards. It is important to leave aisles that allow for movement from the circles furthest out to the middle circle.



The facilitator spurs the conversation by introducing the guests and asking questions. After a few rounds of conversation, the dialogue is opened to all participants. One variation of fishbowl is that an empty chair is left in the middle circle so that when the conversation is opened to the group anyone from the audience can join the fishbowl in the middle. At that point one (or more) guests have the choice of leaving their seats in the middle circle to allow for other participants to join the middle fishbowl. This rotation can continue until the end of the session.

The Importance of Spatial Design

There are numerous studies on the impact of seating arrangements on people's experience of convenings¹. A circle signifies equality and openness, two critical gestures for invoking reflection and problem solving. We can say that physical space conjures images of knowledge flow which in turn sets expectations and engenders certain actions from participants. In a traditional classroom or panel

setting one or a few people are at the front and the audience is seated in theater style rows. This creates the mental image of one or more 'experts' transmitting knowledge to a receiving group.

Now picture a circle or a set of concentric circles. A circle creates a level playing field where everyone's knowledge and experience are considered valid. The arrangement maximizes visibility of other people, creating a collegial atmosphere. The individuals in the middle circle have more visual access to those around them, prompting them to call on



New York State officials participate in a Leading Large Scale Change fishbowl conversation in Albany, New York.

¹ See www.effectivemeetings.com/design/workplace/meetingseating.asp

and Russell, J.C., Firestone, I. J. and R. Baron (1980) "Seating Arrangement and Social Influence", *Social Psychology Quarterly*, Col. 43, No. 1, 103-109

the experience of audience members who have dealt with the issue at hand. Meanwhile everyone in the outer circles can clearly see the ones in the middle and their interactions, making for a more dynamic event even for those who choose not to speak or join the central circle.

The fishbowl facilitator jumpstarts a conversation with guests in the middle and helps them reflect with, rather than impart knowledge to, others. It is thus the work of the facilitator to make everyone recognize that while those in the center have experience with the topic being discussed, other participants may have interesting knowledge and experiences to contribute.

Practices for a Successful Fishbowl

Preparing for fruitful dialogue

As with any successful event, the facilitator needs to understand and own the event's goals. The goals help shape the questions to be asked, the nature of the conversation and the framing of the event. It is critical to do some research on the guests; not only for the sake of introducing them, but also to make sure that the questions asked are relevant to and are rooted in their experience of doing the work.

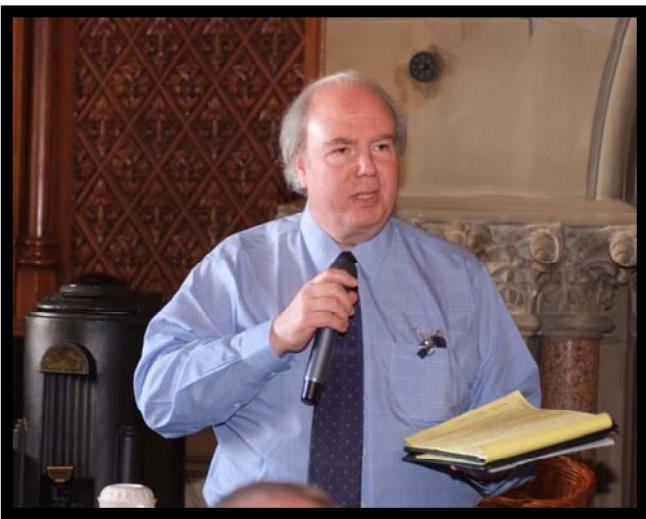
In preparing for the LLSC series, the project manager goes the extra mile and actually meets with the guests who will form the middle circle, resulting in a set of notes for the facilitator. This is to make sure that the insights that emerge from often quiet solitary contemplation are captured to nourish further reflection in the fishbowl. Preparation also helps the facilitator anticipate where there will be a convergence in experience or a difference in perspective.

Preparation also helps in choosing the tone of the conversation. For example, one of the LLSC events addressed the challenge of managing poverty reduction in NYC. After meeting with the Commissioner of the New York City Department of Finance, the project manager was able to hone the issue to be "using multi-agency measures to track and manage poverty reduction initiatives." He learned of Mayor Bloomberg's call to all commissioners to explore how their agencies could contribute to that effort. This set the tone of the conversation to be an inspiration to take action and to learn from those who have already taken active steps to share and coordinate measures for monitoring and managing the City's anti-poverty agenda. The City managers in the middle circle were unusual suspects - not the Commissioner of Homeless Services or of the Human Resources Administration (Social Services) – but instead the Commissioners of the Departments of Health and Mental Hygiene, Consumer Affairs, Youth and Community Development, Finance, and Small Business Services. This signified that the effort was indeed a multi-agency one, and that even those agencies with no direct connection to poverty work were deploying active measures.

Framing the conversation

Part of the success of fishbowl relies on how it is framed. Fishbowl needs to be presented as what it is – a dialogue which is both reflective and vigorous. The method is also designed to encourage reflection as the conversation unfolds, rather than having experts speak from prepared talking points, which leads to a more animated, engaging discussion.

Highlighting dialogue is especially important with participants whose organizations do not practice reflective conversations. In the context of LLSC, government managers often interact through cabinet meetings where participants are expected to plow through an agenda. That is why there is a deliberate effort not to use PowerPoint in the LLSC series to avoid the “talking at participants” syndrome. Facilitators usually open the conversation by asking a thoughtful question to interrupt common ways of communicating through directives or tasks. There are no opening speeches by the discussants.



New York State Director of Operations Dennis Whalen provides closing remarks.

Who does the framing is of equal importance. At a recent LLSC event in Albany on “finding creative solutions to state problems in times of scarce resources,” the introduction was provided by New York State Secretary to the Governor Charles O’Byrne, and closing remarks were provided by New York State Director of Operations Dennis Whalen. Similarly, the Executive Briefing on Poverty Reduction in the City was opened by Mayor Michael Bloomberg and closed by Deputy Mayor Linda Gibbs, the official charged with overall responsibility for implementation. Having leaders from the Governor’s office open the conversation signified the priority of this theme. It also demonstrates the accessibility and openness of managers higher up in the ranks to collective problem-solving.

Asking thoughtful and pertinent questions

Asking the right questions triggers the right kind of conversation. The questions should be aligned with the overall tone of the conversation, be it a celebration of success, a call to action, or learning from experience. Since fishbowl is a form of dialogue, the questions asked need to open rather than close conversation. Questions that allow conversations to flourish include those that tap experiential knowledge, invite varied interpretations and insights and allow for additional remarks from consecutive guests in the circle. Questions from the LLSC series:

- Are highly relevant to what guests and participants are currently grappling with;
- Shed light on the nature and scope of the problem (or opportunity) and the impetus or desire to address it;
- Invite elaboration on what actions have been or are being taken;
- Invoke responses that are pragmatic, rather than abstract or ideological;
- Enable guests to share nuanced insights from experience that are fitting to the complexity and oftentimes novelty of the challenge at hand, i.e., the questions permit responses that may even seem counter-intuitive or paradoxical and are generated from everyday experience of dealing with the issue, not from textbooks;
- Address the multiple facets of the issue – financial, political, interpersonal, and so on; and
- Encourage guests to reflect on what they wish they had known sooner or what action they wish they would have taken or not taken.

These types of questions offer helpful tips to facilitators of fishbowl in general, but are particularly relevant to conversations that have a reflective or problem-solving nature and are grounded in experience.

Promoting experience sharing

A good fishbowl starts with the assumption that “knowledge is all around,” meaning that those in the middle circle have something to share, but so does everyone in the room. To maximize the benefit of a fishbowl, facilitators need to tap both the knowledge of those in the middle circle as well as those in the concentric circles.

The guests in the middle circle are also there to learn from each other and others in the room. So, it is perfectly fine for a conversation to ensue with minimal interjection from the facilitator. At the same time, it is the role of a facilitator to balance the dialogue so that everyone gets to share their experience. This can happen by asking a general question to all the discussants. A facilitator can also tailor a question to one of the discussants and ask the others to comment, but has to make sure that subsequent rounds of questions will start with those who commented last in previous rounds.

The LLSC program manager, NYU Wagner Professor Dennis Smith, describes the fishbowl as an opportunity to “learn from doers,” a complement to learning by doing. The best way to do that is to welcome audience participants to share their experience as well. This can be done traditionally, by reserving a certain amount of time for dialogue among the invited guests before opening it up to everyone in the concentric circles. Another way is to prompt the guests to note audience members they know have experience with the issue or have taken action to address it and to call on them to share their knowledge. Physically setting up the fishbowl by leaving an empty chair in the middle circle that invites audience members to join the discussants in conversation is yet another approach.

KEEP IN MIND

- **Group size:** Fishbowl can be used with a group of any size, permitting that the room setup allows for large groups.
- **Timing:** Fishbowl conversations should address timely issues. They should also be scheduled for convenience. The LLSC series start at 7:30 am so as not to interfere with participants’ busy schedules.
- **Networking:** A fishbowl, like any event, offers a good networking opportunity. So, it is wise to allow some time for this activity to occur informally. The LLSC series, for example, start with breakfast, during which city and state managers have a chance to interact – a chance that may not happen regularly.
- **Closing:** A fishbowl does not necessarily have to be closed by the facilitator. Other invitees may be asked to provide a recap of main points. This is a good chance to reinforce certain points, especially if the conversation is organized to instigate action.

MORE REFERENCES ON FISHBOWL

<http://www.kstoolkit.org/Fish+Bowl>

RELEVANT RCLA RESOURCES

Practice Note: Using World Café in Complex Conversations - October 2008

This Practice Note draws on RCLA's experience using World Café in a Race and Leadership symposium to examine the central roles social identity, particularly race and ethnicity, can play in the work of social change organizations. Facilitators can use this method to enable a variety of rich, in-depth discussions, letting coherent themes emerge without imposing their own interpretations.

<http://www.wagner.nyu.edu/leadership/reports/files/PracticeNoteWorldCafe1008.pdf>

Practice Note: Designing Peer-to-Peer Learning Exchanges - April 2008

Peer-to-peer exchanges enable leaders to learn from each others' practice. Peers often share a deep understanding of each others' common challenges, experiences, and practices, and have developed valuable expertise. This Practice Note discusses some actions that can facilitate opportunities to deepen peer-to-peer learning and address the challenge of applying new learning "back home" in participants' own organizations.

http://www.wagner.nyu.edu/leadership/practice_notes/RCLA%20Practice%20Note_Peer-to-Peer.pdf



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As part of this work, RCLA crafts and runs customized, experiential leadership programs that both expand individuals' skills and strengthen the organizations in which they work. RCLA develops structured convenings where leaders explore the complexity of the challenges they face and together advance their efforts to make change possible. As an academic center, RCLA conducts rigorous social science research, employing a variety of innovative and participatory methodologies to the issues of contemporary leadership.

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