

# Fishbowl Circles for Restorative Practices

The Fishbowl Circle, a powerful tool that fosters active listening, transparency, and collaborative decision-making.

Whether used for conflict resolution, trust-building, or collective brainstorming, Fishbowl Circles create an intentional space where voices are heard, perspectives are considered, and wisdom emerges from the collective. This white paper explores the power of Fishbowl Circles, the different formats available, and best practices for their implementation.

## Fishbowl Circles Overview

Fishbowl Circles are structured discussion formats where a small group engages in a focused conversation while a larger group listens attentively. The process ensures balanced participation, encourages reflective listening, and prevents dominant voices from overtaking the conversation. They are particularly effective in:

- Decision-Making – Ensuring all perspectives are considered before making a choice.
- Conflict Resolution – Allowing structured dialogue without interruption, reducing tension, and fostering understanding.
- Learning & Brainstorming – Harvesting collective wisdom and innovative ideas.
- Building Trust – Increasing transparency in leadership and strengthening community ties.

By providing an organized and intentional framework for dialogue, Fishbowl Circles allow both speakers and listeners to engage in meaningful, transformative conversations.

# How to Set Up a Fishbowl Circle

Creating a successful Fishbowl Circle requires thoughtful preparation and skilled facilitation. Follow these steps to establish an effective and impactful discussion:

## 1. Choose the Topic

Clearly define the purpose of the circle. Is it for decision-making, resolving a conflict, brainstorming ideas, or building community relationships? Ensuring clarity from the outset sets the tone for meaningful participation.

## 2. Arrange Seating

- Place 3–6 chairs in an inner circle for the speaking participants and the facilitator.
- Arrange the outer circle around them for observers.
- Ensure there is a clear boundary between participants and observers while maintaining a sense of inclusivity.

## 3. Select Initial Speakers

The discussion begins with designated participants in the inner circle. Who they are depends on the purpose of the fishbowl. For example, if the fishbowl is being used for conflict resolution, they would be one or more of the parties involved in the incident. If the fishbowl is being used for decision making, they should represent all affected by the decision including the decision makers.

## 4. Facilitate the Process

A facilitator ensures the discussion remains structured and productive by:

- Keeping time.
- Maintaining the flow of conversation.
- Encouraging equal participation.
- Ensuring adherence to agreed-upon discussion norms.

## 5. Debrief & Reflect

Once the inner circle conversation concludes, observers share their insights and reflections. This phase solidifies the learning and action steps from the discussion.

# Fishbowl Circle Formats

## Fishbowl Circle with an Open Chair

This format allows observers to step into the conversation, making the discussion dynamic and participatory.

### Structure:

- One chair in the inner circle remains open.
- Any observer can join the discussion by taking the open chair.
- When a new participant joins, an existing member exits to maintain balance.

### Benefits:

- Encourages broader participation.
- Ensures fresh perspectives and evolving dialogue.
- Keeps the conversation dynamic and inclusive.

### Example Use:

A spiritual community is discussing changes in its engagement strategy. Community members can step into the inner circle to share ideas, making the discussion open and evolving.

## Fishbowl Circle Without an Open Chair

This format keeps the inner circle fixed, with only designated speakers participating.

### Structure:

- The inner circle is fixed – only pre-selected speakers engage in discussion.
- Observers listen without interrupting.
- A structured Q&A follows the discussion, allowing observers to engage afterward.

### Benefits:

- Maintains focus and continuity.
- Ensures an in-depth discussion among selected voices.

- Helps leadership convey ideas transparently while allowing for later feedback.

### **Example Use:**

A leadership team deliberates on policy changes while community members listen. Afterward, the observers are invited to provide written or spoken reflections.

## **Choosing the Right Fishbowl Format**

How do you decide which format is best suited for your needs? Consider the following:

✓ Use an Open Chair when inclusivity, engagement, and dynamic participation are priorities. ✓ Use a Closed Circle when a focused, in-depth discussion is needed without frequent interruptions. ✓ Hybrid Approach – Start with a closed format for structured dialogue, then transition to an open chair model for broader input.

Both formats promote active listening, transparency, and collective wisdom, making them valuable tools for spiritual, organizational, and community leadership.

Fishbowl Circles provide a transformational approach to conversation, one that prioritizes listening, reflection, and community wisdom. By integrating this practice into your spiritual or organizational setting, you cultivate an environment where every voice matters, trust is strengthened, and decisions are made with clarity and collective insight.

Whether you are resolving conflicts, making community decisions, or deepening relationships, Fishbowl Circles can be the bridge that connects people in a more meaningful, equitable, and restorative way.