

Open Space Fishbowl

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“Very enjoyable and as I expected, valuable also. This will bring about a bit of momentum to do-it better in implementing change in our organisation.” (VPSCIN participant)

In Australia, we discovered and tested a great way to apply the Principles and Law of Open Space Technology to a “fishbowl” to create a dynamic, energized conversation with a whole room in a short time frame. The traditional “fishbowl” meeting format with its small circle of chairs in the middle of a larger group and an “empty” chair to engage one participant at a time was transformed by the Principles and Law of Open Space. It became a generator of high energy connection and stimulated discussion of ideas important to the whole group. Andrew proposed the idea of the Open Space Fishbowl stimulated by Larry’s visit to Melbourne in October 2006. Larry added his thoughts and we did the first implementation together. It was great fun!

The VPSCIN Story

A year earlier, Frank Connolly had become the network coordinator for the Victorian Public Services Continuous Improvement Network (VPSCIN), a community of interest around all things related to government improvement. Frank’s vision had led him to working with more interesting and engaging formats. From Dr. Feelgood to Edward De Bono to Laughter sessions, Frank wanted to tap into core issues. That new energy saw consistent lunch time crowds of over 150 people.

Andrew as an Anecdote consultant had worked with Frank. When he learned from Fr. Brian Bainbridge that Larry would be visiting Melbourne and had a preference for a conversation rather than a stock standard ‘presentation’, he thought of Frank’s Continuous Improvement Network and wondered about a fishbowl type process.

Andrew raised the idea with Frank who loved the idea of the fishbowl. Larry did also, but was concerned most about the theme for the conversation and what the process was to be called. Through a mixture of emails and skype calls with Larry in Toronto we developed the lunchtime theme of “Leading complex change and opening space”. This was a theme which Frank felt confident would be engaging for Continuous Improvement Network members.

It made sense to Larry to apply the Principles and Law of Open Space to a different “technology”, the fishbowl, for the meeting. Since the phrases “Open Space” and “Open Space Technology” mean the same thing to many, he believes the differences get muddled between applying the principles and carrying out a particular event. This event would have some self-organizing characteristics, but not be a full self-organizing OST meeting. To prevent this confusion Larry encouraged Frank and Andrew to not call it an Open Space meeting. Larry was confident that they would find a way to make it work no matter what the name.

As we proceeded towards the day, Andrew thought about how to make the fishbowl work. How would we get people into the fishbowl and the conversation? He imagined how the principles of Open Space Technology could also apply to the fishbowl. He realized there seemed to be a good fit. Whoever comes to the fishbowl are the right people. Whatever happens in the fishbowl is the only thing that could have. Whenever it starts is the right time, and when it’s over it’s over. And the Law of Two Feet certainly seemed to make sense as well – “If you’re not learning or contributing in the fishbowl, move away and open some space for someone else to join”.

In good improvisational style, about an hour before the event was scheduled to start, Larry and Andrew sat down and went through the design, roles, and the nuts and bolts of the fishbowl process. Given the group, we agreed to informally encourage some people to join the fishbowl at the beginning, to seed the early discussion. Andrew proceeded to do this before the session started.

The room was set up with both the traditional podium along one side and a fishbowl circle of seven comfortable chairs, on risers in the middle. The rest of the room was full

of round tables that soon became full of people. The first half-hour was for lunch and networking for the 160 participants. After a half-hour, the CEO sponsor Karen Cleave welcomed the group and introduced the session and then called upon Larry.

Larry spoke for about fifteen minutes, introducing himself, his experience, thinking and ideas related to the theme in order to stimulate participants to join the upcoming conversation. Andrew then introduced the fishbowl, describing the process, encouraging the participants to join the fishbowl. Larry and Andrew worked together to “open the space” of the fishbowl invoking the Four Principles and One Law of Open Space. Andrew described the five-minute chair and that he would monitor the time. He encouraged tables to discuss questions that they might want to bring to the fishbowl. With Larry sitting in the fishbowl, Andrew invited those who felt passionate, those who had taken responsibility and ownership for a question to bring their question and their body into the fishbowl.

Of the three “seed” people Andrew had encouraged to come, only one did, but behind him, were 5 other volunteers! Larry facilitated the fishbowl and also gave input as appropriate. Fishbowl participants started discussions, initially with queries or ideas in relation to the initial presentation. The conversation then flowed from there following one emergent theme or another. Then, the Principles and Law began to kick in. Some members of the fishbowl left, allowing others to join with their ideas or queries. There were good conversations on a number of topics dealing with leadership of complex initiatives, organizational support for such change, what to do if you are asked to lead a major change with which you disagree, living systems, Open Space Technology and many others.

Some topics or questions got applause when they were brought into the fishbowl – an indication that the whole room was engaged. Others stimulated enough controversy that the formal leadership got a bit defensive. Issues of real importance to the participants went into the fishbowl. Some of the initial members of the fishbowl came back later in the conversation, because they wanted to put more in.

For the next 45 minutes the whole room appeared to be totally engaged, with people joining and leaving the fishbowl. The conversation flowed beautifully. The one thing

Andrew noticed how Larry with his calm caring way took the time to invite others thoughts and comments before answering. This approach seemed to create a real atmosphere in the fishbowl and in the room. The CEO formally closed the session as she had opened it with kind words and “thank you’s”.

Some of the feedback from participants at that session was quoted at the beginning of this piece. Fr. Brian Bainbridge was sitting outside the door near the end of the event, waiting to collect Larry and Becky (Larry’s partner and York University professor who jointed him on the trip). Brian stated that few had left the session early and that he overheard a quite positive buzz when people did leave. Those he asked about the session gave glowing comments.



Sydney Facilitators Network

Larry then used the same approach in Sydney near the end of his visit to Australia. The Sydney Facilitators’ Network operates intentionally on Open Space Principles. Once an invitation goes out gatherings happen, people appear, conversations takes place. There is a core group that initiates the conversations. The normal meeting is about two hours and before the event Larry was told by that there was particular interest in the connections between OST, Spiral Dynamics and Ken Wilbur. Harrison Owen’s visits were remembered with great fondness by a number in the group.

Becky and Larry were warmly received at UTS (University of Technology at Sydney) by Professor Elysabeth Leigh but she, for good reasons, could not attend the session. Although, she ensured the room and cookies were available. For a short time, Becky and Larry were left in an empty room with a few cookies. They pushed the tables to the side, made a circle of about 40 student chairs to fill the perimeter. A core member of the network did appear to host the event, as did, all of a sudden, a lot of people ready to participate. They were more people than chairs, so some were borrowed from other classrooms.

After the session was convened and Larry and Becky introduced, Larry did a similar brief overview to that of VPSCIN, but with more emphasis on complexity theory and his application of Spiral Dynamics Integral. He then created the fishbowl in the centre of the room, described the process and invoked the Principles and Law of Open Space. He was surprised that a substantial number of people in the room had not experienced OST and wanted a description. So he made a slight departure to describe OST using Open Space in Pictures from his web site. (The technology classroom had great internet access.) Mary Jamieson, who was at 4 events in Melbourne including VPSCIN, volunteered to monitor the five-minute chair in the fishbowl.

With this group, however, the seeding was certainly not necessary. There was an ebb and flow of conversation in the circle that was great fun. Some questions were very specific about OST and its impact and what Larry does before and after opening the space. Some were about relationships between approaches. Others were deeper with regard to personal/spiritual preparation for this kind of work. It was great fun and again few people in the room used their two feet to leave, mostly they joined the fishbowl for conversation. Becky joined the fishbowl for part of the time, but was mostly watching from the larger circle and commented on the high level engagement she saw throughout the room. The approach worked again.

Conclusions

This is a small sample of two uses, but the Open Space Fishbowl seemed to work extremely well in these situations where some sort of “expertise” was a reason or stimulus for the gathering and the focus was on learning or conversation.

Thanks to Andrew's initiative, we discovered and practiced a great way to have a conversation with larger groups in short time frames. We believe that Open Space Fishbowl is an example of using the Principles and Law of Open Space to take another meeting form, or technique, to a higher level. It increased the energy and self-organization of participants and produced better learning and more spirited conversations. It was not a use of Open Space Technology to engage the full room in self-organized conversation groups with emergent leadership around the theme. It did, however, create the conditions for a powerful and engaging conversation.

A quick review of Open Space Fishbowl process:

Context:

- One or two people are perceived to bring substantial experience or expertise to a gathering with regard to a theme. The "content" or "persona" they bring is part of the reason for the invitation and focus of the meeting.
- Time frame is relatively short (e.g. 1-2 hours max.)
- The group size is 40 participants or more. It would likely work with groups up to 200.
- Physical space allows for set-up of the fishbowl

Set-Up

- A circle of chairs in the middle of other chairs or round tables with chairs. There needs to be some space between the bowl and the other chairs so that people can choose to join.
- Fishbowl circle of chairs is visible to all with appropriate mikes for sound. In large groups, especially those with tables, the fishbowl will need to be on risers somewhat above the round tables with chairs.

Traditional Fishbowl

Traditional fishbowl is a simple process with 5-8 chairs in a circle and one empty chair. Others in the room are in a larger circle and hence look in on the "fishbowl" in the centre. Fishbowl members are sometimes pre-selected or emerge from the group, but tend to stay in their chairs for the duration of the session. The empty chair is for those from the larger group who want to ask questions or give comments, but usually they are then asked to leave and let the discussion continue. The empty chair is intended to help others stay engaged in the discussion. The fishbowl usually has a moderator or facilitator in the group.

Possible Flow of Open Space Fishbowl

- Sponsor's Welcome (5 Minutes)
- Content presenter(s) suggest areas of content for the conversation (15 minutes), before getting into the fishbowl. (So as to distinguish the two processes.)
- Describe the OS Fishbowl process and rules (10 minutes)
 - Describe the circle and the 5-minute empty chair

- Invoke the Principles and Law of OST for all fishbowl members and other participants and be clear that it is not a full Open Space Technology meeting even with the same Principles and Law
- Presenter (or a facilitator) initiates the discussion by asking for a question or idea generated by the content framework presented. Follow good small group process to engage, make input, tell stories, acknowledge newcomers questions or ideas.
- When it's over it's over! There is usually a time frame for such formal meetings. If it's over before then, then it's over.
- Sponsor's closing comments. (2 minutes)

What makes it work!

- "Presenter(s)" who are willing and able to let the majority of the content for the session emerge in conversations related to participants' questions and ideas. (Trust the people in the room, the process, emergent learning and the collective consciousness.)
- Could try a facilitator in addition to the "expert" in the bowl if concerned about the above, but we have not tried this yet.
- A group that is interested in the topic, in watching some of their colleagues get engaged in conversation and free to use the Law of Two Feet if they are not – either jump in the fishbowl, learn or leave.

Other Comments on the VPSCIN OS Fishbowl:

"I really enjoyed the openness of the fishbowl, next time I will be in there swimming."

"We were pleasantly surprised with the number of participants willing to brave the fishbowl, and even more so with the conversation that followed. This was a format that engaged those within the fishbowl to offer the type of forthright commentary that may not have surfaced in another meeting format. Congratulations to Andrew and Larry for being able to engineer such a frank exchange of views."

"This was a really refreshing change to the normal VPSCIN lunch. I'm glad I came in on my normal day off! I have been involved in other kinds of discussion circles and would be keen to see open space used more particularly in whole of Government sessions."

"I was surprised how readily people took to the fishbowl! Why not apply this format in future VPSCIN events?"

"Would suggest using the fishbowl approach in other sessions. I liked the way the silent space is filled by those who have something to say - It is a great way to build discussion/conversation around the topic of the day."

"The principle that 'whoever comes are the right people' - that leaders will identify themselves – struck a chord. We see this clearly in community groups and social settings, and even in the non-core business of our work (social functions, for example). It is more challenging to foster and support leaders to identify themselves in our core business as public servants where hierarchy can be stifling."

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