User Experience Fishbowl

Idea In Short

User Experience Fishbowl is a Liberating Structure that allows a small group to have a focused conversation while a larger group observes. This format promotes active listening, shared learning, and deeper understanding of different perspectives. It creates a dynamic learning environment by making conversations visible. User Experience Fishbowl makes conversations visible for learning.

This structure provides a unique way to facilitate dialogue & knowledge sharing within a group. It creates a clear distinction between those actively participating in the conversation (the "fish") & those observing (the "outside circle"). This dynamic allows for focused discussion while providing a valuable learning opportunity for the observers. It makes dialogue more engaging & accessible.

The process involves arranging chairs in two concentric circles. The inner circle, or "fishbowl," is where the small group of participants sits & has the conversation. The outer circle is where the observers sit & listen. This physical arrangement creates a clear visual distinction between the participants & the observers.

The conversation in the fishbowl is guided by a specific topic or question. The facilitator introduces the topic & provides any necessary context. The participants in the fishbowl then engage in a conversation about the topic, sharing their thoughts, experiences, & perspectives.

A key element of the Fishbowl is the "open chair" or "empty chair" rule. This means that one chair in the fishbowl is left empty. An observer from the outside circle can choose to enter the fishbowl & join the conversation by taking the empty chair. When someone enters the fishbowl, another participant must leave, creating space for the new participant. This dynamic allows for a continuous flow of perspectives & prevents the conversation from becoming stagnant. It also gives observers a chance to participate directly.

The observers in the outside circle actively listen to the conversation in the fishbowl. They may take notes, observe body language, & reflect on the different perspectives being shared. They are not allowed to directly participate in the conversation unless they enter the fishbowl. This allows them to focus on observing & learning.

After a set amount of time, the facilitator can pause the conversation & facilitate a brief debrief with the whole group. This allows the observers to share their observations & ask questions of the participants in the fishbowl. This debriefing session helps to consolidate the learning & generate further insights.

User Experience Fishbowl is particularly useful for exploring complex or sensitive topics, sharing diverse perspectives, & promoting active listening. It can be used in a variety of settings, such as team meetings, workshops, conferences, & training sessions.

Case Study - Gathering User Feedback on a New App

Imagine a company has developed a new mobile app & wants to gather user feedback. They decide to use a User Experience Fishbowl to facilitate a user feedback session.

Setup

The company arranges chairs in two concentric circles. A small group of target users sits in the inner circle (the fishbowl), & the development team & other stakeholders sit in the outer circle.

Conversation

The facilitator introduces the app & asks the users in the fishbowl to discuss their experiences using it. The users share their thoughts on the app's usability, features, & overall experience.

Open Chair

During the conversation, a member of the development team notices that the users are struggling with a particular feature. They decide to enter the fishbowl by taking the empty chair. They ask clarifying questions about the users' experience with that feature & gain valuable insights into how it can be improved. Another user then leaves the fishbowl,

keeping the dynamic of the conversation flowing.

Debrief

After the conversation, the facilitator facilitates a brief debrief with the whole group. The development team shares what they learned from the users, & the observers share their observations about the conversation dynamics. This feedback is then used to improve the app. This example shows how the Fishbowl can gather user feedback.

Application in Strategy/Management Consulting

User Experience Fishbowl can be a valuable tool in strategy & management consulting for several reasons. It allows consultants to:

- **Gather diverse perspectives:** By observing a conversation between stakeholders with different viewpoints, consultants can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges & opportunities facing the organization
- **Surface hidden assumptions:** The dynamic nature of the Fishbowl can help to surface underlying assumptions & biases that may be hindering progress
- **Facilitate stakeholder alignment:** By making conversations visible, the Fishbowl can help to build shared understanding & alignment among stakeholders
- **Observe group dynamics:** Consultants can observe how different stakeholders interact & communicate, providing valuable insights into organizational culture & dynamics

Case Study - Merger Integration

A consulting firm is hired to assist with the integration of two companies following a merger. The consultants use a User Experience Fishbowl to understand the cultural differences between the two organizations. They select representatives from different departments & levels of both companies to participate in the fishbowl. The topic for the conversation is:

> What are the key cultural differences between our two organizations, & how can we create a unified culture?

As the representatives discuss their experiences, the consultants observe distinct differences in communication styles, decision-making processes, & organizational values. The open chair dynamic allows observers from both companies, who were initially hesitant to speak, to join the conversation & share their perspectives. The subsequent debriefing session creates a platform for acknowledging these differences & discussing potential strategies for building a unified culture. The consultants use these insights to design targeted interventions to facilitate the integration process.

Advantages & Potential Limitations

User Experience Fishbowl offers several advantages:

- It promotes active listening & shared learning. It allows for a deeper understanding of different perspectives. It is a highly engaging & interactive method
- This structure creates a dynamic learning environment. The open chair rule keeps the conversation flowing & prevents it from becoming stagnant. It allows for a continuous influx of new ideas & perspectives
- It is particularly useful for exploring complex or sensitive topics. It creates a safe & structured space for dialogue. It can be used in a variety of settings & contexts

Shortcomings

However, there are also some potential limitations to consider:

- The effectiveness of the method depends on the willingness of participants to engage in open & honest communication. If participants are not willing to share their true thoughts or opinions, the insights gained may be limited
- It is important to create a safe & supportive environment where participants feel comfortable expressing themselves. The facilitator plays a key role in setting the tone & ensuring that everyone feels respected
- The observation aspect can make some participants feel self-conscious. It is important to explain the purpose of the observation & emphasize that it is intended to be a learning experience for everyone involved

Summary

User Experience Fishbowl is a valuable Liberating Structure for making conversations visible and promoting shared learning. It creates a dynamic and engaging environment for exploring complex topics and sharing diverse perspectives. User Experience Fishbowl makes conversations visible for learning.