Folding Spectrogram

Idea In Short

When a decision depends on understanding how people see an issue, make the range visible before debating solutions. Folding Spectrogram asks participants to position themselves along a line between two stated extremes, then notice who stands where and hear from people with different views. Use a statement that allows a spectrum of responses, not a yes-or-no vote. Explain the endpoints, make it safe to change position, and ask participants to speak from their own experience. The activity can reveal alignment and disagreement that would otherwise remain hidden. It does not produce consensus by itself; follow it with a conversation about what the differences mean for the decision.

A team preparing a policy change may hear that “most people are aligned,” even though some colleagues support it, others are uncertain, and a few see risks that have not been discussed. Folding Spectrogram makes this range visible. Participants position themselves along a line between two ends of a statement, then look around and hear from people in different places. The structure helps a group notice similarities and differences before a decision is made. It reflects the Liberating Structures principle “Practice Self-Discovery Within a Group.” Its value is the conversation the visible pattern makes possible, not a vote that settles the issue.

Write a statement with room for nuance

A useful prompt allows people to take positions between two extremes. “This policy is good” invites a simple yes or no. “How much flexibility should teams have when applying this policy?” can support a spectrum if the host defines what each end means. The facilitator should state the issue and clarify that participants are expressing a current perspective. If the endpoints are ambiguous, the line can create confusion rather than insight.

Participants stand along a physical line or place a digital marker along a horizontal continuum. One end represents an extreme, the opposite end another, and the middle

represents in-between views. The group should have time to look around and notice where people are positioned. The facilitator can invite a few participants from different points to explain their perspective, but no one should be forced to speak or defend a position.

Let the group notice the shape

The arrangement can reveal clusters, gaps, and unexpected distributions. Several people may stand near the middle because they need more information. A small group at one end may identify a consequence others have not considered. Participants may discover that colleagues they assumed were aligned are not, or that different reasons lead people to the same position. These observations are valuable because they surface assumptions the group can test.

The host should ask questions that invite curiosity: What did you notice? Which perspectives surprised you? What might explain the spread? What information would help us understand the issue better? Avoid asking participants to persuade the rest of the line or to justify their position as if the activity were a debate. A person's placement is a prompt for learning, not a claim that they must defend.

Use the fold to bring people into conversation

The "folding" format can make the continuum more interactive by asking participants to fold the line or shift positions after hearing from others, depending on the session design. The intention is to create connection across differences and make it easier for participants to meet people with another perspective. The facilitator should explain any movement clearly and ensure there is enough space. Online, the host can create equivalent pairs or small groups based on participants' digital positions.

Participants can discuss what they heard and whether their thinking changed. A movement on the line does not have to represent a conversion; it may show that someone understands another view more clearly. The group should not treat movement as the desired outcome. Some differences will remain, and the purpose is to recognize them before making a decision that affects the group.

Protect choice and psychological safety

The activity asks people to make a view visible, which can feel risky when leaders are present or when opinions are politically charged. Explain how the information will be used and whether positions will be recorded. Let participants pass or use an anonymous digital marker if public positioning would create pressure. Leaders should avoid using the line to identify dissenters later. The quality of insight depends on participants believing they can express a genuine view without penalty.

The structure usually takes 15 to 20 minutes and recommends at least ten participants. It requires open space, a line with visible endpoints, and a statement prepared in advance. A large group may need a microphone or a way to collect comments in writing. Online, a shared visual line and markers can work, though a facilitator may need to manage visibility and anonymity. Ensure participants can access the exercise in a way that fits their mobility and communication needs.

Folding Spectrogram is useful before strategic choices, policy decisions, or discussions where leaders need to understand a range of positions. It can help groups avoid surprises by making disagreement visible early. Research on employee voice and decision participation shows why people need channels to express concerns before plans are finalized; the National Academies' work on consensus study processes also emphasizes the value of transparent deliberation. 1, 2, 3

Move from the line to the decision

A spectrogram does not decide what the group should do. After hearing perspectives, clarify which concerns need more investigation, which trade-offs require a choice, and who has authority to decide. The group may use a follow-up structure to generate options or examine assumptions. If the decision is urgent, the facilitator should state how the input will affect the decision and when participants will hear the outcome.

Folding Spectrogram lets a group see the diversity already present in the room. Participants can recognize common ground while also understanding where their colleagues differ. That knowledge can improve a decision because the group can address concerns before they become hidden resistance or implementation surprises. The line is a starting point for conversation, and the next step is to act with a fuller view of the people affected.

- 1Why employees don't speak up

- 2The wisdom of crowds
- 3Consensus study reports

Summary

Folding Spectrogram turns individual perspectives into a visible landscape the group can explore. Participants place themselves along a continuum, notice patterns, and hear from people at different points. The facilitator should frame the statement carefully and make clear that positions are provisional, not commitments or votes. The discussion that follows can reveal where information is missing, what values shape the difference, and which concerns a decision must address. Use the structure to deepen understanding before choosing a response. A spectrum can make disagreement easier to discuss, but the group still needs a decision process suited to the issue. Revisit the conversation as the work changes and new evidence becomes available.