

Fishbowl, Panel, and Speak Outs

Please note: as with many of the diversity tools, we recommend that you first experience the tool itself before trying it out with others. The experience is very different than how it reads. This set-up expects that the group already has some familiarity with the terms Mainstream/Margin, possibly through having gone through the Mainstream/Margin tool beforehand.

In the Mainstream/Margin exercise, participants learn that it's a fact of life (nothing personal) that mainstream people tend to be clueless about the life experience of folks on the margin. Most hearing people know little about those who are deaf, for example; most Christians know little about the experience of Muslims.

A good workshop provides opportunities for mainstream people to get new information about margins, in a way that goes below the surface and involves the emotional learning channel. The expectation is that, by highlighting the experience of a few margins in a dramatic way, participants will learn that they need to become pro-active in order to be fair with people on the margins.

Since a characteristic of any mainstream is its ability to control communication and to stay inside its own comfort zone, these three listening exercises reduce the mainstream's ability to control the turf and protect itself from uncomfortable truths. The three exercises differ, however, in how much emotional intensity they are likely to generate.

Three options are outlined in this document, in order of increasing emotional intensity: the Fishbowl, the Panel and the Speak Out.

Things to consider when deciding which option to use:

- the strength of the group's container
- the strength of your facilitation skills
- which tools you have personally experienced.

For the purpose of these options we use the example of the margin of women being listened to by the men. Men are dominant in our society, even if they aren't numerical majority in a particular group.

The Fishbowl

The women sit on chairs or the floor in the middle of a circle of mainstream people (men). The women face each other. This gives them a sense of safety, because they can talk to each other even though overheard by the men.

The facilitator explains to the whole group: Something we learned from the mainstream/margin exercise is that the mainstream can become more aware by listening carefully to the margin, and learn about its life experience.

The women will be together here, responding to the questions I'll ask as they talk among themselves. I'll ask them to speak to each other loud enough to be heard by the men.

The men will have the job of listening as deeply as they can. They won't get a chance to ask questions of the women; they have the opportunity to turn their full attention to what they hear. The women will finish when they finish, and then we'll take some time for everyone to share.

We ask everyone in the room to accept a ground rule of confidentiality - you can share the lessons you learn from this session, but please do not link information to the person who said it.

The facilitator sits with the women and asks the Three Questions:

What are you pleased about or proud of, regarding your identity?

What is difficult or challenging about it?

What would you like other participants to know in order that they could work with you better or be more supportive?

Rather than sharing their experiences, the women may start off by discussing the questions. A bit of this sort of discussion is OK.

You might need to give plenty of time to the first question, and might have to ask it several times, until the conversation among the sisters begins to flow. Be patient with the awkwardness they might feel in the beginning.

Note: The intention is for the speakers to share from their personal experience: statistics and generalizations are not part of this exercise at this point.

When the women are finished, the facilitator asks them to return to the larger circle, and asks for everyone to take a couple moments of silence to digest what they've heard. Then ask them to turn to a person of the same gender to share immediate feelings; you may need to name some feelings to remind them: "nervous," "relief," "sadness," "empathy," "irritation," "hope."

After a few minutes, ask them to return to the whole group to share learnings.

Emphasize that this is not a time for debate or analysis or even disagreement: at this point ask people to say briefly something they learned.

(Do this for ten minutes or until the energy peaks.)

The facilitator explains: a ground rule that supports maximum learning from this exercise is that the men can only bring up something they heard from the fishbowl after asking permission from the sister who said it.

The Fishbowl is the least intense format of the three options.

Panel

Four volunteers from the margin (you need to recruit them ahead of time) sit on chairs in front of the room with a facilitator beside them.

The facilitator explains: Something we learned from the mainstream/margin exercise is that the mainstream can become more aware by listening carefully to the margin, and learn about its life experience.

Here we have a panel of women who have agreed to share from their life experience, in response to my interview questions. The men will have the job of listening as deeply as they can. They won't get a chance to ask questions of the women; they have the opportunity to put full attention on what they hear.

The women will finish when they finish. Then the men will go to a break-out room to compare notes on what they've heard and learned, while the panel and the other women will remain here to debrief. Then we'll all get together.

We ask everyone in the room to accept a ground rule of confidentiality - you can share the lessons you learn from this session, but please do not link information to the person who said it.

The facilitator interviews the panel, using the Three Questions:

What are you pleased about or proud of, regarding your identity?

What is difficult or challenging about it?

What would you like other participants to know in order that they could work with you better or be more supportive?

Take your time. Feel free to ask follow-up questions - not to probe, but simply to support them to say what they want to say. You may need to remind the speakers to share from their personal experience: statistics and generalizations are not part of this exercise, at this point!

The male facilitator goes with the men to debrief:

feelings (name some feelings to get the men to acknowledge that they are not robots)

surprises, new information, things I knew but didn't know as fully

reflections on my own relationships with women

changes I might like to make in my behavior

The female facilitator stays with the women to debrief:

feelings, if you aren't getting much of a response, try: "What was challenging about that?"
"What was satisfying about that?"
surprises, things to think about in a new light
reflections on the process of telling men what it's really like
concerns about re-uniting with the men.

Reminder them if there is a ground rule about asking permission before disclosing what was said. Explain the rationale for this rule (see the paragraph under What these formats have in common). Explain what will happen when men return to the classroom.

(Male and female facilitators will need to leave their groups from time to time to do a check-in on when to bring the two groups back together.)

When everyone is back together, explain the ground rule: what supports maximum learning from this exercise is that the men can only bring up something they heard from the fishbowl after asking permission from the sister who said it.

Do a go-round, in a standing circle, and ask each person to share just one sentence: "One thing I learned from this exercise." When the first person in the circle forgets to say "I," remind them: "One thing I learned from this exercise."

The Panel is a more intense format than the Fishbowl, but less intense than the Speak Out.

Speak Out

The facilitator explains: something we learned from the mainstream/margin exercise is that the mainstream can become more aware by listening carefully to the margin, and learn about its life experience.

The women in the class have agreed to share from their life experience, in response to my interview questions. The men will have the job of listening as deeply as they can. The men won't get a chance to ask questions of the women; they have the opportunity to put full attention on what they hear. The women will finish when they finish.

Then the men will get a chance to compare notes on what they've heard and learned, while the women will go to another room to debrief. Then we'll all get together. We ask everyone in the room to accept a ground rule of confidentiality - you can share the lessons you learn from this afternoon, but not link information to who said it.

The first step will be that the women will go to another room to prepare their remarks, while the men stay here with the male facilitator to prepare themselves to be awesome listeners.

The female facilitator works with the women, first on feelings about doing this, reassurance that not everyone needs to talk, appreciation for those who are nervous nevertheless showing sisterhood in this way, reassurance that in our experience this exercise ends up building unity.

Go over the three questions:

What are you pleased about or proud of, regarding your identity?

What is difficult or challenging about it?

What would you like other participants to know in order that they could work with you better or be more supportive?

Don't let them dwell on their answers: the answers go stale if they are rehearsed.

Tell them you have one more question in reserve you might or might not ask: "What's one thing you never want to hear from a man again?" (Note: this question will invite participants to share deeper feelings, to disclose more about themselves.)

The male facilitator works with the men. He begins first with their feelings (name some feelings to get the men to acknowledge that they are not robots). Then he asks them what they've found useful in their lives to enable themselves to listen well to something important that they might have difficulty hearing.

If no one starts soon, offer one of your own methods (deep breathing, imagining what might be going on for the other person, telling yourself you're OK, etc.). Get as many men as possible to talk about methods they've used to listen to others in a serious way. Invite men present can use each others' methods.

Note that the women's preparation often takes longer than the men's in this exercise, which is useful. The mainstream group gets to experience what it is like to be forced to wait for those who it usually gets to set the rules for. (The facilitator can make this observation.)

Relax if the group gets anxious about waiting for the women; it's part of the exercise. The men will, when there's been enough silence, break the ice with jokes or random comments. Just relax and hold the container (group) together.

The women walk in when they are ready, stand across the front of the room (the men are seated), and the female facilitator stands beside them while feeding them the Three Questions (and possibly the fourth, if you decide to ask it).

If the women are feeling safe (despite being outside their comfort zone) they will build on each others' responses to each question by adding their own.

When the women are finished (and not before), they leave the room. The facilitator who goes with them encourages celebration and venting, then debriefs, finally leading to the question "How shall we re-unite with the mainstream participants (men)?"

The facilitator in the mainstream group assists participants to process and digest what they've heard and learn from it, finally leading a reminder of the ground rules of the event and encouraging them to relax about socializing with the members of the marginal group.

Facilitators stay in touch with each other, and arrange a common time to bring the two groups together. When everyone is together, explain the ground rule: what supports maximum learning from this exercise is that the men can only bring up something they heard from the fishbowl with a woman after asking permission. It needs to be OK for a woman to say, "I'd rather not go into that now - maybe later."

A good tool to use at the end is a closing circle, in which everyone gets to share one insight -- usually something they've learned about themselves --in a sentence or two.

The Speak Out is the most intense of the three formats and you should pay attention to what's happening in the group after the session finishes. The facilitators can set an example by socializing with participants of the other gender from themselves at supper time or elsewhere. If some participants go off by themselves with serious expressions, it usually means that solitude is their preferred setting for processing, and should be respected.

The Speak Out is the most intense format of the three options.

Elements Common for all Three Formats:

Talk with the marginal group ahead of time, carefully explaining how the exercise will work and expectations of them. Emphasize that there is no requirement that all members of the group speak up, but that it is important that everyone participates, even if they remain silent, as a gesture of solidarity.

Explain that this is a time-tested exercise that has been effective in a wide variety of cultural settings. It has the effect of reducing the amount of ignorance that the mainstream tends to have about the real experience of the margin.

All three formats use the questions in exactly the same order. That's critical to their success.

All three formats use one-way communication for safety: it is NOT a dialogue or discussion. Be aware that the women (or other margin if you're working with another equity-seeking group) may find it out of their comfort zone not to know what the men are thinking and saying; they've been socialized to "take care of" men and adapt to men's opinions and feelings.

The formats (and the ground rule) all assist women to stay out of their comfort zone, turn to each other for support and reassurance (sisterhood), and build their internal strength rather than worry about the mainstream.

In all three formats the two groups (mainstream and margin) will get along together fine after the session. There may be a bit of residual nervousness, but in the hundreds of times we've done this, these exercises don't result in a permanent division. This natural process of re-integration is made easier if the facilitators relax about it.

What if there are only One or Two Members of a Margin in my Class?

Use the interview style, what we call the diversity interview. The facilitator uses the same three questions.

The questions can be asked in different ways:

while standing alongside the person(s) in front of the room

sitting beside the person(s) in front of the room

Or:

the facilitator can go to where the person is sitting in the room

the facilitator can stay in front and simply ask the questions of the person sitting where they already are in the circle

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