

THE FISHBOWL EXERCISE

APPENDIX M

Our second creative problem-solving exercise is called “The Fishbowl.” We first encountered this exercise at a retreat for school leaders. It was so simple and so effective, we have kept it in our back pockets ever since. The only materials required for this exercise are a stack of sticky notes, a chair, and a problem. Once you’ve gathered those materials, the exercise may be accomplished in these basic steps:

Step 1: Invite a teammate to think of one thing causing them stress, consternation, confusion (or all of the above).

Step 2: Depending upon the amount of time you have, multiple teammates could participate. However, due to common time constraints in school meetings, we have found that typically one teammate “enters the fishbowl” to help them solve a problem. Regardless of how the teammates participate, once they are selected for the fishbowl, they move to Step 3.

Step 3: The teammate entering the fishbowl must provide a brief narrative nutshell of their problem. The problem statement shouldn’t be too long or too brief—just enough to provide the rest of the team with adequate details and context. (The “fishbowl” is just a chair or position where they can sit and everybody else sits around them to listen.)

Step 4: As the teammate in the fishbowl provides a “narrative nutshell” of their problem, the rest of the team simply listens intently.

Step 5: After the teammate in the fishbowl has finished summarizing their problem, the rest of the team listening must write down one single question on their respective sticky notes. Just one, honest question.

Step 6: Once every teammate has written their question on their sticky notes, they are to deliver the notes to their teammate in the fishbowl.

Step 7: The teammate in the fishbowl simply collects the sticky notes and does *not* answer them. The teammate keeps the questions and reviews them at their leisure. The questions on the sticky notes tend to be quite effective by either validating the thoughts the teammate already had or by introducing new questions the teammate may not have thought of. In creative problem-solving, sometimes we just need to see if we’re on the right track. Other times, we need some outside perspective to help us search for solutions. The fishbowl exercise does a good job at both!

GOAL: Many problem-solving meetings have time constraints. As such, without some sort of structure, we can waste a lot of time. Additionally, when it comes to creative problem-solving, it's rare to find a creative solution in a short period of time. The fishbowl exercise helps mitigate time constraints by being brief and to the point. It also allows the teammate with the problem to spend some time reflecting on their own.