

## The Virtual Fishbowl

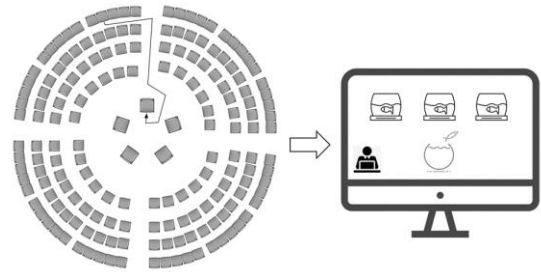
As COVID-19 causes even the most resilient to move to online platforms, connecting virtually raises various issues on how to collaborate through different timezones, cultures, organizational behaviors, personal and emotional strain. The fishbowl is a great inclusivity method as it offers the benefits of small group discussions within larger crowds on controversial issues.

**Some context.** As COVID-19 strikes globally, virtual meetings are strikingly becoming a design feature meant to stay as opposed to a temporary replacement of in-person communication (Grosse, 2002). The virtual nature of the collaboration is crucial for the success of global virtual teams (GVTs) even though the process is far from smooth (Daim et al. 2012; Jarvenpaa and Leidner, 2006). GVTs require greater inclusivity, authenticity, active listening, and, mostly, the capacity to let go of the command and control management style that is present in most companies today to move towards trust and achievement (Spataro and Bloch, 2018; Weger et al. 2014). As empathy requirements grow together with the need to be heard, and the emotional connection is more central than the process itself, that's where a fishbowl conversation can replace one-to-one meetings and global exchange (Shin, 2018).

**What is it?** Fishbowl conversations are a form of dialog that was born in what is known as un conferences, participant-driven meetings that try to avoid standard conference formats (Carpenter, 2016; Budd et al. 2015). It is used when discussing topics within large groups as several people can join the discussion and this allows everyone to participate generating an ongoing flow, making the conversation very interactive (Atkinson, 2009; Fruchter, 2006). The classic method used is as follows: five chairs are arranged in a circle, four are occupied, one is left empty. More chairs are then arranged in concentric circles that go around the central loop in the center. There is always a moderator who introduces the topic and poses the first question to a few participants that initiate the fishbowl conversation, while the rest of the audience sits around and listens in. Every two to ten minutes any member of the audience can join the conversation while an existing member of the fishbowl voluntarily frees a chair. If this doesn't happen smoothly the moderator can invite someone to move on and rejoin later. When the set time is over the moderator summarizes the discussion and officially closes the fishbowl.

**Why is it useful?** Fishbowls are not meant to reach consensus or linear answers but instead generate an intimate and spontaneous conversation used for building dialogue between participants as they are the custodians and curators of the process.

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**Figure 1.** from live to online fishbowls

**Moving to the virtual space.** Online, with virtual participants, the framework does not vary much. A group of experts, guided by the moderator, start a conversation where participants can join in at any time (Figure 1) just by turning on their video. This allows multiple voices even in difficult contexts where there is limited psychological safety and potential speaking inhibitions. As more and more conferences and meetings move online, the fishbowl helps to maintain attention levels and generate positive deviance as it focuses the entire group's attention on the main discussion. It is a useful engaging alternative to presentations or panel discussions as it calls for direct conversations, providing participants with an interactive platform for discussing controversial issues (Arivananthan, 2015; Miller and Benz, 2008).

A recent example of the virtual fishbowl is the **#goodaftercovid19** initiative meant to use the pandemic as a stimulus to gather the 20% participation needed to reach a tipping point that unlocks the new connectedness paradigm by creating a common platform where people can meet to discuss and build a better future and to correct many of the pre-existing weaknesses the COVID has exposed.

For a full version of the article and reference list please visit:

<https://www.barbaracv.com/blog/a-virtual-fishbowl/>

**Carlo Giardinetti**, Dean of  
Executive Education & Global Outreach,  
Franklin University



**Dr. Giorgia Nigri**, Economist,  
LUMSA University  
[g.nigri@lumsa.it](mailto:g.nigri@lumsa.it)

