

PROTOCOLS IN PRACTICE:

Modifying The Fishbowl Technique

By Dave Lehman, Connections Executive Editor, NSRF National Facilitator, and CFG Coach in Wisconsin, davelehman@mac.com

Many of us are familiar with the “Fishbowl” technique for introducing a protocol early in a CFG coaches training. The technique can also be used in a classroom setting, or for an established CFG to assist a new CFG getting started. (See page 6 for excerpts from the newly revised NSRF [Fishbowl Technique](#).)

Typically, in a group of 15 participants, six of the group volunteer to be “fishes” sitting in a circle (the “fishbowl”) in the center of the room, along with the person presenting their work and the NSRF coach/facilitator. The other seven participants are then seated outside of the inner group as observers, to watch and learn how a given protocol proceeds.

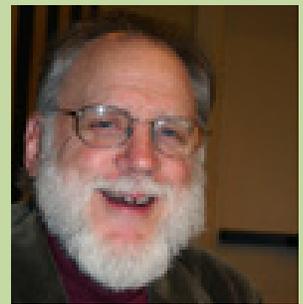
Sometimes the coach will establish a ground rule in which someone from the outer group can tap the shoulder of someone in the fishbowl, and then take their place in order to make a contribution. However, all too often – at least in my experience – relatively few people choose to step into the inner group from the outer group, and more typically, those outside the fishbowl all too often simply tune out, sometimes even doing something else and chatting quietly with each other.

Fishbowl Consultants: Observers are assigned to individual "Fish" to actively assist them.

Traditional Fishbowl: Some are "Fish" and the rest are Observers, sometimes swapping out.

I have been using the following two variations on the Fishbowl Technique and have found them to more effectively engage everyone. Here is an overview or summary of these two modifications of the Fishbowl:

1) Fishbowl Consultants – Rather than simply observing, in this modification, each person on the outside of the Fishbowl sits directly behind one of the “fishes.” Then, at various points throughout the protocol, the coach says, “Cut. Turn to your consultant,” thereby instructing each of the “fish” to turn to the person behind them and briefly discuss that point in the process of the protocol being demonstrated. For example, in Fishbawling the [Tuning Protocol](#), the coach could call “Cut” at these points: clarifying questions, warm feedback, and cool feedback. The “fish” would then turn to their “consultants” for some brief suggestions, then



Dave Lehman is the former founding principal/teacher of the Lehman Alternative Community School, a public middle-high school recently named after him and his wife by the Ithaca, New York Board of Education upon their retirement after 30 years. He currently is leading “School Improvement Coaching” at East High School in Madison, Wisconsin.

Contact him with your questions or comments at davelehman@mac.com

Fishbowl Countoff: Everyone is a "Fish" and an Observer, with alternating times and tasks.

return to the fishbowl and continue the protocol. This can even be done with a somewhat larger group where all of the "fish" have a pair of "consultants" seated directly behind them.

2) Fishbowl Count Off – In this modification, everyone is in the inner circle of the fishbowl. For example, again thinking of

Fishbowling the Tuning Protocol, everyone is seated in a circle of 15. Excluding the presenter and the coach, the participants are asked simply to "count off, 1, 2, 1, 2, 1, 2...." around the circle. Then the coach assigns "warm feedback" to all of the 1s, and "cool feedback" to all of the 2s. For a larger group or a different protocol, the facilitator can count off by threes and give different assignments. This way, everyone participates in the protocol practice round, but only part of the group is actually speaking at any point in the protocol.

A third modification specifically for classroom use is suggested by our *Connections* editor, Luci Englert McKean, which she calls "Observer Scientists." In this

variation, each observer is either given a specific "fish" to watch for particular analysis, or is given a specific task to observe in the entire group, such as "How often did the individuals confuse Probing Questions with suggestions?" As scientists, these observers would take specific notes to be able to share with the group later.

Fishbowl Scientists: Every Consultant observes a particular "Fish" or observes the group for specific behaviors.

Each of these modifications have the advantage of actively engaging your peers rather than having half or more of the group simply observing. This seems particularly crucial as the point of Fishbowling is for the observers to learn as well as the participants, and so we logically want everyone fully engaged.

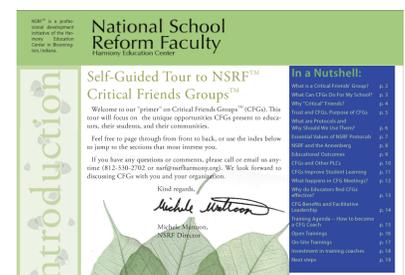
Let us know what you think of these modification of the typical [Fishbowl](#). Try them out, and tell us if you've found any of them to work especially well for you. — *Dave Lehman*

Do you, your colleagues, or your administrators have questions about NSRF and Critical Friends Groups? Click the photos or the links below to review our latest promotional materials, or email us to request copies and links:

[A Self-Guided Tour to NSRF Critical Friends Groups \(pdf\)](#)

and

[Video Glimpse of NSRF New CFG Coaches Training](#)



al School Reform Faculty Critical Friends Group (CFG) Coaches

