

Let's Talk About Power

Hosting guidelines for a conversation about the power differences in your team. This can be a difficult conversation so you'll need a trusted and **experienced facilitator** and **informed consent** from the participants.

Process

1. Introduction
2. Reflecting on the power circle
3. Fishbowl conversation
4. Open dialogue
5. Closing round

Setup

Suitable for about 10-20 people. You need enough space for a large circle of chairs, and no tables in the room. Make sure you have enough time (60-90'). Draw 2 or 3 **concentric circles on a flipchart**, alternatively mark them with tape on the floor with enough space for people to move in and out of the circles.

1. Introduction

Start by explaining the process, guide participants on what will happen, what norms are expected for a good participation, and what they can do if feeling triggered.

You can set the scene by saying something like: *"We are committed to equity and inclusion AND we know that no group is perfectly flat, there are always differences in who has more or less influence. The objective of this conversation is to increase the shared understanding of those differences. After people are heard and understood, we may also be able to suggest changes to improve the distribution of power in the team."*

The concentric circles symbolise some of the different power dynamics in the group. If you're closer to the center, that could mean you feel like people listen to your ideas, you have a meaningful say in important decisions, people seek your expertise, this project is a high priority for you, you feel responsibility or ownership. Here are some factors that might draw you more towards the inner circle:

- You are in a position of higher authority
- In your role you make decisions on behalf of others
- People in the group see you as an elder
- You are trusted to make decision in your area of expertise without consultation
- Your ideas normally get picked up right away by the group
- You feel comfortable proposing new ideas and disagreeing with others
- You normally pick up tasks out of your comfort zone



2. Reflecting on the power circle

Ask people to reflect on their position in these circles:

1. Where do you think you stand now? *(move to that position in the room / place your name on the flipchart / make a note for yourself in your journal)*
2. Where would you like to be in 3 months from now? *(move again)*

Ask people to do this in silence and spend a couple of minutes reflecting on what they observe, before moving into the fishbowl conversation.

3. Fishbowl conversation (30-40')

[“Fishbowl”](#) is a way of having a small group conversation that is witnessed by a larger group. Bring 5 chairs into a small circle in the middle of the room; this is the fishbowl. The rest of the chairs should be in a second circle outside the inner ring.

Start with a “closed” fishbowl, i.e. the people in the inner circle will have a conversation, while everyone in the outer ring is there to listen intently and support the conversation in silence. Invite the people who were standing closest to the center in the previous exercise to sit in the fishbowl.*

****Note:** the best people to start the conversation will depend on the level of safety, trust, and openness in the team. If you don't have a culture of openness and high trust, then it's probably safest to start with the more empowered, higher status people, as they can set the tone (i.e. modelling that sharing authentically & vulnerably is okay). If you have a higher level of trust in the team, it may be safe to start with anyone, for example, you could ask the people from the outer circle to start the conversation.*

After 15 or 20 minutes, **move to an “open” fishbowl**. Everyone who was in the fishbowl moves to the outer ring, and 4 of the observers can now move into the open fishbowl. During the open round, one of the fishbowl chairs is kept empty all the time, available for anyone who wants to join the conversation. When someone sits on the empty chair, someone else has to leave, vacating one chair (typically the one who has been sitting longer or is less involved in the current conversation).

- You can **open each round of conversation with some questions** to help people reflect on what they observed about the power differences and how they feel about their position in it. It's important to encourage people to speak from their experience with *I sentences* (“I feel...” “I saw...” “I need...”), and move away from judgements or blame.
- **Possible questions:** How does it feel to stand inside or outside of the power circle? Why do you think you are there? How do you think others feel about it? If in a few months you want to move in/out of that circle? What blocks you? How can this team support you?
- **Take notes of key insights, principles, concerns, ideas** that are named during both conversations.





4. Open Dialogue

After the two fishbowl rounds, **merge into one circle**: reflect the main points you noted back to the team. **Open a conversation about what the team wants to do with these power differences** to find next steps they can take.

You can give some **examples of practices other teams** use to deal with power differences:

- Recognise what roles accrue more power and rotate them or share them.
- Define explicit limits on roles that tend to be more powerful, e.g. the coordinator is NOT responsible for XYZ.
- Encourage and support people that feel less empowered to step into roles that accrue more power.
- Commit to having more conversations like this one.

Collect ideas and action points: Make sure to pick a few things that can change and set up a time for review and iteration instead of making a huge plan that may feel too big or overwhelming.

5. Closing Round

Give everyone one or two minutes for silent reflection. Then close by hearing from everyone in the circle in turn. You can ask a question like “how do you feel as you’re leaving this process?” or “what’s one insight you’re taking with you”, or if time is short, “what’s one word you are leaving with?”

The power conversation is one to come back to regularly. It takes courage, vulnerability and importantly a change of behaviour so remind people that it will take time and is a process of continuous improvement.

