

Ritual dissent/assent

Type : Open Source Method

Family : Perception

This is a workshop method designed to test and enhance proposals, stories, ideas or whatever by subjecting them to ritualised dissent (challenge) or assent (positive alternatives). In all cases it is a forced listening technique, not a dialogue or discourse. It can be used on its own, or linked to story construction, social construction of the Cynefin framework and a broad range of methods. The basic approach involves a spokesperson presenting a series of ideas to a group who receive them in silence. The spokesperson then turns their chair, so that their back is to the audience and listens in silence while the group either attack (dissent) or provide alternative proposals (assent). The ritualisation of not facing the audience de-personalizes the process and the group setting (others will be subject to the same process) means that the attack or alternative are not personal, but supportive. Listening in silence without eye contact, increases listening. Overall plans that emerge from the process are more resilient than reductionist of consensus based techniques

Context

The technique is normally used in a workshop with a minimum of three groups with at least three participants in each. Ideally the number of participants should be higher, but no higher than a dozen, and the larger the number of groups; the more iterations and variety.

Each group should be seated at a round table (or a circle of chairs), and the tables should be distributed in the work area to allow plenty of space between them. If the tables are very close then there will be too much noise which will restrict the ability of the spokesperson to listen the the dissent/assent. The tables should be set up so it is easy (and very very self evident) to give an instruction to move to the next table in a clockwise or anti-clockwise fashion.

The technique has been used successfully with groups in separate rooms opening off a central space, although this makes the facilitator's job more difficult.

Each table should be provided with a clipboard and pen for the spokesperson. This is not vital, but spokespeople frequently forget to take pen and paper, and the clipboard smoothes the process somewhat.

The technique assumes that the participants are engaged in another process. The other process will create the *think to be challenged* which could be creating a business plan, populating the Cynefin Framework, socially constructing a story or whatever. This process should be underway before ritual dissent/assent is used. The flow of events starts after the group have been working for some time on the process/outcome which is to be improved by ritual dissent/assent. Cycling the ritual process several times with the multiple groups offers a significant improvement opportunity. Not only the spokesperson learns, but the group dissenting or assenting also learn from their comments.

Flow of events

Step	Comments
<p>Each group is asked to appoint a spokesperson after they have been working for some time. The requirement is for the spokesperson to have <i>"a resilient and robust personality and not bear a grudge"</i>. A time deadline is set for them to be ready to present (minimum 5 minutes)</p>	
<p>Three minutes before the deadline, you stop the work and explain exactly what is going to happen to the spokesperson.</p> <p>Advise the spokesperson that they will have three minutes to present their idea.</p>	<p>Make sure the group know that they can choose a spokesperson. Resist any temptation to make the process a surprise at this stage, to do so is a serious breach of ethics.</p>
<p>At the end of the deadline ask the spokesperson from each group to stand up, but not to move.</p>	<p>It will take a bit of time to get everyone standing up, but do not allow them to move until one person is standing up in each group.</p>
<p>Tell the spokespeople to move to the next table in a clockwise direction and take the vacant seat, but to wait for your instruction before saying or doing anything.</p>	<p>You need to maintain rigid control of the process at this point otherwise things go badly wrong.</p> <p>If this is the second or subsequent iteration then go anti-clockwise, clockwise plus 1 etc to make sure that each time a new group is used.</p>
<p>When everyone is sat down repeat the instruction. The spokesperson will present their idea for 3 minutes, at that time a time check will be announced by the facilitator. If the group are happy to listen for more time they may do so, but from this point onwards the spokesperson can be made to turn around finished or not. They must present to silence (the group may not comment or interact with the spokesperson in any way) and then turn round, taking the clipboard to take notes on what they hear. The group should then attack the ideas with full and complete vigor (dissent) or come up with a better idea or major improvement (assent).</p>	<p>Help people here by giving examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Think of the water cooler conversations that follow an executive presentation • Remember that time you came up with a great idea presented it to the board and had to sit in silence while your idea was taken apart <p>Make sure people realise that the idea is not to be fair, reasonable or supportive but to attack, or provide a better alternative (often more painful than being attacked)</p>

Step	Comments
Once complete the spokesperson must not talk with the group but leave to a central area, away from the groups that are working, until all the spokespeople are complete	This is important and a recent addition to the method. When spokespeople talk with the group they start to explain or compromise their learning.
Once all the spokespeople are in the central area or if enough time has elapsed, then you send the spokespeople back to their groups to talk about what they have learnt. They they get ready for the next iteration as the cycle can be repeated many times to increase learning, enable multiple perspectives to be taken into account and refine the final outcomes.	

Good & Bad Practice

If you have a large group size then send an observer with each spokesperson to take notes - they are not allowed to participate.

Resist all attempts to be nice in respect of dissent, no learning will take place

Facilitators who get involved in, or listen to the material can easily be tempted to influence the groups.

Facilitators may add variety by switching between dissent and assent, however the default should be dissent in the first few cycles (assent is a good way of finishing multiple cycles). We do not recommend the use of assent on its own.

Other Methods

This method is used with any workshop technique