

Tool 2: Human Spectrogram

Aim of the tool

To discover similarities and differences within a group and to get a spectrum of comments on an issue.

When to use it?

Especially at the connection stage. It can be used to make issues open and discussable, and provide insight in the complexity of a situation. Also useful as an icebreaker exercise or energizer. It helps stakeholders to get to know each other.

What is a Human Spectrogram?

In a human spectrogram, coloured tape is positioned across an open floor to symbolize a spectrogram. On one end of the tape, “strongly agree” is marked while the other end is labelled “strongly disagree”. A facilitator will provide a statement and participants are asked to position themselves along the spectrogram. Participants can stand in the middle or take in-between positions.

The facilitator interviews people along the line to give participants the opportunity to clarify their selected position. Participants are welcomed to vividly express their opinion while listeners can change positions in real-time, whenever their perspective on the topic has changed.



Source: Nancy White (2003)

Why develop a Human Spectrogram?

This technique can be used as an icebreaker and energizer but also to open up discussion on controversial topics. Depending on the selected aim of the tool, statements will vary widely. To energize the group and clarify the process, you can start with a fun statement.

Human Spectrogram

Icebreaker or energizer examples:

- “I am addicted to Facebook”
- “I am an extrovert”

Discussing controversial issues examples:

- “Wikileaks is good for humanity”
- “Only rich countries can solve poverty in the world”
- “The ultimate owners of an MSP process are those who provide the funding for it”
- “Basic health care should always be free”
- “Through MSPs we can diminish the gap between the rich and the poor in a more effective way”

Such statements are deliberately structured to be vague and ambiguous, and participants are encouraged to interpret the statements in whatever way they see fit. The result is often a brisk emergence of community and conversation amongst the participants, and a good 'mapping' of the topics and opinions that people want to explore and discuss. At CDI, we often use spectrograms to illustrate people's responses to simple statements, which make visible the mental models participants are (unconsciously) using. It allows us to discuss the importance of exploring mental models and paradigms so that stakeholders can understand why their positions often differ from each other.

Spectrograms can also result in a lot of spontaneous laughter, which is an excellent way to build the energy of the day.

Learn more

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