

Tool 47: Ritual Dissent

Aim of the tool

To test and enhance proposals, stories or ideas by subjecting them to challenges or positive alternatives.

When to use it?

The Convergence stage of an MSP, when ideas and proposals of a group need to be tested and refined.

What is Ritual Dissent?

Receiving feedback is not easy, and when feedback is not positive, people often get defensive and upset. Despite this, negative feedback can be very important for improving proposals or ideas – if only because people tend to remember it better than positive feedback! But it is not easy to create a safe manner to discuss feedback without damaging personal relationships.

Ritual Dissent is a workshop technique designed by Dave Snowden (Cognitive Edge) to test and enhance proposals, stories, ideas or other content by subjecting them to ritualised dissent (challenges) or assent (positive alternatives). It is a knowledge management tool which offers a formalized way to share criticism and disagreement for the purpose of learning and increased resilience. In all cases, it is a forced listening technique, not a dialogue or discourse.

The basic approach involves a spokesperson presenting a series of ideas to a group who receives 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 attacks (dissent) or provides alternative proposals (assent).



Photo: Ritual dissent being used in a workshop for ICCO, New Delhi (CDI, 2011)

The ritualization 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 consensus based techniques.

Ritual Dissent is meant to simulate the process of delivering new ideas to management or decision-makers, and to open up new thinking to necessary criticism and iterations. The process is meant to enforce listening, without disruption.

The technique assumes that the participants are engaged in another process. The other process will stimulate their thinking to be challenged - which could be creating a business plan, developing an action plan for the MSP, or something else creative. This process should be underway before ritual dissent/assent.

How to create a ritual dissent setting

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

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 dissent/assent.

The tables should be set up so it is easy (and 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 a pen and paper, and the clipboard eases the process somewhat.

How to facilitate:

1. Appoint a spokesman for presentation. It is advisable that the person have "a resilient and robust personality and not bear a grudge".
2. Invite a critical audience. Preferably the audience will consist of more external/outside than within the working group to offer different perspectives on the issue..
3. Short presentation of the ideas, proposal, concept or similar content that are to be challenged by the group. The spokesman presents to the silent audience which offer no comments yet. It is suggested to limit the presentation to 3 minutes.
4. The challenge: The spokesman is given a clipboard for taking notes and turns around. The group should then attack the ideas with full and complete vigour. The spokesman listens in silence and takes note.

5. Conclusions: The spokesman takes some time to reflect on what he or she has heard. He or she then turns around to face the group again and tells the group what he or she has learned.

The flow of events starts after the group has been working for some time on the process/outcome, which is to be improved by ritual dissent/assent. Cycling this ritual process several times with multiple groups offers a significant opportunity for improvement of the initial idea presented. Through this process not only the spokesperson learns, but the group dissenting or assenting also learns from their comments.

Learn more

Cognitive Edge. Ritual dissent: <https://cognitive-edge.com/library/methods/ritual-dissent/>

Knowledge Sharing Tools and Methods Toolkit: www.kstoolkit.org/Ritual+Dissent

SDC Learning & Networking site: www.shareweb.ch/site/Learning-and-Networking/home-sdc-km-tools/ritual-dissent