

## **Human Spectrums: An Interactive Tool for Building Understanding and Group Capacity**

This article presents the following information about Human Spectrums: a description of Human Spectrums; a rationale for their use; a set of examples demonstrating the range of their applicability; directions for constructing, conducting, and debriefing Spectrums; and possible modifications to the standard structure of Spectrums for special purposes.

### Introduction to Human Spectrums

Human Spectrums are a simple, direct means for achieving some of the understanding and solidarity necessary for group members to work effectively together. In an active, engaging way, Spectrums provide a group with information about its members and its overall composition. That information can include attitudes, preferences, or positions on a topic a group is considering.

During Spectrums people reveal only “public” information about themselves, and much of that information has a direct and obvious bearing on the work people are to do together. The information has a quality of useful news — people learn helpful information about how to work well with each other, and they do it in a way that does not cause or stimulate defensive reactions.

Spectrums are most useful when group members first begin working together. A few simple Spectrums, three or four at most, are enough to get people talking to one another and to build energy. Spectrums can also serve as a device a group uses repeatedly throughout its work together to get a sense of where members stand on issues.

Spectrums usually are done in sets. For each Spectrum in the set, the facilitator describes the opposite ends of a spectrum. Here is a simple example of one Spectrum that could be included in a set. The facilitator indicates that the extreme left end of the Spectrum is for people who have their greatest energy really early in the morning, say 5 a.m. The extreme right end of the Spectrum is for people who have their greatest energy late at night, say 2 a.m. The group members’ task is then to arrange themselves in the appropriate order. People stand and place themselves somewhere on the Spectrum. If people place themselves appropriately in relation to each other, there will be a “spectrum” of people from those who have energy earlier in the day to those who have energy later in the day. The Spectrum may have gaps. It may reveal that most group members share a preference for early morning work, or that members’ preferences are spread throughout the day and night.

As an introductory device, Spectrums have a number of advantages. First, they are physical. Simply moving around raises the energy of the group. Second, Spectrums encourage everyone to participate. Typically, people will not resist placing themselves on the line. Third, group

members will have to talk at least a little bit with their friends and neighbors to figure out their place on the Spectrum; whether they are shy or outgoing, that talk will come easily, without invading people's privacy.

Another advantage is that when Spectrums are properly constructed and conducted they are totally non-judgmental. Appropriate Spectrums are chosen so that neither end of the Spectrum — nor any place on it — provides a perceived advantage or benefit. If the Spectrum is chosen appropriately, every place on it is a good place to be.

One way to introduce Spectrums to a group with no previous experience with them is to ask people to line themselves up according to birth date in the year. January 1<sup>st</sup> is one end of the Spectrum and December 31<sup>st</sup> is the other. This simple Spectrum makes it clear that people have to talk to one another to find out where they fit, and that it's possible to get everybody in line and check to see if they have the appropriate order.

### Examples of Spectrums

Spectrums can be designed to meet the needs of any group, depending on what the group is working on or toward. Spectrums can be designed to work on questions of group process, or they can be designed to work on specific issues that the group will be facing. Here is an example that works on process. One end is for people who are perfectly comfortable with direct confrontation about areas of conflict. The other end is for people who are totally comfortable with leaving conflict alone and trusting it will resolve itself. This Spectrum provides information about each person's preferences for dealing with conflict. It also lets the group know whether its members have similar preferences and whether their preferences cluster closer to one end of the spectrum or the other.

Here is another example that works on process, appropriate for a group whose task is to plan and then carry out a particular activity. One end is for people who love to plan and would spend all of their lives planning if they could. The other end is for people who love to act and who do not really want to plan for a single minute.

Here is an example that moves closer to the content of a group's work. In this example the group has to create a budget. One end is for people who think of themselves as really frugal and careful with money. The other end is for people who think of themselves as generous or expansive. This type of Spectrum allows people to self-identify and to begin to have a conversation about the budget, as well as recognize the nature and extent of difference in their approaches.

Here is an example of substantive decision-making. In this example the group is a school board

with responsibility to set a disciplinary policy for its school system. One end is for people who think that discipline, authority, and control are most important. The other end is for people who believe that respect for individuals and a lot of latitude and freedom are most important. As in all well-constructed Spectrums, group members choose between two “goods” or two values that are both worthy.

Here are a few examples of Spectrums useful in many group work settings:

- ▶ morning person — night person
- ▶ planner — doer
- ▶ think to speak — speak to think
- ▶ detail person — big picture person
- ▶ starter — finisher
- ▶ structured — flexible
- ▶ linear problem solver — creative problem solver
- ▶ “planful” — spontaneous
- ▶ prefer tradition and history — prefer invention and the future

### Constructing Spectrums

A few basic principles govern ways to design and conduct Spectrums. One principle for constructing them, already mentioned, is that the ends of the Spectrum must be value-neutral in group members’ perceptions, so that there is no real or perceived advantage or no better place to be on the Spectrum in any objective sense. This neutrality is necessary so that people will be willing to place themselves where they truly think they fit rather than worrying about the judgment that other people will make about where they place themselves.

A second principle for constructing Spectrums is that they always need to be relevant to the particular group. Spectrums succeed when there is a connection or obvious bearing on what the group members are working on or learning together.

### Conducting Spectrums

The first principle for conducting Spectrums is that the facilitator must offer a clear oral description of the ends of the Spectrum. It is important to make clear statements, especially at the beginning, and particularly if people are not familiar with Spectrums. The facilitator must be clear that the group members need to put themselves in one single line — they cannot be clumped up.

Another principle is that people are responsible for placing themselves. It is inappropriate for anyone to direct someone else to a position or to remark about someone's chosen location on the Spectrum unless that other person invites comments. Whatever people describe about where they are and why they are there should be honored, even if people offer contradictory information about why they are in particular spot. The facilitator takes whatever explanations people offer.

### Putting Spectrums to Work

Once people are lined up, the facilitator guides the conversation about a Spectrum in ways that add to the information people will get from the simple ordering on the line. Here are some suggestions for that conversation:

1. Engage the group in building a description of the Spectrum. Ask people to identify the middle. This is necessary because some groups will not fill in the whole Spectrum. For example, if a Spectrum is about early morning or late night preferences, it might be that the entire Spectrum for a group runs only from 5 a.m. to 11 a.m.
2. Ask people how far away from the middle they are and how close to the ends of the Spectrum they are.
3. Ask people what it means to be where they are, so that people have a clear sense about what it means for someone to be in a particular place on the Spectrum, and what that person thinks about himself or herself in relationship to this Spectrum. If people are in the middle of the Spectrum on morning versus nighttime energy, what does that mean? Does that mean that they peak at the middle of the day or that they peak at 7 p.m.?

People will answer questions about their place on the "peak energy" Spectrum quite easily. When dealing with Spectrums that reflect more subtle preferences, however, as people describe where they stand it gives them a chance to talk a little more about how they like to live their lives and what it's like to be them.

4. Finally, if appropriate, ask questions about applicability. What does the range exhibited by the group and its pattern of clustering tell the group about its overall capacity? What does it tell the group about what individuals might or might not be suited to do? What does it tell the group about challenges in front of it?

The conversation then focuses on what the overall composition of the group is and what bearing any differences have on the group members' work together. Spectrums reveal how diversity on a range of issues can be useful to the way the group works. Information from Spectrums underscores the point that people have different kinds of abilities and

talents that can be called upon in different ways. Spectrums can also suggest to a group which people are more likely to be successful at certain kinds of tasks.

### Modifications

There are two possible modifications to the way Spectrums are run. If they are to be used as the main device for working with a group on a particular set of issues during a lengthy session, the group can set up a room so that people are sitting in a big open U or even a hollow square, so long as all participants can sit in one tier and can see one another. The facilitator asks group members to stand up and arrange themselves on a Spectrum in a line around the outside of the chairs, and then invites them to sit back down around the outside of the table so that they maintain the order of their Spectrum. Instead of standing in a line, people sit all the way around a table from one end of the Spectrum to the other. This shortens standing time and permits a more leisurely discussion about the Spectrum.

A second alternative is to use a flip chart. The facilitator lays out a line on the flip chart page, chops it into quarters or into smaller units, and indicates the ends of the Spectrum. S/he then simply asks people where they would place themselves on this line. The facilitator can put little x's or initials next to each position in order to get a quick reading of where each person would be. The group can then have a conversation about the Spectrum as if the group members were standing on that line.

### Conclusion

Human Spectrums are that rare process: they are both fun and useful. They engage, energize, and connect people who are working together. They avoid causing resistance, embarrassment, or inappropriate personal disclosures. Spectrums are flexible structures that can accelerate group members' understanding of how to make best use of their combined resources. Although they are particularly useful when a group is first forming, Spectrums also can help established groups stay grounded in member preferences, and profit from wise use of members' differing resources and capabilities.

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\*If you use Human Spectrums and want to contribute to a new knowledge base about how they worked, please send a brief description of your experience to:

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