

Best Practices

HUMAN SPECTRUMS

OVERVIEW

We listen in as a facilitator invites a group to form a Human Spectrum: “If you think the big picture is *always* more important than the details, stand on the far right. If you think that importance *always* lies in the details, stand on the far left. The rest of you, talk with other people and place yourselves somewhere on the spectrum. You should end up in a single line from big picture people at one end to detail people at the other end.”

RKI partner Steve Kay may have invented Human Spectrums — he’s not sure — but he certainly uses them to accelerate new groups through the early forming stages and to help established work groups sort out interests, views, and positions. Steve cites his favorite features of Human Spectrums:

“Spectrums avoid any hint of getting too personal. They concentrate on the kinds of information people like to share

and need to share with each other to work well together. Spectrums add value to work groups, community task forces, boards, and civic groups. Spectrums make it easy, fun, and interesting for group members to form connections and understand each others’ interests.”

Wait, there’s more: “Spectrums are physical; standing and moving around raises the energy of the group. Spectrums are specifically designed so that no one is left out. Every point on the spectrum is okay. Spectrums promote natural, easy conversation that brings everyone into full group membership early on.”

This issue of *Best Practices* introduces Human Spectrums as RKI partners use them. E-mail us at our new address :

rki@robertsandkay.com

for more detailed information about using Spectrums with your own groups. Try Spectrums and let us know what you learn.

Spectrum

A broad sequence or range of related qualities, ideas, or activities.



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THE PROCESS

WORKING WITH SPECTRUMS

Planning for Spectrums

1. Make a list of Spectrums that will be useful to your group. The Spectrums may address attitudes, preferences, processes, or positions on issues. Here are some examples:

Planner/Doer
Starter/Finisher
Structured/Flexible
Linear problem solver/
Creative problem solver
Morning person/night
person

2. Make sure each end or “pole” of the Spectrum is clearly value neutral.

Construct the poles so that people can place themselves anywhere they wish on the Spectrum without worrying about others’ judgments.

Conducting Spectrums

1. Explain a few simple ground rules; for example: “Put yourself somewhere on the Spectrum. Choose your own spot — it’s inappropriate to direct others to positions or to comment about their chosen spots unless they invite your comments. Form a single line without clumps.”

2. Take particular care to describe each pole clearly so that people will hear the contrasts.

3. Use a fun, “practice” Spectrum as a group’s first experience. For example, “Please organize yourselves according to the month and day of your birth — not the year. January 1 will be on my far left, December 31 on my far right.”

Putting Spectrums to Work

1. Once people are placed on the Spectrum, assist the group in describing the Spectrum in words. Identify people who are in the middle. Identify those who are on each extreme end, if anyone is.

Ask people what it means to be where they are: for example, “What does it mean to be in the middle on this planning and doing Spectrum?” or “What does it mean to be three people away from the end on the linear problem solving side?”

2. Help group members apply the Spectrum to their work. For



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Personally Speaking

I’m not much inclined towards the “touchy-feely” approach to organizational work. I’m also no fan of gimmicky or cute exercises where people reveal embarrassing things about themselves. But I do see the need for people to learn enough about each other to make group work go well. Human Spectrums have become my standard means for promoting the understanding and solidarity necessary for effective group work.

Human Spectrums grew out of a process of self-identification called “Up-Downs” that I learned from work on cultural diversity. Over time I came to understand what modifications work with which groups, and I learned what not to do. Now I am quite bold in introducing Spectrums in unlikely settings. Nothing is foolproof, but I believe that a set of underlying principles ensures that Spectrums can be used to some advantage with almost any group.

Steve Kay

example, "What does this range of preferences and this particular clustering tell you about your ability to get work done?" "What does this array suggest that your group is well suited to do?" "What does this Spectrum suggest about challenges in front of you?" "How can you benefit from your diversity?" "Does this Spectrum suggest anything to you about who should do certain kinds of work?"

Spectrums on Issues

Spectrums work easily with preferences (prefer the excitement and mysteries of the future/prefer the traditions and certainties of history) and processes (prefer to plan/prefer to do). With care, you can also use Spectrums to work on issues.

For a group charged with creating a budget, for example, one end of a Spectrum could be for people who think of themselves as frugal and careful with money. The other end could be for people who think of themselves as generous or expansive or who like to invest funds in order to benefit in the future. This Spectrum allows people to launch a conversation about the budget that recognizes the differences in their approaches, and makes plain the value they place on those differences.

For a school board with responsibility to set a

disciplinary policy for its school system, one end of a Spectrum could be for people who think that discipline, authority, and control are most important. The other end could be for people who believe that respect for individuals and a lot of latitude and freedom are most important.

Modifications

If you plan to use Spectrums as the main device for working with a group on a set of issues in a lengthy session, set up the chairs in the meeting room in the shape of a big open U or a hollow square, so that everyone can sit and see each other. Ask group members to stand and form the desired Spectrum in a line that runs behind the chairs. Then ask people to sit in the chairs, maintaining their places in the Spectrum. This makes it easy to talk through the Spectrum at length without people getting tired.

A second alternative is to use a flip chart. Group members remain seated. Lay out a line on the flip chart, chop it into quarters or smaller units, and describe each end of the Spectrum. Ask people where they would place themselves on this line. Put little x's or initials on the flip chart so that everyone can see how the group clusters on that Spectrum. Then talk through the results as if people were actually standing in place along the Spectrum.



Note of interest:

Steve Kay and Rona Roberts have been selected to present a full-day pre-conference workshop on Human Spectrums at the International Association of Facilitators annual conference in Williamsburg, Virginia on January 14, 1999. For details about the workshop, please contact us at rki@robertsandkay.com, or contact IAF at <http://www.iaf-world.org> for full conference information.



IN THEORY

Allow us to be a bit philosophical. We like using Human Spectrums because they quickly build valuable connections among group members. It is more than just a nice thing for group members to connect with each other. Connections form the basis for solid productive work together — particularly for democratic work.

Noted scholar Jane Mansbridge writes:

Aristotle tells us that the Greeks saw a kind of solidarity, which they called “friendship,” as the necessary basis of the state. Further, they identified equality, consensus, face-to-face contact, and common interest as distinguishing features of that friendship.*

Mansbridge then suggests that such friendship among people makes possible a “unitary democracy of friendship based on common interests.” This democracy differs in many ways from the more familiar adversary democracy that is based on conflicting interests.

In essence, connections or “friendships” offer a fresh opportunity for people to build things together in communities and work places. We encourage you to use Human Spectrums to help group members build essential relationships and work together more democratically.

*Mansbridge, Jane J. [Beyond Adversary Democracy](#). Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

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Fast, fun, and physical:
Human Spectrums