

# 'Speed sparring'



## Suitable tool for:

- Helping people to make progress with a question or problem.
- Creating energy in a group: everyone is actively involved (which makes it an effective way to start up a day or even a course)
- Stimulating learning from peers
- Perhaps even for practicing communication skills (listening, feedback)

## Steps:

1. Each participant formulates an issue or an approach on which they would like to receive feedback. Preferably, all of these issues share one common theme (a professional dilemma, a specific type of activity), or they are similar with regard to the type of question (e.g. what is your development need? Or: what trends do you perceive, and how would you like to deal with those?)
2. Space the chairs in the room, pairwise. If possible, make 1 or 2 long double row(s) of chairs. Place the chairs so that participants face each other.
3. Split the group up in two: 'problem owners' and 'sparring partners'.
4. The problem owners pose their question to their sparring partner, and talk about it for ten minutes. Then, they wrap up the first meeting and pose their issue to a second colleague – including the new insights from the first meeting. Again, this conversation takes 10 minutes. Finally, there is a third round, also lasting 10 minutes.
5. Ensuingly, everyone engages in absolute silence for 3-5 minutes. The problem owners have time to gather their thoughts, write down important new input. The sparring partners from the first round can prepare for the second round, in which they can ask for feedback on their own issues.
6. Participants change roles, and repeat steps 4 and 5.

## What does it look like?

- Everyone sits and you explain which role everyone fulfils. Problem owners in one row, sparring partners in the other...
- Once the process gets started, the room is filled with noise. This makes people concentrate harder on their own conversation. Concentration grows.
- Each round, participants are more engaged... everyone becomes wrapped up in the process.
- The silent episode after the first three rounds of sparring means a very dramatic change of energy. Very much needed. You can feel the concentration of the group.
- After that, the noise swells again, faster than before, because everyone now understands the concept.
- The hour is over before you know it...

### **When to use this method?**

The technique is basically a way for people to – very quickly and efficiently – make big steps in an issue that they are working on.

Take for example a group of co-workers who all encounter a certain theme in their work (e.g. HRD professionals who all have to facilitate group meetings once in a while; managers who have bad news conversations). Everyone takes a current, actual issue from their own everyday practice, and asks for feedback during the speed sparring. Because everyone is familiar with similar problems and challenges, sparring is very rewarding and of high quality (people can learn from each other's experience)..

I have also used it in a group of managers that were participating in a course together. In the first meeting, I asked them to share with each other their learning questions, and development objectives. It was a very effective way to sharpen and deepen these objectives, and to create a group spirit.

### **What you need:**

- Time: 1 hour
- Large enough space
- A minimum of 7-8 participants.

### **Some small tips from experience**

- Be very clear and concise in your instructions for switching places. For example: 'the problem owners, please stand up and go to the seat on your left.' It is important to keep up the speed and concentration, and prevent chaos.
- Announce the end of each round, 1 minute beforehand. Ask everyone to end their conversation. This too promotes the flow between rounds.
- Please ensure that the quiet period is actually quiet. People receive so much information, they really need time and focus to 'harvest', to gather their thoughts.
- Do not forget the silent period at the end! Those who are problem owner the second time round also need 'processing time'.
- Carefully observe the participants during this exercise, it is very informative with regard to their listening skills, their ability to ask questions, etc...