

# Ritual Dissent

## What is Ritual Dissent?

Ritual Dissent is a workshop method designed to test and enhance sketched ideas, drafted proposals, strategies, etc. by subjecting them to ritualised criticism, in other words to have peers challenge them. It is a listening technique, not a dialogue or discourse.

The basic approach involves a spokesperson presenting an idea, proposal, strategy, concept or similar to a group who attentively listens in silence. The spokesperson then turns his/her chair, so that his/her back is to the audience and listens in silence while the group attacks the ideas.

## What are the benefits?

Inviting peers for a Ritual Dissent process helps to ensure that the knowledge and experience of others is integrated early enough in the elaboration of a new concept, strategy or proposal. This may mitigate the risk of a “rude awakening” later when presenting for the first time outside the core group in the “external world”.

Listening in silence without eye contact increases the attention of the listener and depersonalizes the attacks and critics.

## How do I go about it?

### 1. Appoint a spokesperson to make the presentation

The person should have a resilient and robust personality and “not bear a grudge”.

### 2. Invite critical audience

Preferably, there are enough external/outside in the audience to bring in a different perspective on the issue than the one within the working group.

### 3. Presentation

Short presentation of the ideas, proposal, concept or similar that are to be challenged by the group. The spokesperson gives the presentation and at this stage the audience does not make any comments. It is recommended to limit the presentation to 3 minutes.

### 4. The challenge

The spokesperson is given a clipboard for taking notes and turns around so his/her back faces the audience. The group should then attack the ideas with full and complete vigour. The spokesperson listens in silence and takes note. Make sure people realise that the idea is not to be fair, reasonable or supportive, but to attack or provide a better alternative!

### 5. Conclusions

The spokesperson takes some time to reflect on what she/he has heard. He/she then turns around to face the group again and tells the group what she/he has learned. Avoid explanations or justifications!

## Ritual Dissent in a workshop setting

The process of Ritual Dissent can be designed in a workshop setting, where several groups with multiple presentations challenge each other. By repeating the ritual through rotating groups a significant improvement can be achieved. Further, not only the spokesperson learns, but the group dissenting learns also from different presentations and respective comments.

For this a minimum of three groups with at least three participants in each is required. Ideally the number of participants in one group should be higher, but no higher than a dozen. The larger the number of groups, the more iterations and variety.

Each group should be seated at a round table (or in 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, the high level of noise may restrict the ability of the spokesperson to listen to the dissent. The tables should be set up so it is easy (and very self-evident) to give instructions on how to move from one table to the next in a clockwise or anti-clockwise fashion. The technique has been successfully used with groups in separate rooms connected through a central space (although this makes the job of facilitating more difficult).

Each table should have a clipboard and pen for the spokesperson. This is not vital, but spokespeople frequently forget to take pen and paper, and the clipboard somewhat smoothes the process.

In such a workshop setting where the spokesperson rotates from one group to the next the facilitator will need to keep rigid control of the rotation process otherwise things go badly!

## Alternative

An alternative to this method is Ritual Assent, meaning that the group comes up with better ideas or major improvement, instead of objections and critics. See collegial coaching.