

Metro North Health CULTURE & ENGAGEMENT



Stinky Fish Activity

Time: Approximately 45 minutes.

Materials needed: Printed “Stinky Fish” templates, pens, wall or board for display.

Participants: Team or department.

Values in Action: Integrity, Compassion, Teamwork, Respect.

Outcomes: Builds trust, increases psychological safety, and supports open dialogue around hidden concerns.

Purpose

This activity creates a safe space for participants to acknowledge and share concerns they may usually avoid discussing. Like a “stinky fish” that gets smellier the longer it’s ignored, unspoken worries can grow over time and hinder team progress. This session helps surface those concerns early, so the group can move forward with clarity, empathy, and openness.

How to run this activity

Step 1: Introduction (10 mins)

Introduce the activity and explain the metaphor:

“The stinky fish is something you’re carrying with you — a concern, fear, or hesitation — that you haven’t voiced. Left unspoken, it starts to ‘smell’ and affect your work or mindset. Today, we’re going to air those out.”

Hand out the printed template. Let participants know this is a judgment-free space — sharing is about building team trust, not solving everything immediately.

Step 2: Reflect on your stinky fish (5 mins)

Invite everyone to take a few minutes to privately reflect and write down their own stinky fish. Just a few words or a short phrase is fine.

Examples:

- *“I’m worried I won’t have time to learn the new system.”*
- *“I’m anxious about how this change will affect my role.”*
- *“I feel like my concerns aren’t being heard.”*

Have participants keep their fish with them.

Step 3: Share your stinky fish (10-20 mins)

- Invite participants to share their stinky fish with the group — one at a time.
- Keep it to 30–60 seconds per person.
- After sharing, participants can place their fish on a wall or whiteboard.

Remind everyone: this is not about fixing things now — it's about surfacing and acknowledging them as a team.

Step 4: Closing the activity (5-10 mins)

Thank the group for their honesty and vulnerability. Acknowledge that:

- It's completely normal to feel uneasy about change, uncertainty, or new challenges.
- Voicing concerns is the first step to working through them together.
- Some of the shared concerns may be addressed later in the session or through follow-up actions.

Optional: Let participants know the group will revisit some themes or insights as part of the wider workshop or program.

Key takeaways

- Everyone carries unspoken concerns — acknowledging them builds psychological safety.
- Naming discomfort helps reduce tension and opens space for collaboration.
- Vulnerability, when supported by trust, strengthens team connection and clarity.