



World Café Conversations

The World Café refers to both a vision and a method of dialogue. World Café Conversations are an intentional way to create a living network of conversation around questions that matter. A Café Conversation is a creative process for leading collaborative dialogue, sharing knowledge and creating possibilities for action in groups of all sizes.

The challenges of life require us to find new ways to access the wisdom and intelligence inherent in groups both small and large. The need for collaboration, insight and coordinated action has never been greater. Café Conversations are one way that communities, businesses, governments, and people from all walks of life are using to create a common purpose, share knowledge, make more intelligent decisions, and call forth life-affirming action together.

The methodology of is simple. The environment is set up like a café. Tables seat four or five participants, and are covered by flip chart or butcher paper. Markers or crayons are available. If possible, it is nice to have flowers, candles, quiet music and refreshments. Each table should select one host who will remain at the table for all three rounds of discussion. Each round can last from 20 to 30 minutes.

During the first round, participants have conversations in response to a compelling question which deepens understanding around a specific issue.

During the second round, the host remains at his/her initial table, while the others travel to separate tables. Table hosts welcome newcomers to their tables and share the essence of that table's conversation so far. The newcomers relate any conversational threads which they are carrying -- and then the conversation continues, deepening as the round progresses. This process repeats a third time, usually with a new question for the third round.

At the end of the third round, participants review the information that has been captured in words and drawings. With their help, the table hosts prepare a summary of key emerging themes, insights, and learnings. These are harvested and shared with the whole group, captured on flipcharts or other means for making the collective intelligence of the whole group visible to everyone so they can reflect on what is emerging in the room. At this point the Café may end.

The seven design principles of World Café are:

1. Set the context. Clarify the purpose and broad parameters within which the dialogue will unfold.
2. Create hospitable space. Ensure the welcoming environment and psychological safety that nurtures personal comfort and mutual respect.
3. Explore questions that matter. Focus collective attention on powerful questions that attract collaborative engagement.
4. Encourage everyone's contribution. Enliven the relationship between the "me" and the "we" by inviting full participation and mutual giving.

5. Cross-pollinate and connect diverse perspectives. Enable people to visit different tables and hear different perspectives. They act as pollinators, and begin to create a sense of the whole by hearing the “buzz” from the room.
6. Listen together for patterns, insights, and deeper questions. Focus shared attention in ways that nurture coherence of thought without losing individual contributions.
7. Harvest and share collective discoveries. Make collective knowledge and insight visible and actionable.

Finding the Right Questions

In World Café, the formulation of powerful questions is a fundamental art and skill. Questions like, "What's important to you about this situation, and why do you care?" and, "What are we not seeing (or talking about) that is vital to our progress?" can open up new possibilities and energy. If you (as planner or host) don't know what question(s) are right for a particular Café, you can ask as a first round question, "What question, if answered, could make the greatest difference to the future of the situation we're exploring here?"

Here are some questions to facilitate the formulation of “the questions.”

- What question, if explored thoroughly, could provide the breakthrough possibilities we are seeking?
- Is this question relevant to the real life or real work of the Café participants?
- Is this a genuine question to which we don't know the answer?
- What work do we want this question to do? What kind of conversation, meaning, and feeling do we imagine this question evoking in those who will be exploring it?
- What assumptions or beliefs are embedded in the way this question is constructed?
- Is this question likely to generate hope, imagination, engagement, new thinking, and creative action, or is it likely to increase a focus on past problems and obstacles?
- Does this question leave room for new and different questions to be raised as the initial question is explored?



Report Out Plenary Discussion

Questions for the group or for individual reflection:

- What is emerging here?
- If there was a single voice in the room, what would it be saying?
- What deeper questions are emerging as a result of these conversations?
- Do we notice any patterns and what do those patterns point to, or how do they inform us?
- What do we now see and know as a result of these conversations?

Re/sources:

Juanita, B. and I. David (2005). The World Cafe: Shaping our Future Through Convesations That Matter. San Francisco, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

Holman, P., et al (2007). The Change Handbook: The Definitive Resource on Today's Best Methods for Engaging Whole Systems. San Francisco, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

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