

World Café to Go

2002 Whole Systems Associates, World Café Community

Conducting an exciting Café Conversation is not hard – it's limited only by your imagination! The Café format is flexible and adapts to many different circumstances. When these guidelines are used *in combination*, they foster collaborative dialogue, active engagement and constructive possibilities for action.

Clarify the Purpose

Pay attention early to the reason you are bringing people together. Knowing the purpose of your meeting enables you to consider which participants need to be there and what parameters are important to achieve your purpose.

Create a Hospitable Space

Café hosts around the world emphasize the power and importance of creating a hospitable space – one that feels safe and inviting. When people feel comfortable to be themselves, they do their most creative thinking, speaking, and listening. In particular, consider how your **invitation** and your **physical set-up** contribute to creating a welcoming **atmosphere**.

Explore Questions That Matter

Finding and framing *questions that matter* to those who are participating in your Café is an area where thought and attention can produce profound results. Your Café may only explore a single question, or several questions may be developed to support a logical progression of discovery throughout several rounds of dialogue. In many cases, Café conversations are as much about discovering and exploring powerful questions as they are about finding effective solutions.

Encourage Everyone's Contribution

As leaders we are increasingly aware of the importance of participation, but most people don't only want to participate, they want to actively contribute to making a difference. It is important to encourage everyone in your meeting to contribute their ideas and perspective, while also allowing anyone who wants to participate by simply listening to do so.

Connect Diverse Perspectives

The opportunity to move between tables, meet new people, actively contribute your thinking, and link the essence of your discoveries to ever-widening circles of thought is

one of the distinguishing characteristics of the Café. As participants carry key ideas or themes to new tables, they exchange perspectives, greatly enriching the possibility for surprising new insights.

Listen for Insights and Share Discoveries

Through practicing shared listening and paying attention to themes, patterns and insights, we begin to sense a connection to the larger whole. After several rounds of conversation, it is helpful to engage in a **whole group conversation**. This offers the entire group an opportunity to connect the overall themes or questions that are now present.

Café Conversations at a Glance

- Seat **four or five people at small Café-style tables** or in conversation clusters.
- Set up **progressive** (usually three) **rounds of conversation** of approximately 20-30 minutes each.
- **Questions or issues that genuinely matter** to your life work or community are engaged while other small groups explore similar questions at nearby tables.
- Encourage both table hosts and members to **write, doodle and draw key ideas** on their tablecloths or to note key ideas on large index cards or placemats in the centre of the group.
- Upon completing the initial round of conversation, ask one person to remain at the table as the “host” **while the others serve as travelers or “ambassadors of meaning”**. The travelers carry key ideas, themes and question into their new conversations.
- Ask the table host to welcome the new guests and briefly share the main ideas, themes and questions of the initial conversation. Encourage guests to **link and connect ideas** coming from their previous table conversations – listening carefully and building on each other’s contributions.
- By providing opportunities for people to move in several rounds of conversation, **ideas, questions, themes begin to link and connect**. At the end of the second round, all of the tables or conversation clusters in the room will be *cross-pollinated* with insights from prior conversations.
- In the third round of conversation, people can return to their home (original) tables to **synthesize their discoveries**, or they may continue traveling to new

tables, leaving the same or a new host at the table. Sometimes a new question that helps **deepen the exploration** is posed for the third round of conversations.

- After several rounds of conversation, initiate a period of sharing discoveries and insights in a **whole group conversation**. It is in these town meeting-style conversations that patterns can be identified, collective knowledge grows, and possibilities for action emerge.

Once you know what you want to achieve and the amount of time you have to work with, you can decide the appropriate number and length of conversation rounds, the most effective use of questions and the most interesting ways to connect and cross-pollinate ideas.

Café Etiquette

Focus on what matters.

Contribute your thinking.

Speak your mind and heart.

Listen to understand.

Link and connect ideas.

Listen together for insights and deeper questions.

Play, Doodle, Draw – writing on the tablecloths is encouraged.

Have fun!

The Importance of Café Question(s)

The question(s) you choose or that participants discover during a Café conversation are critical to its success. Your Café may explore a single question or several questions may be developed to support a logical progression of discovery throughout several rounds of dialogue.

Keep in mind that...

- Well-crafted questions attract *energy* and focus our *attention* to what really counts. Experienced Café hosts recommend posing open-ended questions – the kind that don't have yes or no answers.
- Good questions need not imply immediate action steps or problem solving. They should invite inquiry and discovery vs. advocacy and advantage.
- You'll know you have a good question when it continues to surface new ideas and possibilities.
- Bounce possible questions off of key people who will be participating to see if they sustain interest and energy.

A Powerful Question

- Is simple and clear.
- Is thought provoking.
- Generates energy.
- Focuses inquiry.
- Surfaces unconscious assumptions.
- Opens new possibilities.

5 Ways to Make Collective Knowledge Visible

1. Use a Graphic Recorder

In some Café events the whole group conversation is captured by a graphic recorder who draws the group's ideas on flip charts or a wall mural using text and graphics to illustrate the patterns of the conversation.

2. Take a Gallery Tour

At times, people will place the paper from their tables on the wall so members can take a tour of the group's ideas during a break.

3. Post your Insights

Participants can place large Post-Its with a single key insight on each blackboard, wall, etc., so that everyone can review the ideas during a break.

4. Create Idea Clusters

Group insights from the Post-Its into "affinity clusters" so that related ideas are visible and available for planning the group's next steps.

5. Make a Story

Some Cafes create a newspaper or storybook to bring the results of their work to larger audience after the event. A visual recorder can create a picture book along with text as documentation.

How to Create a Café Ambiance

Whether you are convening several dozen or several hundred people, it is essential to create an environment that evokes a feeling of both informality and intimacy. When your guests arrive they should know immediately that this is no *ordinary* meeting.

- If possible, select a space with natural light and an outdoor view to create a more welcoming atmosphere.
- Make the space look like an actual Café, with small tables that seat four or five people. Less than four at a table may not provide enough diversity of perspective, more than five limits the amount of personal interaction.

- Arrange the Café tables in a staggered, random fashion rather than in neat rows. Tables in a sidewalk Café after it has been open for a few hours look relaxed and inviting.
- Use colorful tablecloths and a small vase of flowers on each table. If the venue allows it add a candle to each table. Place plants or greenery around the room.
- Place at least two large sheets of paper over each tablecloth along with a mug or wineglass filled with colorful markers. Paper and pens encourage scribbling, drawing, and connecting ideas. In this way people will jot down ideas as they emerge.
- Put on additional Café table in the front of the room for the Host's and any presenter's material.
- Consider displaying art or adding posters to the walls (as simple as flip chart sheets with quotes), and play music as people arrive and you welcome them.
- To honor the tradition of community and hospitality provide beverages and snacks. A Café isn't complete without food and refreshments!

**Use your imagination!
Be creative!**

Café Supplies

- Small round tables of 36 to 42 inches are ideal, but small card tables will also work.
- Enough chairs for all participants and presenters.
- Colorful tablecloths.
- Flipchart paper or paper placemats for covering the Café tables.
- Colored water-based markers (so they don't bleed, Crayola and Mr. Sketch work well). For legibility use dark colors such as green, black, blue and purple. Add on or two bright colors to the cup (red, light green, light blue or orange) for adding emphasis.
- A vase with cut flowers, a mug or wineglass per table for markers.
- A side table for refreshments and snacks.

- Mural (6' long x 48" tall) or flip chart paper for making collective knowledge visible and tape for hanging.
- Flat wall space (minimum of 12') or two rolling white boards (4'x6' each)
- Additional wall (or window) space for posting collective work and/or the work of the tables.

Optional (depending on size and purpose)

- Overhead projector and screen.
- Sound system for tapes and/or CDs.
- A selection of background music.
- Wireless lavalieres for Café Hosts, and handheld wireless microphones for town meeting-style sessions.
- Easels and flipcharts.
- Basic supplies including stapler, paper clips, rubber bands, markers, masking tape, pens, push pins and pencils.
- Colored 4x6 inch or 5x8 inch cards (for personal note taking).
- 4.6 inch large Post-Its in bright colors for posting of ideas.

I'm the Café Host, What do I do?

The job of the Café host is to see that the six guidelines for dialogue and engagement are put into action. It is not the specific form, but living the spirit of the guidelines that counts. Hosting a Café requires thoughtfulness, artistry and care. The Café Host can make the difference between an interesting conversation and breakthrough thinking.

- Work with the planning team to determine the purpose of the Café and decide who should be invited to the gathering.
- Name your Café in a way appropriate to its purpose, for example: Leadership Café; Knowledge Café, Strategy Café; Discovery Café, etc.
- Help frame the invitation.
- Work with others to create a comfortable Café environment.

- Welcome the participants as they enter.
- Explain the purpose of the gathering.
- Post the question or themes for rounds of conversation and make sure that the question is visible to everyone on the overhead, flip chart or on cards at each table.
- Explain Café guidelines and Café Etiquette and post them on an overhead, an easel sheet or on cards at each table.
- Explain how the logistics of the Café will work, including the role of the Table Host (the person who will volunteer to remain at the end of the first round and welcome newcomers to their table).
- During the conversation, move among tables.
- Encourage everyone to participate.
- Remind people to note key ideas, doodle and draw.
- Let people know in a gentle way when its time to move and begin a new round of conversation.
- Make sure key insights are recorded visually or are gathered and posted if possible.
- Be creative in adapting the six Café guidelines to meet the unique needs of your situation.

I'm a Table Host, What Do I Do?

- Remind people at your table to jot down key connections, ideas, discoveries, and deeper questions as they emerge.
- Remain at the table when others leave and welcome travelers from other tables.
- Briefly share key insights from the prior conversation so others can link and build using ideas from their respective tables.

What are Café Conversations?

Café Conversations are an easy-to-use method for *creating* a living network of collaborative dialogue around questions that matter in service of the real work. Cafés in business have been named in many ways to meet specific goals, including

Creative Cafés, Knowledge Cafés, Strategy Cafés, Leadership Cafés, Marketing Cafés, and Product Development Cafés. Most Café conversations are based on the principles and format developed by The World Café (see www.theworldcafe.com), a growing global movement to support conversations that matter in corporate, government and community settings around the world.

Café Conversations are also a provocative *metaphor* enabling us to see new ways to make a difference in our lives and work. The power of conversation is so invisible and natural that we usually overlook it. For example, consider all the learning and action choices that occur as people move from one conversation to another both inside the organization and outside, with suppliers, customers and others in the larger community. What if we considered all of these conversations as one big dynamic Café, with each of job function as a table in a larger network of living conversations, which is the core process for sharing our collective knowledge and shaping our future? Once we become aware of the power of conversation as a key business process, we can use it more effectively for our mutual benefit.

The Café is built on the assumption that people already have within them the wisdom and creativity to confront even the most difficult challenges. Given the appropriate context and focus, it is possible to access and use this deeper knowledge about what's important.

What is essential about the Café method? We have outlined a series of guidelines for putting conversation to work through dialogue and engagement. If you put these guidelines to work when planning your meetings, you'll be surprised at the improved quality of the outcomes you get. When hosting a Café Conversation using *all* these guidelines *simultaneously* you'll find you are able to create a unique Café environment where surprising and useful outcomes are likely to occur.