

# The World Café

## Overview

The World Café is an intentional way to create a living network of conversations around questions that matter. It is a methodology which enables people (from 12 to 1200) to think together and intentionally create new, shared meaning and collective insight. Although people have been meeting in ways sharing the same spirit of the World Café for centuries, the actual methodology was 'discovered' and formalized by Juanita Brown and David Isaacs in 1995. Since then hundreds of thousands of people have been meeting in World Café style across the world.

The host of a World Café makes use of the café metaphor quite literally. The room is actually set up like a café, with people sitting spread out in groups of four at different tables, for deeply participative, high-quality conversations. They are guided to move to new tables as part of a series of conversational rounds around questions that matter to them. With each move, a table host remains behind, sharing the essence of his/her table's conversation. The others move out into the room and connect to what other tables have talked about, in this way



networking and cross-pollinating the conversations. The café, with its ability to weave and further build insights, new ideas or new questions, enables collective intelligence to evolve through a group.

The World Café is based on a core assumption that the knowledge and wisdom that we need is *already present and accessible*. Working with the World Café, we can bring out the collective wisdom of the group - greater than the sum of its individual parts - and channel it towards positive change. Finn Voldtofte, one of the early World Café pioneers actually sees the café as the unit of change force in any system or organization as it engages, inspires and connects different parts of a system. As Margaret Mead once said, "Never doubt that small groups of committed people can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has."

### *Four conditions to create café magic*

Many people who have participated in a really energetic and effective World Café, speak of the human "magic" that arose in the conversations and exchanges, as they moved from one to another conversation, evolving a theme or deepening a question.

Through the work of café practitioners, four conditions have been identified that enable 'café magic' to occur:

- 1. A question that matters:* Identifying compelling questions is an art form. For a question to matter to a group, it needs to have personal relevance to each person. They need to be invested with a real stake in the question and its answers. Good questions open up to a diverse range of thinking, are thought provoking and stimulate creativity. A good question places the ball in the court of the participants – showing them they are needed, valuable contributors to the whole.

2. *A safe and hospitable space*: Often meeting spaces are not very inviting. Here the café metaphor gets played out, and care is taken to create an inviting and warm environment. Often it is complete with café tables, table-cloths, flowers and candles. When people step into the World Café, they immediately know that this is not just another formal meeting. In addition to the physical environment, though, is the creation of an actually *safe space*, where people feel comfortable enough to contribute what they are thinking and feeling. If for example a group from the same organization participates in a World Café, care should be taken that people know they will not be punished later for saying something in disagreement with a colleague or superior.

3. *Mutual listening*: This condition emphasizes the importance of listening over talking. It connects to the underlying assumption that the knowledge and wisdom we need is already present. Collective insight will only emerge as we honour and encourage each person's unique contribution. Margaret Wheatley has said that "Intelligence emerges as a system connects with itself in new and diverse ways." As each person offers his or her perspective, they are contributing to the increasing intelligence and insight of the whole, often in surprising ways.

4. *A spirit of inquiry*: It is common for people to arrive to workshops and events with their expert knowledge, deliver it and leave without having shifted or grown in their own views at all. In the World Café, a spirit of inquiry is key. This means that people are truly in exploration together. They bring what they know, think and feel about a given question to the table, but they are willing to go beyond that, to work together to uncover new insights, different perspective, and deeper questions. We can all always learn more. Fostering a spirit of inquiry and curiosity for what is not known, will help overcome resistance to new or different thoughts.

The following *guidelines* are directly related to the four conditions, and can help a facilitator to enable the creation of these conditions.

1. *Clarify the purpose*: Before bringing together people for a café, clarify the purpose of the café. Understanding the purpose is necessary to be able to decide who should be there, the questions to discuss and the finer details of the design.

2. *Create Hospitable Space*

3. *Explore Questions that Matter*: Don't underestimate the care needed to succeed in identifying good questions.

4. *Encourage Each Person's Contribution*

5. *Connect Diverse People and Ideas*: The opportunity to move between tables, meet new people, actively contribute your thinking, and link discoveries is one of the distinguishing characteristics of the World Café. Design your cafe for maximum cross-pollinating without making the rounds themselves too short.

6. *Listen for insights and share discoveries*: Encourage each café group to take a bit of time for reflection to notice "what's at the center of our conversation?" After several rounds of café conversation it is helpful to engage in a conversation of the whole group to explore together which themes and questions are arising.

### *Café Etiquette*

The World Café homepage suggests that a simple way to invite participants to engage optimally in the World Café is by sharing the following "Café Etiquette" with them.

- *Focus* on what matters
- *Contribute* your thinking and experience

- *Speak* from the heart
- *Listen* to understand
- *Link And Connect* ideas
- *Listen Together* for deeper themes, insights and questions.
- *Play, Doodle, Draw*—writing on the tablecloths is encouraged!

## Applications

The World Café website and the new book released in 2005 about the World Café profile numerous stories of how this approach has been used in different contexts across cultures, sectors, social classes, and generations. According to the website, the World Café is valuable when you aim:

- \* To generate input, share knowledge, stimulate innovative thinking, and explore action possibilities around real life issues and questions
- \* To engage people--whether they are meeting for the first time, or are in established relationships--in authentic conversation
- \* To conduct in-depth exploration of key strategic challenges or opportunities
- \* To deepen relationships and mutual ownership of outcomes in an existing group
- \* To create meaningful interaction between a speaker and the audience
- \* To engage groups larger than 12 (up to 1200!) in an authentic dialogue process

The café is less useful if there is a predetermined outcome, there is a desire to convey one-way information, or a group is working on detailed implementation plans.

## Case Examples – From Maori Forestry Claims to Norwegian Town Planning

The café is a very simple tool, which has been used in many different settings. We include a couple of examples to show its breadth of use. *These cases have been chosen from several others from the World Café website.*

In New Zealand the café was used by an organisation to create a gathering to increase knowledge, networking and agreement among diverse Maori groups all working to claim back forests from the Ministry of Justice. The informal warm atmosphere of the World Café worked incredibly well with the traditional ways of the indigenous Maori people. Experts on the claims process were brought in to provide insights and perspective, and conversations among claimant groups and others around tables occurred throughout. The purpose was to progress Maori treaty claims, and the process was to hear diverse views, network with those who knew more, and to consider next steps. This first three day café looks likely to spark several others in other regions in New Zealand, with an intention that the final outcome be a vision of partnership between the Maori and non-Maori people of the land.

The World Café has also proven itself as a tool for town planning in Norway. The head of culture for a suburb of Oslo made use of the café as a way to get input and involvement from citizens involved in culture for a plan for the cultural activities of the future. They were used to people being rather passive at town meetings, and so the World Café was brought in as a way to fully engage people.

The café kicked off with a simple exercise that everyone had to join in: everyone had to draw a simple picture to express what they wanted to achieve with culture in their community. From here they began sharing their ideas, writing down their comments, insights and questions on the tablecloth. Weaving in and out between groups, they gathered new ideas or solutions to

elaborate on. Each table had members of the cultural department helping to gather the main ideas that would later be used in the formal cultural plan.

The set-up and structure of the café meant that everyone became deeply involved in thinking together around the issues, challenges and possibilities of culture in the future of the town. Ideas that could work for many sectors had been shared. The informal creation of relations and the creation of a sense of wholeness in the group was a very important side-benefit. At the end of the meeting, the main learning for the organizers was that it is much more important to find ways to engage the energy and commitment of the people who are involved, than it is to produce a piece of paper with the formal plan.

Our third example is the Financial Planning Association – a membership association of financial planners in the US. They have been making use of café as a way to build and bridge their new organization after a merger of two independent groups. During the first year, they hosted around 15 cafes, described as falling into three overarching categories:

*Member cafes* were cafés for members that mostly focused on bringing members together for networking. The questions asked were very broad and simply aimed to generate stimulating conversation and new insights together.

*Event-driven cafes* were cafes integrated as part of existing events for the different constituencies of the association. These enabled people to participate in technically specific conversations, learning from each other in the process. The goals of most of these were personal and business specific notes that the participants took for themselves.

*Purpose driven cafes* were convened with a very specific purpose in mind and some kind of expected outcome, such as reaching consensus on a major decision, or to plan out specific workgroup activities.

## Commentary

The World Café is a strong tool to ignite and engage a larger group of people through good meaningful questions and inviting safe space. The process of bringing the diverse perspectives and ideas together can really give a group a sense of their own intelligence and insight that is larger than the sum of the parts.

One can use the World Café with as little as an hour, or convene a gathering over several days. If it is part of a longer gathering it is often used in combination with other tools. The divergence and breadth of ideas often generated through a Café are helpful to follow with an “Open Space” process, where participants have to step in and take responsibility for specific areas of an issue, joining with others with a shared commitment to further an area. The Café can also offer a useful alternative to “report backs” if people have been in working in “taskforces” or “committees”. Rather than having each group stand in front of plenary to speak to words on a flipchart, a Café can be created where people from different groups move between the tables and capture the key insights.

The aspect of meaningful questions is absolutely essential for a successful Café. Questions that may matter to the organisers may not be as compelling to participants. Where a designer of a World Café process is not sure of the questions that will ignite a group, he or she can simply have an initial question which seeds further questions, eg. “What question, if answered, would make the greatest difference to the future of the situation we’re exploring here?”

## Resources

Brown, Juanita and David Isaacs. *The World Café: Shaping Our Futures through Conversations that Matter*  
<http://www.theworldcafe.com>