

# A resource guide for the world café.

## Hosting Conversations that Matter at the World Café

To help you find your way through this World Café Resource Guide, here's what you'll encounter:

- The Power of Conversation to Create the Future
- What Is The World Café?
- Six Key Principles for Hosting a World Café Conversation
- The Role of the Overall Café Host and the Table Host
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## The Power of Conversation to Create the Future

Since our earliest ancestors gathered in circles around the warmth of a fire, conversation has been a core process for discovering what we care about. It's how we've always shared our knowledge, imagined our futures and created communities of commitment. The meanings we make in conversation and the coordinated action that emerges naturally from them help to shape our lives.

Many large change efforts began when people sat down together for informal conversations in living rooms, kitchens, cafés, and church halls. Consider the sewing circles and Committees of Correspondence that helped birth the American Republic, as well as the cafés and salons that spawned the French Revolution. Consider the Scandinavian study circles that stimulated an economic and social renaissance in Northern Europe. Consider the church gatherings where the civil rights movement was born.

In light of recent world events, networks of conversation and committed action are springing up around the globe as we face the critical social, economic, political and environmental challenges of our time. This is how change happens. People in small groups, both face to face and in on-line communities spread seed ideas for new conversations, creative possibilities and collective action in ever widening networks. What if there were an *easy to use approach* for developing dynamic networks of focused conversation in order to create living knowledge and new possibilities for action even in very large groups? World Café conversations are designed to do just that.

## What is the World Café?

The World Café is an intentional way to create a living network of conversations around questions that matter. It is a creative *methodology* for hosting authentic conversations in groups of all sizes. You join several other people at a Café-style table or in a small conversation cluster exploring a question or issue that really matters to your life, work, or community. Others are sitting at nearby Café tables or in small conversation clusters exploring similar questions at the same time. You won't be sitting for too long, however, because half the excitement of being part

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of a World Café conversation is the opportunity to move to a another group or Café table, visit with new people and cross-pollinate ideas and insights.

As the conversations connect together, collective knowledge grows and evolves. A sense of the larger whole becomes real. The wisdom of the group becomes more visible.

The World Café is also a useful *metaphor* for noticing how we learn, share knowledge, make-meaning, and co-evolve our futures through the living networks of conversation in which we participate. Just as fish don't see the water in which they swim, we often don't see the webs of conversation we engage in and their importance to the future of our organizations and communities as living systems. In a World Café gathering, people have the opportunity to experience these critical, but usually invisible learning networks more intentionally. When you come right down to it, living networks of conversation lie at the heart of our capacity as a human community to create the futures we want rather than being forced to live with the futures we get.

Thousands of people have experienced both the methodology and the metaphor of the World Café in settings ranging from crowded hotel ballrooms with 1200 people to cozy intimate living rooms with just a dozen folks present. Leadership Cafés, Knowledge Cafés, Strategy Cafés, and Discovery Cafés have been hosted in large multi-national corporations as well as in small non-profit organizations using the World Café format and operating principles. World Café sessions have been conducted in as little 1 1/2 hours. Other sessions have lasted several days.

The purposes of each of these Cafés, whatever they are named, have been as diverse as the people attending them. Yet the World Café process itself has demonstrated a remarkable capacity to foster authentic conversation among people who may never have never met and who have had no formal dialogue training.

The World Café is designed 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 for members to access this deeper knowledge about what's important. Our research has shown that there are six operating principles underlying World Café-style conversations. When these six principles are used *in combination*, they have the capacity to foster collaborative dialogue, strengthen community, spark creative insight, and create new possibilities for constructive action.

### **Six Key Principles for Hosting an Effective World Café Conversation**

Hosting a World Café Conversation is not hard. Creating an exciting Café conversation is limited only by your imagination. Café conversations have happened living rooms, school rooms, ball rooms, church lounges, universities, neighborhood cafés, corporate retreats, senior citizen centers, and even in tents! The Café format is flexible and adapts to many different circumstances, based on a few simple operating principles. When the following six principles are used *together*, then the magic of the World Café experience is more likely to occur.

#### **World Café Operating Principles**

- Create Hospitable Space
- Explore Questions that Matter
- Encourage Everyone to Contribute

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- Connect Diverse People and Ideas
- Listen Together for Insights, Patterns, and Deeper Questions
- Make Collective Knowledge Visible

### **Principle 1: Create Hospitable Space**

Café hosts around the world emphasize the power and importance of creating a welcoming environment. Hospitable space means a safe and inviting space—a space where everyone feels comfortable to be themselves. A place where they can do their very best thinking, speaking and listening.

The Invitation: Creating hospitable space begins with the way you frame the invitation to participants. In your invitation, try to develop an initial *question* or *theme* (not a proposal or a problem) that you or your hosting group thinks those who are being invited really do care about. And make it a simple question or theme that creates curiosity and doesn't have a pat answer. Why have a conversation about something that doesn't really matter or to which you already have the answers in advance?

Let people know that this is not any ordinary conversation, but that it will be a Café conversation—fun, engaging, and creative. Everyone's contribution will make a difference to what will be discovered together in relation to the question—or to other questions that get raised as part of the conversation.

If you are sending out a written invitation, try to make it special in some way—informal, creative, colorful, and most important, with a personal touch. There's a difference between a business meeting and a Café. A Café conversation is about hospitality, conviviality and freedom not formality and forced involvement.

The Physical Environment: What creates a comfortable space for a World Café conversation? The physical environment plays a large role in determining the success of your endeavor. While you may be convening several dozen or even several hundred people, it is essential to create an environment which evokes a feeling of informality and intimacy where people can feel comfortable.

If possible, make the space look like an actual Café, with small round or square tables that seat four to five people. With less than four at a table there is often not enough diversity of perspectives, while more than five begins to limit the amount of personal interaction, making the Café setting feel more like a meeting or a banquet.

Small round tables of 36 to 42 inches in diameter are ideal, but small card tables will work if round tables cannot be located. If tables are larger, they begin to act as barriers. Add colorful tablecloths (red and white checked is great), a candle or flowers. Put a couple of large white sheets of paper over the tablecloth and include pens and markers on each table to encourage scribbling, drawing, and connecting ideas. Easel sheets from flip chart pads work well. So do roll-ends of newsprint usually available from local newspaper printers. Or create placemats of letter or legal sized paper. What's important is that people can see each other's ideas (See Café Set Up and Supplies List at the end of this Guide).

Arrange the 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, inviting and disarming. Try to create this type of Café ambiance, even in a large meeting room. If it is difficult to set up an actual Café environment, don't despair! There have been situations where it has been impossible to set up enough Café tables for all the people who wanted to participate. You can easily modify the Café design by scattering a few tables around the room to give it a Café feeling. In a real pinch, you can omit Café tables all together, although this limits the group's capacity to record it's ideas on the tablecloth so everyone can see what's emerging.

If you are not using Café tables or you are only using them for ambiance, create conversation clusters of 4-5 chairs placed in circles or crescents. When it is time for the conversation to begin, people can simply turn to one another and put their heads together around the question being posed. In addition, be sure to provide food or refreshments to honor our long traditions of community and hospitality. Whenever possible, add music, art, natural light, and plants. Use your imagination to create a welcoming and informal environment for your Café gathering.

If you have a group of less than 12 participants, it is usually better to consider a dialogue circle, council, or other small group approach to fostering authentic conversation. The World Café is best suited to creating an hospitable space for connecting the intimacy of the small group, with the excitement and fun of larger group participation and learning.

## **Principle 2: Explore Questions that Matter**

People are reluctant to be in a conversation centered on things they don't care about. Finding and framing "questions that matter" to those who are coming to the Café is an area where thought and attention can produce very profound results.

As people join in exploring questions they care about, they begin thinking together rather than spinning off into random directions. Well-crafted questions focus *intention*, attract *energy* and direct *attention* to what really counts. Suddenly the table comes alive with curiosity and excitement. Experienced Café hosts tell us that open ended questions (the kind that don't have "yes" or "no" answers) work the best. These questions need not imply immediate action steps or problem solving. Instead, the questions should invite further inquiry and discovery.

For example, at a Café in Denmark teachers, administrators, students and parents gathered to explore how they might improve their school system. The Café Host didn't settle on the more obvious question, "What problems do we have in our school?" Rather, he framed the question this way: "What could a good school also be?" In doing so, he opened the conversation to appreciating and exploring creative opportunities rather than limiting the group's attention to what wasn't working with the current situation.

### ***Powerful Questions Focus Attention, Intention and Energy***

What makes a powerful question? We have asked this of hundreds of people on several continents and several common themes have emerged.

#### **A Powerful Question**

- Is simple and clear

- Is thought provoking
- Generates energy
- Focuses inquiry
- Challenges assumptions
- Opens new possibilities
- Evokes more questions

In some ways, World Café conversations are as much about discovering and exploring the right questions as they are about finding immediate answers. In Café conversations collaborative learning, understanding, and insight are as important to creating positive results as formal planning or traditional problem solving.

Spend some time discovering and crafting the questions you want to use in your Café. If possible, bounce them off key people who will be participating to see if the questions sustain interest and energy. If the event includes a speaker, involve that person in helping to create questions which, if explored, could make a difference to the real life concerns of those attending. You'll know you have a good question when it continues to surface new ideas and possibilities.

### **Principle 3: Encourage Each Person's Contribution**

Whether you are an overall Café Host or the member of an individual table conversation, it is important to encourage everyone to contribute their ideas and perspectives, while allowing anyone who wants to contribute through their listening or silent presence to do so. One of the reasons for having only four or five people at a Café table or conversation cluster is to enable each voice to be heard. Often, people who are hesitant to speak in a large group have rich and exciting insights to offer in a more intimate Café setting.

We find that people may feel freer to speak from the heart and listen more deeply to others if there is a *talking object* available to support the dialogue (it can be a stone, stick or any symbolic object—even a pen or salt shaker will do.) The use of a talking object has a long history. It was originally used by indigenous peoples to support courageous conversation, mutual respect, shared listening and wise decisionmaking. Each person at the table picks up the object when they are ready to speak or the talking object can move in a circle around the group. Another option is for the person who is holding the talking object to offer it as a gift to another member of their group when they have finished speaking. Of course, members have the opportunity to *pass* if they wish.

No one interrupts the person who is holding the talking object. Instead the other members listen attentively to the person speaking. Everyone listens for ideas, assumptions, perspectives, and connections coming from that person's unique contribution. You might also encourage Café members to allow a moment of silence between each person who speaks. This enables everyone a brief pause to reflect before adding their own thoughts.

At many Café gatherings, once the question is posed people are encouraged to simply jump into the conversation and begin to explore and share ideas. Often that's just what the group needs. As the Host, you can assess what combination of reflective listening through the use of a talking object, and exciting engagement through free flowing exchange will work the best.

#### **Principle 4: Connect Diverse People and Ideas**

The opportunity to move between tables, meet new people, actively contribute your thinking, and link the essence of your discoveries in ever widening circles is one of the distinguishing characteristics of the World Café's approach to dialogue and collaborative learning. This cross-pollination of people and ideas greatly enhances the richness of exchange and new insights. More perspectives surface and surprising combinations of insight and creativity often reveal themselves in ways people had not previously imagined.

Many Café hosts, after explaining the World Café Assumptions and Etiquette (included at the end of this Guide) set up three progressive rounds of conversation of approximately 20-30 minutes each. After several rounds of conversation, there is usually a period of sharing discoveries and insights in a town meeting-style conversation with the whole group.

Upon completing the initial round of conversation, one person agrees to remain at the table as the host while the others serve as travelers or “ambassadors of meaning.” The travelers each go to new tables, carrying with them the core ideas, insights or deeper questions of their initial group. Café conversations might be described as akin to a progressive dinner party for collaborative inquiry, creative thinking and mutual discovery!

Ask the table host to welcome her new guests and share the high points of the initial conversation at that table. This can be done easily if you have encouraged the group to scribble or draw key ideas on the paper table cloth. Sometimes the members and the table host use large index cards or “placemats” in the middle of the table to note down key ideas to share with the travelers whom they will later welcome to their table.

As the travelers bring key insights or themes from their earlier conversations ideas start to connect up to other ideas. Now the exploration spirals to another level. Often people will find a common theme in relation to the original question that takes them deeper. Or, someone will bring a counterpoint view or an unexpected connection that sparks a whole new avenue of relevant inquiry.

Like playing with Lego blocks, we create new forms by using existing foundations and linking up additional unique combinations contributed by others. We describe this pattern of combining focus and freedom as “designing for emergence” or designing for “coherence without control.” By the end of the second round, all of the tables or conversation clusters in the room will be pollinated with insights from prior conversations.

In the third round of conversation, people may return to their home (original) table to synthesize their discoveries, or continue traveling to new tables, leaving the same or a new host at the table. Sometimes a new question is posed for the third round of conversation that helps deepen the exploration.

At times, it is not the people who move, but their ideas. For example, as the Café Host, you can ask each person to write one key insight, idea or theme from the conversation they've been in and offer it as a gift to another table. Each member then exchanges their cards with a person

from a nearby table. Each Café table reads the cards they've received aloud to provide creative input to a deepening round of conversation as it continues at their table.

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, as well as the most interesting ways to connect and cross-pollinate ideas. Once you know the six principles that guide the World Café process, use your imagination, play, experiment and improvise.

### **Principle 5: Listen Together for Patterns, Insights and Deeper Questions**

There is a word in Spanish called *El Meollo*. It means the essential nature or deeper substance of a thing. Members of World Café conversations often discover deeper patterns of meaning in what may appear, at first glance, to be a chaotic and messy exchange of ideas and perspectives.

In Café conversations, it is important to emphasize *shared listening*—listening together for the collective wisdom or insight that no individual member of the group might have access to by themselves. As the overall Café Host, ask people to listen for new connections in the “space-in-between” what’s being said. Encourage each Café table to take a bit of time for reflection during their inquiry together to notice “what’s at the center of our conversation?”

As people enter the second round of sharing, remind participants to listen together for themes, discoveries or core questions that underlie the various emerging perspectives. At times a surprising flow of realizations or insights emerge as a result of this shared exploration. Everyone recognizes it as something special. One Scandinavian Café host calls this *the magic in the middle*. These deeper discoveries may come at individual Café tables or later when the whole group harvests its collective insights.

At the end of the rounds of conversation, it is important, whenever possible, to engage in a *conversation of the whole*. These are not formal reports or analytical summaries. Rather, this time for mutual reflection offers the whole group an opportunity to discover the deeper themes or questions that are now present. Encourage a brief time of silence, and perhaps personal note-taking.

Focus attention during the reflection on what is most important for the group to explore at this stage. It is often in silence that a deeper intelligence or intuitive flash of new knowledge is revealed.

Ask anyone in the room to begin with key idea, theme or deeper question that has held real meaning for them. Then encourage others in the room to listen and notice what’s been important from their own Café conversations that links to the contribution of the person sharing the initial idea. Imagine a ball of yarn passing overhead from one person in the room to another who shares a connected idea... and then to another and another. As the conversation continues, a new focus will likely emerge from somewhere else in the room. This person’s contribution begins weaving additional threads to the collective tapestry of meaning.

Through practicing shared listening and placing disciplined attention on core themes, insights or questions we begin to develop a sense of connection to the larger whole. Mutual intelligence

grows and evolves from linking individual contributions and perspectives that have been informed by multiple overlapping dialogues.

The purpose of the whole group conversation is not detailed data capture. That can happen by everyone contributing information on Post-Its or cards. Rather, it is an opportunity to become aware of the collaborative learning that has occurred and what has been especially meaningful or important to the members. Collective intelligence becomes more rich and accessible by paying mutual attention to levels of meaning and insight that may not have been visible at first glance.

### **Principle 6: Make Collective Knowledge Visible**

Just by scribbling your ideas down on a napkin or a tablecloth, other Café members can literally *see what you mean*. Sometimes these are words. Sometimes they are pictures, shapes, or just colors. By writing and drawing, the group has created a shared space for weaving and connecting ideas at even deeper collective levels. There is something liberating about seeing your idea or insight placed on the paper in front of you and knowing that there is a memory of the key points being made. It also allows for a quick visual reference or reminder when reflecting together on what is emerging from the conversation.

In some Café events, a visual practitioner who uses words and pictures draws the group's ideas on a large wall mural as part of the whole group conversation. This allows everyone to see the relationships among key perspectives as well as the larger picture they are creating together. These colorful murals, often placed on a rolling blackboard or whiteboard, or on a flat wall on the side of the room, act like big tablecloths for the whole group.

At times, people will place their actual tablecloths on the wall and members will take a “gallery tour” of the group's ideas during a break. Or, at the end of a Café gathering, members can place large Post-Its with a single key insight per Post-It on a rolling white or blackboard or on the wall so that people can review the ideas during a break. This is a useful data gathering device for future planning. Sometimes volunteers can group this information so that clusters of related insights can be made visible and available for the group's next steps.

Some Cafés create a newspaper or a storybook to take the results of their work to larger audiences after the event. Create your own ways of making your group's collective knowledge and insights more visible. Whatever you do, participants will be able to deepen their collective understanding and make new connections as they literally *see* more of the whole.

### **The Role of the Overall Café Host and the Table Host**

The overall Café Host's job is to see that the six key World Café operating principles are put into action. It is not the specific form, but the embodiment of the principles that counts. This demands creativity, thoughtfulness, artistry and care. It's the Café Host who can make the difference between an interesting conversation and the magic of people accessing living knowledge and sources of deeper collective wisdom.

Neither the Café Host, nor the individual table host is actually a facilitator in the traditional sense, since World Café conversations are largely self-managing and self organizing.

In fact, we've found that having formal facilitators at individual tables tends to reduce the effectiveness and excitement of the Café experience. What's important is not formal facilitation at small tables, but rather the thoughtful set up of the overall Café environment, clear instructions regarding Café etiquette and logistics, management of time in a gentle way, and the capacity to harvest, weave and connect ideas in the town meeting portions of the Café.

**The role of the overall Café Host is to:**

- Help frame the invitation
- Work with others to create an hospitable, welcoming and informal Café Environment
- Welcome the participants
- Tell people the purpose of the gathering
- Pose the question or theme for rounds of conversation—and make sure that the question is visible to everyone either on an overhead, on cards at the tables, or on an easel sheet.
- Provide the few simple World Café guidelines (See Café Assumptions and Café Etiquette under Materials for Café Hosting at the end of this Resource Guide)—often on an overhead projector or an easel sheet
- Tell people how the logistics of the Café will work, including the role of the table host, who will be asked to volunteer to stay at the end of the first round.
- Move among the tables, being available to encourage everyone's voice to be included, to remind people to note down key ideas, doodle and draw and to answer questions, if requested.
- Help keep the time for the rounds of conversation in a gentle and nonintrusive way. Raising your hand quietly, and encouraging other people to do the same when they notice yours raised can be a signal to wind down their table conversations and prepare for the next round.
- Host the conversations of the whole.
- Make sure that key insights are recorded visually or are gathered and posted if at all possible.
- Be creative in adapting the six Café operating principles to meet the unique needs of your own situation.

**The Role of the Table Host is to:**

- Help note down or draw (along with others at the table) key connections, insights, discoveries and deeper questions as they emerge.
- Stay behind to welcome the travelers from other tables.
- Briefly share the key insights from the prior Café conversation so others can link and build using ideas from their respective conversations.

**Is the World Café More Than Just Talk?**

We, as humans, have the unique capacity for reflection and making meaning together. As meaning changes for us, so does our way of being and acting in the world. As we share our stories and ideas with each other in a welcoming environment, our sense of possibilities and creative opportunities can undergo subtle and occasionally profound changes.

People who have used the World Café to explore important questions usually find that participants are challenged in new ways. When a conversation comes alive, people naturally gravitate to considering possibilities for action—both individually and collectively. Collaborative

conversation is “real work” and World Café conversations often lead to powerful outcomes. When people come to a new level of shared understanding around real-life issues, they usually want to make a difference. And when participants build on one another’s knowledge, they will most likely see action choices they didn’t even know existed before.

There is nothing more powerful than a community engaged in conversation in relation to what it cares about. Pull up a chair. Sit down, and talk. Listen and build on what you learn. Host a World Café conversation yourself. You might be surprised at what emerges!

### **Where to Go for Additional Information**

Like the World Café process itself, this Guide is evolving. As you experiment with hosting your own World Café Conversations we’d love to hear from you, both about your Café experiences and about ways we can make this Resource Guide even more useful. Contact [ken@theworldcafe.com](mailto:ken@theworldcafe.com) with ideas and feedback. And for further detailed background information, including World Cafe stories, additional hosting tips, supporting articles, and links to related Café and dialogue initiatives, please visit <http://www.theworldcafe.com>

### **Materials to Support Café Hosting**

#### **Assumptions Underlying World Café Conversations**

- The knowledge and wisdom we need is already present & accessible
- Collective insight evolves from....
- Honoring unique contributions
- Connecting ideas
- Listening into the middle
- Noticing deeper themes and questions
- Intelligence emerges as the system connects to itself in diverse and creative ways.

#### **Café Etiquette**

- **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!

### **Café Room Set Up and Supplies**

#### **Room Set Up**

*(Note: The room set up is described for an ideal situation. Your venue may not fit this model exactly. Don’t panic. You can create a great World Café by using your imagination to improvise and design the unique way in which your Café reflects the six basic operating principles—with or without red checkered tablecloths!)*

- A room with natural light and view to outside foliage, if at all possible. If not, try to put plants or flowers around the room to give the Café a natural feeling.

- Flat wall space to put mural paper or table cloths on one side of the room or two large rolling white boards, if you have a visual practitioner for your Café.
- Small round or square tables ( approx. 36 inches to 42 inches in diameter) that can seat 4 or 5. Card tables work as well, although round tables tend to create more of a Café ambiance.
- Room size large enough so that people can comfortably move among the tables and so that the Café Host can move among the tables without disturbing seated participants.
- Tables spread in an slightly chaotic fashion (not in rows—a random distribution around the room).
- Checkered tablecloths or other informal color tablecloths. If none exist, then white tablecloths will work. Even just putting a piece of easel or flip chart paper on the table will work.
- Two pieces of white flip chart paper on each table (like in a café where people write on the table cloths).
- One wine glass or other small glass on each table that can hold several different colored Crayola or other felt tipped pens.
- Crayola, Mr. Sketch or other water based felt tipped pens in several different colors (red, green, blue, black—the kind you buy for children in the plastic packs—enough for each group of 4 participants to have several colors on each table (placed in the glasses on each table)
- One small vase with sprigs of fresh (not plastic) flowers on each table and/or one votive candle
- One Café table set up to put presenter and/or Host's materials on at front of the room.
- Coffee, tea, and refreshments for participants. Water and glasses in the room.
- Enough chairs for all participants and presenters (with capacity to remove extra chairs)

### **Equipment and Supplies**

*(Note: these are optional depending on the size of the group and the purpose of your Café)*

- Overhead projector and Screen and table large enough to hold overheads
- A sound system that can play both tapes and CDs with good speakers for music.
- Microphones for Café hosts or speakers—2 wireless lavalier (if needed, depending on number of participants) and two hand held wireless mikes for town meeting-style sessions.
- 4 flip charts with blank white flip chart paper.
- Two 4 x 6 or 4 x 8 rolling white board or blackboard.
- A supply box which contains basic supplies (stapler, paper clips, rubber bands, markers, 1 masking tape, pens, pushpins, pencils and post-it pads.)
- Extra pens for participants.
- Colored 4 x 6 or 5 x 8 cards in any colors other than white—enough for each participant to have what they may need for personal note taking as they move from table to table. (If you choose for them to do this since they may not bring their own paper.)
- 4 x 6 large stickies (Post-Its) in bright colors—divided in small packs of 25 stickies—one package for each table. (If you are using them for people to write ideas and post them.)

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