

The World Café Basics

Purpose

The World Café fosters strategic dialogue by creating a living network of connected small-group conversations focused on shared “questions that matter” in order to foster the emergence of collective intelligence and committed action.



Number of participants: 12-2,000+

Typical Duration: 1.5-2 hours

More information: www.theworldcafe.com

Principles

When engaged as an integrated whole, these principles create the conditions that enable the “magic” of World Café dialogues to emerge and unfold:

- Set the context.
- Create hospitable space.
- Explore questions that matter.
- Encourage everyone’s contribution.
- Cross-pollinate and connect diverse perspectives.
- Listen together for patterns, insights, and deeper questions.
- Harvest and share collective discoveries.

Process

Four people sit at a café-style table or in a small conversation cluster to explore a question or issue that matters to their life, work, or community. Other participants seated at nearby tables or in conversation clusters explore similar questions at the same time. As they talk, participants are encouraged to write down key ideas on large cards or to sketch them on paper tablecloths that are there for that purpose. After an initial 20- to 30-minute “round of conversation” in these intimate groups, participants are invited to change tables—carrying key ideas and insights from their previous conversation into the newly formed group. One “host” stays at each table to share with new arrivals the key images, insights, and questions that emerged from the prior dialogue. This process is repeated for several (generally three) rounds and is followed by a harvesting of the dialogue, to which all participants contribute.

The Steps in Brief

Set up:

The goal of this set up is to provide an atmosphere that feels like a Café, not a traditional conference or meeting room. That can include dimming the lights and playing music as

Adapted from Holman, Peggy. (2010). *Engaging Emergence: Turning Upheaval into Opportunity*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

participants enter.

- Tables and chairs of four set up Café style, randomly distributed in the room.
- On the tables:
 - Checkered tablecloths or other informal cloths
 - Two pieces of flipchart paper
 - Glass holding 5+ small or medium colored felt tip pens, (thin Mr. Sketch scented markers and other children's markers work well.)
 - Small vase with a fresh flower (small so that they don't obscure vision)
- Microphone(s)
- Worktable for supplies on the side of the room
- Painter's tape
- CD player with good speakers
- Plants around the room, if available.
- Art and quotes related to the subject of the conference on the walls
- Dimmed lights to set the mood

Supplies:

- Round tables and chairs for groups of 4 (circles of chairs can work if necessary)
- Informal table cloths
- Flip chart paper (2 sheets per table plus some for signage)
- 5-6 Crayons or felt tips of mixed colors at each table
- Glasses to hold the felt tips
- Vase with a flower for each table
- 1-2 wireless microphone(s) if warranted by group size
- Small worktable for facilitator
- Painter's tape
- Greenery for the room
- Music

If you have a visual recorder...

- 2-3 flip chart easels with sturdy backs and pads of unlined paper.
- Painter's tape for hanging flip chart sheets and murals
- Mural paper

Before the event

Questions to establish Café specifics

1. What is the core question(s) to be explored? How can we best communicate it's depth and passion (e.g., young pregnant woman speaking to business people about the future she wants for her children and suspects they want for their children)
2. How many people are participating? To establish number of tables.
3. How much time? To establish the length for each round, # of rounds, time for conversation as a whole

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4. Using a graphic recorder?
5. How shall we integrate “experts” into the café?

Day of the Event

1. Post Café guidelines in the room.
2. Greeter welcoming people to sit with people they don't know and get acquainted.
3. Host welcomes the whole group in an informal way and poses a powerful question. Elaborate on personal passion for the question.
4. Facilitator speaks briefly about meeting as conversation as the way people learn
5. Introduce the core question to be discussed.
6. Provide a couple minutes for each person to reflect on the question with quiet music in the background
7. Introduce the guidelines for the conversations:
 - Link and build
 - Listen together for deeper themes
 - Play! Write or draw key ideas on your tablecloths.
7. Approximately 20 minutes in, raise hand for silence and shift tables with one person staying behind as host to welcome the new guests and share the essence of the just-completed conversation, using the notes and drawings on the tablecloth. Guests bring the seeds of their conversations to this new one. Continue the conversations “listening into the center”. Look for common themes, patterns, and deeper questions that are emerging from the shared listening and cross-pollination of ideas.
8. Approximately 20 minutes later, switch again.
9. Leave about 20 minutes at the end to have a “conversation of the whole.” If appropriate, call for a moment of silence to notice the energy in the room, the sense of connectedness. Ask people to share insights that emerged from their conversations; to add something to the larger conversation whenever they heard connections to their table's conversations. Ask for the deeper questions that emerged



Notes:

If dealing with a particularly divisive topic, put a “dialogue stone” in the center of each table and offer some of the basics of dialogue (slower pace, listening, spirit of inquiry, suspending judgment)

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For More Information

[The World Café Website](#)

[The World Café Online Community](#)

Brown, J., Isaacs, D., & Community, W. C. (2005). ***The World Cafe: Shaping Our Futures Through Conversations That Matter***. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.

In addition to offering a simple, yet powerful process for thinking together and creating actionable knowledge, Brown and Isaacs put conversational practices in a larger context.

Purpose of the World Café: To foster the conditions for the emergence of collective intelligence by engaging people in dynamic strategic conversations around questions that matter to their life and work. (Available in English, Spanish, Portuguese, Turkish, Japanese, Simple Chinese, Complex Chinese, German, Korean, and Thai)

Holman, P., Devane, T., & Cady, S. (2007). ***The Change Handbook: The Definitive Resource on Today's Best Methods for Engaging Whole Systems*** (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.

Describes sixty-one change methods for engaging whole systems.

Adapted from Holman, Peggy. (2010). *Engaging Emergence: Turning Upheaval into Opportunity*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.