

Speaking Our Worlds into Being: The World Café

By Juanita Brown and the World Café Community

The Power of Conversations that Matter

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 the future, and created communities of commitment. Innovation and change can often be traced to people conversing informally in living rooms, cafés, kitchens, 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. The U.S. civil rights movement was born through conversation in people's homes and churches.

The World Café is . . . an easy-to-use *method* for creating a living network of collaborative dialogue around questions that matter to the real-life situations of your organization or community. World Café conversations offer a practical yet creative way to grow our capacity for thinking together. They are part of a growing global movement to support “conversations that matter” in business, government, health, education, and community-based organizations.

The World Café is also . . . a provocative *metaphor* for noticing the already existing living networks of conversation through which we develop new knowledge and co-evolve the future together. As we create our lives, our organizations, and our communities, we are, in effect, always moving among “table conversations” at the World Café. Just as fish don't see the water in which they swim, we rarely notice the larger systemic influence of the webs of conversation in which we participate.

Vicki Robin describes, “We talk to ourselves in our minds about our past, present and future. Out of this self-talk, we talk with others about our pasts, present, and futures, generating personal and shared possibilities through lively exchanges of ideas and feelings. We each then carry the meanings and possibilities we've created into other conversations at home, at work, at church, in boardrooms, and bedrooms and halls of power everywhere... We speak our world into being. A buzz develops—a kind of overtone of resonant ideas carried through multiple conversations—that tells us what's on our collective mind. Some among us put words on this buzz and new possibilities for us as a whole begin to enter our language, the vehicle of meaning making. We see ourselves in their descriptions—“Ah”, we think, “I never saw that, but yes, that is true.” We talk about it... shaping again what we collectively imagine for ourselves. Our conversations shape the spirit and substance of our times.”

The World Café, both as a method and a metaphor, has immediate practical implications for meeting and conference design, strategy formation, organizational development, knowledge creation, and large-scale systems change. Experiencing a World Café conversation in action also helps us make personal choices about more satisfying ways to participate in the ongoing conversations that help shape our lives.

Thousands of people on five continents have experienced the World Café in settings ranging from crowded hotel ballrooms with 1,200 people to cozy living rooms with just a dozen folks present. In a global consumer products company, executives from more than 30 nations used Café principles to integrate a new, worldwide marketing strategy. Mexican government and corporate leaders have applied the World Café to scenario planning. Leaders from local communities representing more than 60 countries participated in Café dialogues during the Stockholm Challenge, which offers a Nobel-style prize for those creating technology for the common good. In New Zealand, Sweden, and the United States, the World Café has inspired the creation of local sites for hosting Café conversations on key issues related to business futures, sustainable development, and community collaboration.

Guiding Principles for Hosting A World Café Conversation

Designing an exciting World Café conversation is not hard—it's limited only by your imagination! The Café format is flexible and adapts to many different circumstances. It is based on seven simple guiding principles that, used in combination, foster courageous conversation and collective intelligence.

Seven Guiding Principles:

- Clarify the Context
- Create a Hospitable Environment
- Explore Questions That Matter
- Encourage Everyone’s Contribution
- Connect Diverse Perspectives
- Listen Together for Insights and Deeper Questions
- Harvest and Share Collective Discoveries

BOX 1

Café Conversations at a Glance

- Groups of four to five people are seated at Café-style tables or in conversation clusters throughout the room.
- Each group explores questions or issues that really matter to your life, work, or community.
- Participants are encouraged to practice collective listening skills and draw on the paper tablecloths to visually express their ideas.
- People move in several rounds of conversation from table to table by cross-pollinating ideas—carrying key insights, themes, and questions into new conversations.
- Hosts stay at each table to welcome guests, who continue recording or drawing key ideas and new connections on tablecloths or cards.
- The groups eventually converge and share their discoveries with each other. As insights from smaller Café conversations connect together, collective knowledge grows. The wisdom of the group becomes more visible, and innovative possibilities for action emerge naturally.

Principle 1: Clarify the Context

To start off, it’s important to clarify the purpose of your Café, the participants you are inviting, and the parameters you are working within in order to be able to create an invitation that engages people’s interest and curiosity.

The Purpose

The purposes for which Café conversations are held are as diverse as the people attending them. Before you host a Café conversation, be sure to ask yourself:

- What is the situation that makes this conversation important? Why are we bringing people together?
- What focus, themes, or areas of inquiry will be relevant and meaningful to those who will be coming? Do we need a special Café name to focus people’s attention?
- What is the best outcome we can imagine? An outcome isn’t always an immediate “answer” or “solution.” Often the most powerful outcome is discovering the right questions or creating the opportunity to think together with others about an issue for the first time.

The Participants

Since Café conversations are designed to connect as many creative ideas as possible, it’s important to ask:

- Who needs to be in the conversation in order to achieve our purpose?
- What additional people or perspectives could add valuable insights?
- What do we know about who’s coming (or whom we’re asking to come) and what their needs, interests, and questions are?

Principle 2: Create Hospitable Space

Café hosts around the world emphasize the power and importance of creating a welcoming environment—one that feels safe and inviting. When people feel comfortable to be themselves, they do their best thinking, speaking, and listening.

The Invitation

Creating hospitable space begins with the way you frame the invitation to participants. Here are some things to consider:

- In your invitation, pose an initial question or theme (not a proposal or problem) that you believe those invited really care about.
- Make the question or theme simple so that it arouses curiosity and doesn't have a pat answer.
- Let people know that this is not an ordinary conversation; it will be a Café conversation—fun, engaging, and creative. Everyone's contribution will make a difference.
- If you are sending out a written invitation, consider making it informal, creative, and personal. Your invitation should reflect the difference between a traditional business meeting and a Café.

The Physical Environment

Whether you are convening several dozen or several hundred people, it is critical to create a comfortable environment that evokes a feeling of both informality and intimacy. When your guests arrive, they should sense immediately that this is no ordinary meeting. Café conversations have been hosted in meeting rooms, corporate conference centers, hotel ballrooms, living rooms, classrooms, church lounges, universities, neighborhood coffee shops, senior citizen centers, and even tents! The key is to find the type of space that allows you to create a “Café feeling.”

How Do You Create a Café Ambiance?

If possible, make the space look like an actual Café, with round or square tables that seat four to five people. Fewer than four at a table may not provide enough diversity of perspectives; more than five limits the amount of personal interaction. It's important for people to be able to easily see and hear each other's ideas.

Arrange the Café tables in a staggered, random fashion rather than in neat rows, similar to the relaxed and inviting way that tables in a sidewalk café look after the café has been open for a few hours. Add colorful tablecloths, flowers, and candles if the venue allows it. Place at least two large sheets of paper over the tablecloth along with a cup filled with colorful markers. Paper and pens encourage people to scribble, draw, and connect ideas as they emerge.

Whenever possible, select a space with natural light, play music as people enter, display art, and place a few plants around the room. Consider adding posters to the walls—or flip-chart sheets with quotes relevant to your theme. To honor the tradition of community and hospitality, provide beverages and snacks. A Café isn't complete without food or refreshments.

Principle 3: Explore Questions That Matter

The question or questions discussed during a Café conversation are critical to the Café's success. Finding and framing “questions that matter” to those who are coming to the 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 immediate solutions. Innovative results can often be realized more readily through Café conversations than by formal planning and traditional problem-solving techniques.

How to Use Questions Effectively

Well-crafted questions attract energy and focus our attention on 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. Instead, they should invite inquiry and discovery rather than advocacy and advantage.

You'll know you have a good question when it continues to surface new ideas and possibilities. Bounce possible questions off key people who will be participating to see if they sustain interest and energy. If you have a speaker before the Café, involve that person in helping to create questions that, if explored, could make a difference to the real-life concerns of those attending.

Principle 4: Encourage Everyone's Contribution

Whether you are the Café Host or the host of an individual table, it's 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 to five people at a Café table is to enable each voice to be heard. People who are hesitant to speak in a large group often offer rich and exciting insights in a more intimate Café setting.

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. However, we have found that people usually feel freer to speak and listen more deeply to others if there is a talking object available to support the dialogue. The talking object can also be passed around in a circle, or the person who begins can simply offer it as a gift to whomever they choose. No one interrupts the person who is holding the talking object.

Principle 5: 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 World Café. As members carry key insights or themes to new tables from their earlier conversations, they cross-pollinate ideas, greatly enriching the exchange. Patterns emerge, additional perspectives surface, and surprising combinations of insight and creativity reveal themselves in ways people had not previously imagined. At this point, the exploration spirals to another level.

How Does Cross-Pollinating Ideas Work?

- Set up progressive (often three) rounds of conversation of approximately 20 to 30 minutes each.
- Encourage participants to write, doodle, and draw key ideas on their tablecloths or to note key ideas on large index cards or “placemats” in the center of the group.
- Upon completing the initial round of conversation, ask one person to remain at the table as the “Table Host” while the others become travelers or “ambassadors of meaning.” The travelers go to new tables, carrying with them the ideas, insights, or deeper questions of their initial group.
- Ask the Table Host to welcome new guests and briefly share the high points of the initial group's conversation.
- Encourage guests to link and connect ideas coming from their own table conversations to these points by listening carefully and building on each other's contributions.
- By the end of the second round, all of the tables or conversation clusters will be pollinated with insights from prior conversations.
 - In the third round of conversation, people can return to their home (original) table 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, which might help deepen the exploration, is posed for the third round of conversation.
 - After several rounds of conversation, initiate a period of sharing insights and discoveries with the whole group. Depending on the length of your Café, there may be several large-group opportunities for harvesting collective wisdom.

—Like playing with Tinker Toys, we create new structures by linking unique combinations of elements. We describe this pattern of combining focus and freedom as “designing for emergence.”

Principle 6: Listen Together for Insights and Deeper Questions

The Spanish word *el meollo* means “the essential nature or deeper substance of a thing.” Café conversations give all members, both individually and collectively, the opportunity to listen for and discover *el meollo*—the deeper patterns of meaning beneath what initially appears to be a chaotic, messy exchange of ideas and perspectives. Noticing patterns and connections lies at the heart of knowledge creation. Dynamic listening plays a key role in realizing such breakthrough discoveries.

How Do You Encourage Dynamic Listening?

* Listen to Learn: Encourage members to enter the conversation with the goal of learning from each person at their table. Ask participants to notice their own natural tendency to only partially listen as they prepare to express their opinions, and point out how this tendency leaves little room for learning.

* Listen for Differences: Ask people to be curious and to listen for differences, surprises, and challenges. Consider different perspectives and assumptions as gifts; even when they make us uncomfortable, they offer rich soil for discovering unforeseen possibilities.

* Listen with Support: Breakthrough thinking occurs most often when one person encourages another to take his or her thinking further. Ask people to give each other their full attention by linking and building on one another’s ideas rather than going in random directions.

* Listen for Connections: To arrive at deeper meaning requires the discipline of shared listening — everyone listening together for the new connections, collective wisdom, or insight that no individual member of the group might access alone. Remind participants to listen together for insights, patterns, or core questions that underlie the various emerging perspectives.

* Listen Reflectively: Sometimes it’s helpful to intentionally pause between comments, allowing time for new ideas to surface. Encourage each Café table to take some time to reflect during their inquiry together, to ask, “What’s at the center of our conversation?”

Principle 7: Harvest and Share Collective Discoveries

Town Meetings—Conversations of the Whole

Through practicing shared listening and paying attention to emerging themes, patterns, and insights, we begin to sense a connection to the larger whole. After several rounds of conversation, it is important to engage in a conversation of the whole, what we call “town meeting–style conversations.” These “town meetings” are not formal reports or analytical summaries. They serve as time for mutual reflection, offering the entire group an opportunity to notice the deeper discoveries, themes, or questions that are now present. Café conversations often lead to surprising outcomes that no one could have predicted when the conversation began.

How Do You Host a Town Meeting “World Café-Style”?

If time allows, encourage a brief silence followed by personal note-taking before the whole-group conversation begins. It is often in silence that a deeper intelligence or intuitive flash of new knowledge is revealed. Ask anyone in the room to share a key idea, theme, or core question that holds real meaning for them. Encourage others in the room to listen and notice what discoveries from their own Café conversations link to this initial sharing. As the conversation continues, new perspectives from around the room add threads to the collective tapestry of meaning that the group is weaving.

The whole-group conversation is not intended for reporting detailed data. If you want to capture the specifics, ask everyone to contribute information by writing on Post-its® or index cards, which can then be posted and consolidated for action planning or other purposes.

Making Collective Knowledge Visible

In most World Café gatherings, members write or draw ideas on paper tablecloths, enabling other Café participants to literally “see what you mean.” This creates a shared space for weaving and connecting ideas at even deeper levels. In addition, recording ideas can be liberating, and members can quickly reference them when reflecting together on what is emerging from the conversation.

Four Ways to Make Collective Knowledge Visible

- 1-Use a Visual Recorder: In some Café gatherings, a visual recorder captures the whole-group conversation by literally drawing the group’s ideas on flip charts or a wall mural. Recording people’s words and images enables everyone to see relationships among key ideas as well as larger themes that are emerging. These colorful murals, often placed on a rolling white- or blackboard or on a flat wall, act like big tablecloths for the whole group.
- 2-Take a Gallery Tour: At times, people will place the paper from their tables on the wall so that members can take a “tour” of the group’s ideas during a break.
- 3-Post Your Insights: Each participant can write one key insight on a large Post-it note and place it on a rolling white- or blackboard or the wall so that everyone can review the ideas during a break.
- 4-Create Idea Clusters: Sometimes volunteers group insights from large Post-its notes into “affinity clusters” so that related ideas are visible and can help the group plan its next steps.
- 5-Make a Story: Some Cafés create a newspaper or storybook to share the results of their work to larger audiences after the event. Or a visual recorder will create a “picture book” along with text as documentation for future use.

The Roles of the Overall Café Host and Table Host

The Café Host’s overall job is to see that the seven World Café guiding principles are put into action. The actual appearance and style of the Café may vary greatly. What is more important is living the World Café principles throughout the gathering. Hosting a Café requires thoughtfulness, artistry, and care. The Café Host can make the difference between an interesting conversation and people accessing their own knowledge and sources of deeper collective wisdom.

Neither the Café Host nor the Table Host is a facilitator in the traditional sense, because World Café conversations are largely self-managing and self-organizing. In fact, we’ve found that placing formal facilitators at individual tables can reduce the effectiveness and excitement of the Café experience. What’s important is the thoughtful set-up of the overall Café environment; clear instructions regarding Café etiquette and logistics; management of time in a gentle way; and fostering of the capacity to harvest, weave, and connect ideas in the “town-meeting” portion of the Café. If you need to capture specific data from individual tables for later use, consider selecting “table stewards” who remain during several conversation rounds and later serve as a “synthesis team” during a break or after the Café is over.

When to Choose a Café Conversation

The World Café format is flexible and can adapt to many different circumstances. Cafés have been designed for sessions as short as one and a half hours and for seminars and strategic dialogues several days in length. They can stand alone or serve as part of a larger meeting or conference. Café conversations are especially useful:

- To generate input, share knowledge, stimulate innovative thinking, and explore action possibilities around real-life issues and questions.
- To conduct an in-depth exploration of key strategic challenges and opportunities.
- To engage people, who may be meeting for the first time, in authentic conversation.
- To deepen relationships and mutual ownership of outcomes in an existing group.

- To create meaningful interaction between a speaker and the audience.
- When the group is larger than 12 (up to 1,200!) and you want each person to have the opportunity to contribute. The World Café is especially suited for connecting the intimacy of small-group dialogue with the excitement and fun of larger-group participation and learning.
- When you have a minimum of one and a half hours for the Café, including harvesting collective insights and discoveries (two hours is much better)—some Cafés have even spanned several days.

When a Café is less Useful

While the World Café can be designed to meet many different purposes, it is not an optimum choice when:

- You are driving toward an already determined solution or “answer.”
- You want to convey only one-way information.
- You are making detailed implementation plans and “assignments.”
- You have less than one and a half hours for the Café.
- You have a group smaller than 12. In that situation, consider a traditional dialogue circle, council, or other conversational approach to fostering authentic conversation.

Is the World Café More Than Just Talk?

People who have used the World Café to explore important questions usually find that participants are challenged in new ways. Collaborative conversation is a key part of the “real work.” When people come to a new level of shared understanding around key 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. People often leave a Café conversation amazed at how much was accomplished in a relatively short time — a feeling all too rare in traditional meetings.

It has been a deeply humbling and rewarding experience for me to have helped to midwife a social innovation of this type. Seeing the World Cafe in action across the globe, in so many different cultures, communities, and organizations has helped me gain more faith in the power of the World Cafe as one expression of the ‘now activism’ – a type of activism that enables us to tap into collective wisdom across traditional boundaries to search for innovative possibilities that no one person or group could have discovered on their own.

Seeing what has been created in World Cafe dialogues over the last decade, even in situations of potentially high conflict, gives me hope that we can reach across the divides that are now endangering our common future in order to tap into our collective human yearning to connect to one another, to seek positive solutions, and to create life affirming futures. If an approach as simple as the World Cafe can show such promising results, it gives me confidence that we don't need fancy, complex processes which require major capacity building to be successful. We just need to create simple, natural opportunities, to notice and tap into the reserves of wisdom that already exist in any group if we create a context where that wisdom can be accessed and expressed.

For further background information, including World Café stories, additional hosting tips, supporting articles and books as well as links to related Café and dialogue initiatives, please visit <http://www.theworldcafe.com>.

Stay in Touch!

As you experiment with hosting your own World Café conversations, we’d love to hear from you about your Café experiences. Café pioneers around the world are sharing stories, learning together, and creating a global Café community to support real conversations around questions that matter. Let us know what has worked (and not!) as you host your Cafés. Send your stories, ideas, and feedback to: info@theworldcafe.com.

BOX 2

Café Questions

Café questions are as varied as the groups that use them. They should be specifically crafted to shed light on your unique situation. Here are some generic questions that can be adapted to meet a variety of needs. Some may be relevant to individual Café rounds. Others may be more appropriate to the “town-meeting” portion of a Café conversation.

Questions for Focusing Collective Attention on Your Situation

- What question, if answered, could make the most difference to the future of (your specific situation)?
- What’s important to you about (your specific situation) and why do you care?
- What opportunities can you see in (your specific situation)?
What do we know so far/still need to learn about (your specific situation)?
- What are the dilemmas/opportunities in (your specific situation).
- What assumptions do we need to test or challenge here in thinking about (your specific situation)?
What would someone who had a very different set of beliefs than we do say about (your specific situation)?

Questions for Connecting Ideas and Finding Deeper Insight

- What’s taking shape? What are you hearing underneath the variety of opinions being expressed? What’s in the center of the table?
- What’s bubbling up? What’s emerging here for you? What new connections are you making?
- What had real meaning for you from what you’ve heard? What surprised you? What challenged you?
- What’s missing from this picture so far? What do we need more clarity about?
- What has been your/our major learning, insight, or discovery so far?
- What’s the next level of thinking we need to do?
- If there was one thing that hasn’t yet been said in order to reach a deeper level of understanding/clarity, what would that be?

Questions That Create Forward Movement

- What would it take to create change on this issue?
- What could happen that would enable you/us to feel fully engaged and energized about (your specific situation)?
- What needs our priority care and attention going forward?
How can we support each other in taking the next steps? What is each of our unique contributions?
- What challenges might come our way and how might we meet them?
- What conversation, if begun today, could ripple out in a way that created new possibilities for the future of (your situation)?

BOX 3

The People's Association of Singapore, through the National Community Leadership Institute (NACLI), decides to merge the World Café with our local culture by creating P2P (People to People) conversations between government representatives and grassroots leaders using a creative adaptation of the World Café called the Knowledge Kopitiam. Kopitiam is the traditional Singaporean neighborhood coffee shops that serve local specialties. They are places that local people have gone since our early immigrant days to relax and talk informally about the issues of the day.

NACLI launches its Knowledge Kopitiam by re-creating a traditional Kopitiam setting for its inaugural conversation on "Creating an Active Community in the New Economy." They call the Kopitiam approach the "knowledge-traveling process." NACLI's magazine *Kopi Talk* spreads the word about this "old/new" way of encouraging authentic conversation on key issues, and the Kopitiam idea begins to spread. After experiencing the Knowledge Kopitiam at NACLI, Yaacob Ibrahim, then Senior Parliamentary Secretary for the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, comments, "Today we want to spark a revolution, not to overthrow the government, but to reinvent ourselves... These people to people or P2P discussions are essential to our development as a cohesive and well-informed people. I am pleased that NACLI has captured the relevance of such dialogues to reinvent the way grassroots forums can be organized."

The Knowledge Kopitiam concept begins to spread to other government and institutional settings. Members of the organizational learning community find they can host a Café without too much difficulty, tailoring it to address their own organization's important questions. In line with one of its corporate objectives—to be a learning organization—the Housing Development Board introduces Café conversations in their orientation program for new officers in order to create time and space for real conversation about their hopes, aspirations, and concerns. Schools convene Café dialogues among a broad cross-section of schoolteachers and administrators around the question, "*Given the changing needs of our country, what does it mean to teach?*" The InfoCom Development Authority and the Ministry of Manpower adopt the Knowledge Kopitiam to explore how internal departments can learn from each other and focus their collective efforts on nurturing a culture of creativity and innovation in Singapore.

I think one of the surprising learnings for everyone doing Café work in Singapore is that Café conversations are a constructive bridge between levels and between the past and the future. It's a national issue because we want to promote entrepreneurship, creativity, and innovation, and we're struggling to learn how to create environments that re-define the authority relationship. Yet to do this, we are partnering with the authorities! It's a paradox.

We like structure in Singapore. We've found that the World Café provides a clear structure, but, like cooks using a large mixing bowl, we can put in different ingredients and invent new dishes. I've also tried to understand why Café dialogues have worked so well in Singapore—an Asian culture with so many diverse ethnic groups. The Café provides an informal and relaxed environment that celebrates and harnesses difference, yet also helps us see what connects us. Seeing this happen gave me an insight into the real meaning of empowerment—power generated from the ground up by seeing new connections and building peer-to-peer relationships across the boundaries that so often divide us.

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