

**Juanita Brown with David Isaacs. 2005. *The World Café: Shaping our Futures Through Conversations that Matter*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.**

The World Café process depends on (1) diversity in culture, experience, and perspective in order to gain insight into today's complex problems and circumstances; and (2) questions that we care about and are driven to answer. "Good questions help us become both curious and uncertain, and this is always the road that opens us to the surprise of new insight" (from the Foreword, xi).

Not surprisingly, Café processes whether used in business, churches, mission organizations, community development, are typically energizing for the participants. However, care must be taken to craft a process that fosters substantive conversation through important questions. "To those of us raised in a linear world with our minds shrunken by detailed analyses, the sudden appearance of collective wisdom always feels magical" (xii).

Throughout history, one can find examples of small gatherings for conversations that matter: the Salon Movement prior to the French Revolution; sewing circles preceding the American Revolution; Wesley's class meetings; study circles in Scandinavia; and the workers' movements in various countries.

#### Conversations that Matter

The Café model transfers well across cultures. It is, after all, a familiar setting in most countries. The World Café uses questions to encourage the cross-pollination of ideas and perspectives and to nurture collaboration and relationship toward the purpose of making a difference.

Café conversations are designed on the assumption that people already have within them the wisdom and creativity to confront even the most difficult challenges. The process is simple, yet it can yield surprising results. The innovative design of the World Café enables groups—often numbering in the hundreds of people—to participate together in evolving rounds of dialogue with three or four others while at the same time remaining part of a single, larger, connected conversation. Small, intimate conversations link and build on each other as people move between groups, cross-pollinate ideas, and discover new insights into questions or issues that really matter in their life, work, or community. As the network of new connections increases, knowledge-sharing grows. A sense of the whole becomes increasingly strong. The collective wisdom of the group becomes more accessible, and innovative possibilities for action emerge.

In a Café gathering people often move rapidly from ordinary conversations—which keep us stuck in the past, are often divisive, and are generally superficial—toward *conversations that matter*. (4, emphasis in text)

Brown observes that there is a difference between "divider-cultures" and "connector-cultures." Where the divider-culture creates and maintains boundaries between people, the connector-culture, which characterizes the Café experience, encourages participants "to offer their diverse contributions while simultaneously increasing the density of connections among people and ideas . . ." (104).

The design of the Café encourages the exchange of ideas, exploration of different perspectives, and can lead to questions that will further guide disciplined inquiry. The Café conversations are

used to generate “actionable knowledge” (29). As such, the design discourages individual grandstanding and the tendency for people to cling to their own opinions.

The Café format encourages the exchange of ideas and exploration of different perspectives which can lead to questions that will guide proposals for disciplined inquiry in local situations. “But at the same time, we need better ways to move between the discovery part of a Café conversation and the action-planning part. We need to make sure when moving into the implementation phase that we leaders don’t go back to our old control mode of doing things” (33).

Talk and action are viewed as inseparable elements of the Café experience. An important shift for participants, then, is to reconsider the view that “talk and action are separate activities. . . . *What if, when conversations are highly energized and relevant, you are already in the action phase? What if it’s not talking and discovery followed by action planning and implementation in the linear way we in the West think about it*” (37, emphasis in text)? In this process it is essential that people share ideas together—express perspectives, background, and history. As people hear, reflect, and engage, and if the process is perceived as important, action follows naturally.

The World Café is built on seven principles: the setting must support interaction and engagement; the space must be seen as hospitable; questions must be significant enough to stimulate collaborative interaction; everyone’s contribution is needed and expected; cross-pollination of ideas and exploration of diverse perspectives is encouraged while at the same time retaining focus on the core questions; participants are helped to listen together for patterns, insights and deeper questions; that which is discovered in the conversations is harvested, shared and acted upon (40). The World Café views the creation of knowledge as a social and community effort, not simply that which is delivered by experts. Learning is viewed as a social endeavor.

However, since the Café concept is difficult to embrace, particularly for academics who are accustomed to a format where they listen to papers, some suggest the addition of a morning keynote address with additional elements such as a small dialogue group that responds to the address during or immediately following. Or, invite the presenters to engage one another as a dialogue group before the Café conversations begin.

### Café Outcomes

Though possible outcomes are often identified, it is important for participants to realize that the Café conversations are not focused, at least initially, on finding solutions. The more important outcome, and one that happens best in conversation, is to discover the right questions to ask in relation to an issue. This outcome, along with networking, sharing ideas, proposing research possibilities, and discussing feasible action often has more long term value.

### Café Setting

The setting is consistent with the familiar Café environment. The setting allows for the flexible boundaries within which relationship, conversation, and planning can emerge. Use tables that seat 4-6 persons and arrange them informally around the space. Cover the tables with 3-4 layers of paper for the rounds of conversations that follow. Provide a glass or jar or other container for

several chart markers (markers that won't bleed through paper). If desired put flowers on the tables or around the room. As the group arrives some have music playing in the background. Walls may be decorated with Café style posters. Greenery such as plants, palm trees can be arranged around the room. Provide name tags for all participants. Have available supplies such as larger sticky notes, 4x6 cards, flip chart paper, masking tape, pens and pads of paper.

Without going into great detail, the Café facilitator gives a few pointers on Café etiquette. Listen together for patterns, insights, and deeper questions; Connect ideas; listen to understand; contribute your thinking and experiences (see p. 64 for table diagram). [Note: The World Café discourages the use of Powerpoint or similar tools. Sheets of paper, whiteboard, sticky notes, note cards, and/or overhead transparencies are preferred.] When Café etiquette is articulated it “focuses on inviting everyone’s contribution rather than simply assuring each person a voice or asking that everyone participate” (101). The distinction between encouraging individual participation and encouraging each person’s contribution is important in the conversations. Brown notes, for example, that individual participation often becomes the insertion of one’s particular opinions and ideas into a discussion. However, when participants are reminded that contribution is important, then they have to think about what their insight and experience actually contributes to the conversation of the whole. Correspondingly, the value of that contribution can be assessed only as it enters the group’s discussion. In other words, participants should come to realize that they bear responsibility for moving the process along; and they can do this through active listening, through sharing patterns they see, through offering metaphors, and by helping the group see potential blind spots (99-102). “As people begin to contribute together, create together, and learn together, a feeling of connection—to each other, and to a larger whole—begins to emerge (103).

### Café Process

A World Café generally consists of three rounds of progressive conversation lasting approximately twenty to thirty minutes each, followed by a dialogue among the whole group. Rounds have gone longer, but people often feel rushed in less than a twenty-minute round. The number and length of rounds prior to the whole-group dialogue will depend on your focus and intent. Feel free to experiment. (166)

Enlist volunteers to act as greeters. When everyone arrives, explain the process. Give a few pointers on etiquette, then ask everyone to move to new tables so that there is a mix of experience and perspectives. After the first round, the facilitator asks participants to move to a table near them. One stays behind at each table as host who shares the essence of the table conversation with the newcomers. Then, travelers would link the ideas from their tables to the new conversation. Language such as the following may be used: <sup>1</sup>

Please move to a new Café table and continue the conversation. One person should stay as the host to greet the guests who are coming from other conversations. Whoever is the host, could you make sure everyone does a quick introduction as you get started? Then show your new group what’s on your tablecloth and let your guests know where your conversation has taken you so you

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<sup>1</sup> To get the attention of the group, the facilitator can simply raise her or his hand and signal the table nearest to do the same.

can continue to link your thinking. And be sure to keep doodling on the tablecloths. In this second round, begin to listen even more deeply to see what patterns and connections are emerging. (83)

While the host(s) at each table is responsible for communicating the essence of the conversation in the previous round, everyone at the table supports the host

in taking notes, summarizes key ideas, and if so moved, making drawings that reflect interesting thoughts and insights as they unfold. This ‘table recording’ helps the host do the best job possible in conveying to new members the key ideas that have emerged. Be sure to encourage people to write, draw, or doodle on the tablecloths in the midst of their conversations. Often these tablecloth drawings will contain remarkable notes, and they help visual learners link ideas. Members who will be traveling to a new table should bring with them the key ideas, themes and questions from their last round to seed their upcoming conversation. (166)

For the second and third rounds encourage people to notice patterns, themes, and deeper questions. Language such as the following can be used:

Now for the third round, please return to your original tables. Share how your conversations have evolved and ask, What deeper questions do we need to ask? Prepare 2-3 questions that you believe are important. Write each question on the large sticky sheet on each table and post it on the wall (sometimes called the Wall of Inquiry). During the break take the opportunity to explore the questions. One option may be to invite participants to take down a question that is of particular interest and take it their table for exploration.

After three rounds of conversation, bring the group together for a plenary session (the “conversation of the whole”) where the participants share their findings, key insights, and also what the conversations meant to them. If necessary, give people a few moments of silence to jot down ideas or make notes of their conversations. At this time the facilitator goes out into the audience asking them to identify the most essential findings from the previous conversations. Begin with one table; then invite other tables to enter the discussion if they have a question or insight that relates. Anyone in the room may speak briefly to the issue, or share a question, insight, or idea that has meaning for them.

At the end of the plenary session determine if there is, in fact, one overarching question that can take the group to a deeper level. Also, following the plenary, invite participants to imagine an agenda and focus for their organization’s activities this coming year. And/or ask people to turn to one other person and share a seed idea to take back to their own context. After the plenary session, persons may write one key insight and post it on the wall. The insights can then be clustered or a story can be made from the postings.

*Café Variation:* After the first round of conversation, two people from each table move to other tables while two stay behind to share with new arrivals the ideas that have developed. In the third round participants return to their home tables, sharing how their thinking has been enriched by the conversations.

*Café Variation:* Divide the tables into sectors, each sector representing a major issue or big question confronting the organization. Table hosts stay as the keepers of the question while

others rotate to other sectors to learn and make contributions. They return to their home table after the third round to share the relevance of their discoveries. The table hosts meet to share their tables' collective insights.

*Café Variation:* Each table posts a question on the table. While one member stays at the table, others rotate to other tables to explore the questions posed by their colleagues.

*Café Variation:* To assist with the moving process, different colored mugs (or buttons) can be used to facilitate the mixing. This visual allows people to find their original partners easily for the third round.

*Café Variation:* The host stays at each table throughout all three rounds. During round 2 or 3, the overall Consultation host walks around to all the tables and makes note of the major question(s) written on the paper at each table. These questions are posted on flip chart paper. The same or closely similar questions are posted on one sheet. Related questions are posted on separate sheets near each other. Rather than break which, in this case, would disperse energy, have participants put their personal sticky notes beside the relevant flip chart page(s).

*Café Variation:* If necessary, have at each table a “talking object” to ensure that no one monopolizes the conversation. The object can be a stick, stone, or salt shaker. The person picks up the object when he or she is ready to speak, and returns it to the center of the table when finished. The talking piece can be passed around the table, with a time limit if necessary; or one person can give it to another. However, all may pass if they wish.

*Café Variation:* If table conversations get stuck or conflicted, use the following questions in a subsequent round:

What I heard you say that I appreciated is . . .

What I heard that challenged my thinking is . . .

To better understand your perspective I'd like to ask you . . . (169)

### Café Questions

David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney, the articulators of the Appreciative Inquiry process in organizational development suggest that human systems grow in the direction of that which they persistently ask questions about.<sup>2</sup> Questions are powerful in learning and in resolution. Asked inappropriately they can stifle learning (What is this text saying about . . .?) Asked differently they can take the mind to higher levels of thinking (How would you assess the position of this author in relation to . . .?). Questions can escalate conflict (Why do you do that?), or point toward resolution (What has brought us to this point and what can we do about it?).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney. 2005. *Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers; and Diana Whitney and Amanda Trosten-Bloom. 2003. *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry: A Practical Guide to Positive Change*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers

<sup>3</sup>To improve question construction see such resources as Walter Bateman. 1990. *Open to question: The Art of Teaching and Learning by Inquiry*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass; Norah Morgan and Juliana Saxton. 1991. *Teaching, Questioning and Learning*. Routledge, Chapman, Hall Inc.; Neil Browne and Stuart Keeley. 2001. *Asking the Right Questions: A Guide to Critical Thinking* (sixth edition). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall; Chet Meyers. 1986. *Teaching Students to Think Critically*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass; Stephen Brookfield. 1995. *Becoming a Critical Reflective Teacher*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass; Jane Vella. 2002. *Learning to Listen*,

Juanita Brown (*The World Café*, 91) tells the story of two different approaches to the question in a community development effort: The less dynamic question was “Have you thought about cleaning up the river?” Apart from being the generally unproductive yes/no form, the question would not take the people into useful inquiry leading to action. In this case, the more useful question was, “What do you see when you look at the river? How do you feel about the condition of the river? How do you explain the situation with the river to your children?” You might be able to frame other questions for this situation, but note the effort not to ask a question that betrays the agenda of the asker. The question invites the people to make their own judgments about the condition of the river. This approach is more risky for the community development specialist because it leaves open the possibility that the people will see the problem (and hence possible solutions) differently.

Brown observes that “*it is the creative cross-pollination of people and ideas combined with the disciplined use of questions as attractors that is perhaps the World Café’s defining contribution to dialogic learning and collective intelligence*” (117, emphasis in text).

For example, “Beyond academic or the more technical definitions, what is the true meaning for you, of a social economy” (46)? “What core question, if explored, could make the most difference to the situation we’re considering? or “What do we *not* know, that if we did know, could transform this situation for the better” (86)?

Questions to stimulate reflection include:

What did you most appreciate about this conversation?  
What had real meaning for you from what you’ve heard? What surprised you? What challenged you?  
What’s missing from the picture so far? What is it we’re not seeing? What do we need more clarity about?  
If there was one thing that hasn’t yet been explored but is necessary in order to reach a deeper level of understanding/clarity, what would that be? (135)

Brown suggests the following framework for questions:

What question(s) if explored thoroughly, could provide the breakthrough possibilities we are seeking?  
Is the question relevant to the real life or real work of the people who will be exploring it?  
Is this a genuine question—a question to which I/we really don’t know the answer?  
What assumptions or beliefs are embedded in the way this question is constructed?

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*Learning to Teach* (revised edition). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass; C. Ronald Christensen, David Garvin and Ann Sweet (eds). 1991. *Education for judgment*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Is this question likely to generate hope, imagination, engagement, new thinking, and creative action, or is it likely to increase a focus on past problems and obstacles?  
Does this question leave room for new and different questions to be raised as the initial question is explored? (*The World Café*, 93)

Various categories of questions are suggested in *The World Café* (173):

#### *Questions to Focus Attention*

- What question, if answered, could make the greatest difference to the future of the situation we are exploring here?
- What's important to you about this situation and why do you care?
- What draws you/us to this inquiry?
- What's our intention here? What's the deeper purpose . . . that is worthy of our best effort?
- What opportunities can we see in this situation?
- What do we know so far/still need to learn about this situation?
- What are the dilemmas/opportunities in this situation?
- What assumptions do we need to test or challenge in thinking about this situation?
- What would someone who had a very different set of beliefs than we do say about this situation?

#### *Questions to Connect Ideas*

- What's taking shape here? What are we hearing underneath the variety of opinions being expressed? What is in the center of our listening?
- What's emerging that is new for you? What new connections are you making?
- What have you heard that had real meaning for you? What surprised you? What puzzled or challenged you? What questions would you like to ask now?
- What is missing from the picture so far? What are we not seeing? Where do we need more clarity?
- What has been your major learning or insight so far?
- What's the next level of thinking we need to address?
- If there was one thing that hasn't yet been said but is needed in order to reach a deeper level of understanding/clarity, what would that be?

#### *Questions that Move Conversation Forward*

- What would it take to create change on this issue?
- What could happen that would enable you/us to feel fully engaged and energized in this situation?
- What's possible here and who cares about it?
- What needs our immediate attention going forward?
- If our success was completely guaranteed, what bold steps might we choose?
- How can we support each other in taking the next steps? What unique contribution can we each make?
- 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 [our situation . . .]?
- What seed might we plant together today that could make the most difference to the future of [our situation . . .]?