

WORLD CAFÉ CONVERSATIONS

What is it?

For people to act together and collaborate on solving community problems, they first need to be able to talk together. Change most often begins simply, with a conversation. A conversation café is an exchange of thoughts, ideas, and feelings among people who care about getting to know each other. When we understand each other better, trust is built. When we listen to each other, surprising and inspired conclusions may emerge that may lead to inspired change.

How does it work?

- Preparation: Give the room a fun feel. It helps if you can add touches such as decorations, lighting, music and refreshments to set the right mood. Cover the tables with butcher paper for doodling and capturing ideas.

Set up a progressive menu of (usually two or three) rounds of conversation of about 20-30 minutes each. Ask questions that genuinely matter to your life, work or community. A first question might ask something personal about why people are there, why they are committed to the work, or what excites them. A second question might ask about the work or issue; for example what community development means to them? A third question might probe deeper, such as why poverty persists in our communities despite all the money spent and efforts made to address it. Consider asking powerful questions that get at the contradictions or underlying issues that need to be addressed to make progress.

*One of the things we
need to learn is that
very great change
starts with very small
conversations, held
among people who
care.*

Margaret Wheatley

- The Process: A facilitator explains the process, keeps time, and moves the group through the series of questions. Seat four or five people at small Café-style tables or in circles of chairs forming four-person conversation clusters. Two hours is a good length of time to permit people to move through several table groups for each question, though the time may be much less. Upon completing the initial round of conversation, ask one person to remain at the table as the “host” while the others serve as travelers or “ambassadors of meaning.” The travelers carry key ideas, themes and questions into their new conversations.

Ask the table host to welcome the new guests and briefly share the main ideas, themes and questions of the initial conversation. Encourage guests to link and connect ideas coming from their previous table conversations—listening carefully and building on each other's contributions.

Encourage both table hosts and members 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.

- **Closing:** After several rounds of conversation, initiate a period of sharing discoveries and insights in a **whole group conversation**. It is in these town meeting-style conversations that patterns can be identified, collective knowledge grows, and possibilities for action emerge.

When to use it

Conversation cafes are a simple but powerful technique to surface many ideas in a short period of time, and help people see what they have in common and what they could be doing together. It is especially useful early in a collaborative process, but it is also just fun. 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, the most effective use of questions and the most interesting ways to connect and cross-pollinate ideas.

Adapted from material at <http://www.theworldcafe.com>. See also www.conversationcafe.org for more resources.