

## The World Café: Meetings That Are More Like Kitchen Conversations

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You know how it feels to meet around a small table – a kitchen table, coffee table, or café table. Four or five people. There is an intimacy, right? An informality, a closer proximity to one another. A small table provides a place where we can offer heartfelt sharing together, an essential quality of leadership in these times.

Small tables are places to share stories. Ask questions. Drink coffee or tea. Be with community. Yet, let's not kid ourselves -- kitchen tables are not just for chit chat. Small tables are often the places where traditions and movements are born.

Margaret Mead knew this. "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." Many of us know this too. Sometimes we just need to meet with people around a small table.

### What is World Café?

World Café is a method for creating many small table conversations, four to five people per table, and interweaving them to form a larger conversation of the whole group. It is a way of deliberately connecting small groups from 16 to 1,600 in ideas, stories, plans, and energy. This process is far less intimidating than one large group conversation. And far more energizing and invigorating.

Each table meets on a specific question or issue for 15 to 30 minutes. Not too long, not too short. A table at which everyone has a chance to participate and to share perspective. Everyone is invited to make notes and draw pictures. And then, best of all, scatter to other tables to hear what other groups have been talking about. As Chris Corrigan shares, "It's like designed gossip-sharing and nosiness!" The difference between regular gossip and gossip in a World Café is that, in the latter, we use gossip to deliberately notice patterns of learning and insight amidst the group.



### When is World Café helpful?

World Café is particularly helpful with a group of people who don't know each other well or who hesitate to participate. This process energizes people to engage with one another through questions that invite personal story sharing rather than mere data-sharing. It favors personal experience and personal "relationship to data" rather than absorption of data.

World Café is not only a feel-good forum. People often do feel good coming out of a World Café, but more likely because they've been able to engage with more people in a meaningful way than many other meeting formats provide. World Café can be used whenever you want to direct a group's attention to important learning together, including the following:

- ▶ to open people up to hearing one another



- ▶ to energize people
- ▶ to get an overall picture of purpose
- ▶ to glean specific ideas for a particular project
- ▶ to achieve consensus
- ▶ to identify related important questions

## How do I do World Café?

Give yourself enough time. One and a quarter to two and a half hours should be enough for set-up, conversations, and a harvest of shared insights.



Set up small tables that can accommodate four to five people (preferably 36 to 42 inch rounds or card tables). You want people to be close to one another. Add some beauty to each table – tablecloths, flowers, candles. Do not add so much to clutter the table, but enough to invite a different kind of presence together. Add some working tools to each table: a shared flip chart paper that people can draw on, and a different colored marker for each person. Welcome everyone to sit at tables with people whom they don't necessarily know.

To begin, offer a personal story that connects to the purpose of your café, or share something you love about your experience with World Café. It doesn't need to be long. Just 1-2 minutes

that is honest and real for you as a host of the process. Next, give an overview of how the cafe works. A procedural definition. For example, "There will be three 25-minute sessions. One person will stay at each table, the remaining people will scatter, to different tables, and we will harvest patterns."

To use the time well, remind people of the guidelines below. Write them on a flip-chart to make them visible for people. Even when people are aware of such principles, the added attention seems to invoke it more strongly in the room.

- Focus on what matters.
- Listen to understand.
- Contribute your thinking.
- Speak your mind and heart.
- Link and connect ideas.
- Listen together for themes, insights, and deeper questions.
- Play, doodle, and draw -- have fun!

You are ready to share the first question for the group to begin.

Prepare a meta-harvest (paper on the wall, a map, a themed drawing) so that you can together make sense of what people are learning. You can ask participants to bring forward post-it notes that have key insights. You can map it. You can write or draw what people speak.

After hearing responses, invite people to name patterns or things that are missing. When you are complete, thank people, and then, close or seal the café with a poem, a quote, or a thought.



*Tips: Don't worry about explaining everything up front. Sometimes people ask questions about the process that can't be answered until they have experienced it. Those questions can stall the process.*

*Dare to keep it simple. Your purpose is to create the conditions for people to talk with one another, explore issues, and ask questions that matter about a given program or purpose.*

*Remember these important principles beneath the World Cafe methodology:*

- the knowledge and wisdom we need are present and accessible;*
- collective insight evolves from honoring unique contributions;*
- intelligence emerges as a group connects to itself in diverse and creative ways.*

*Don't be afraid to ask the same question over all three rounds. Some questions are that important! This is a great way to see what really has energy in the group. Sometimes, your questions for each round will be different, sequenced to lead to key insights from the group.*