

What are World Café Conversations?

GFM National Staff Conference 2016

World Café is an easy-to-use method for creating a living network of collaborative dialogue around questions that matter in service to real work. Cafés in different contexts have been named in many ways to meet specific goals, for example Creative Cafés, Strategy Cafés, Leadership Cafés, and Community Cafés. World Café conversations are based on the principles and format developed by the World Café, a global movement to support conversations that matter in corporate, government, and community settings around the world.

World Café is also a provocative metaphor enabling us to see new ways to make a difference in our lives and work. The power of conversation is so invisible and natural that we usually overlook it. For example, consider all the learning and action choices that occur as people move from one conversation to another inside our organizations and communities. What if we considered all of these conversations as one big dynamic Café, each a table in a larger network of living conversations which is the core process for sharing our collective knowledge and shaping our future? Once we become aware of the power of conversation as a key process in all aspects of our lives, we can use it more effectively for our mutual benefit.

The World Café is built on the assumption that ...

People already have within them the wisdom and creativity to confront even the most difficult challenges; that the answers we need are available to us; and that we are Wiser Together than we are alone.

Seven Design Principles

1) Set the Context

Pay attention to the reason you are bringing people together, and what you want to achieve. Knowing the purpose and parameters of your meeting enables you to consider and choose the most important elements to realize your goals: e.g. who should be part of the conversation, what themes or questions will be most pertinent, what sorts of harvest will be more useful, etc..

2) Create Hospitable Space

Café hosts around the world emphasize the power and importance of creating a hospitable space—one that feels safe and inviting. When people feel comfortable to be themselves, they do their most creative thinking, speaking, and listening. In particular, consider how your invitation and your physical set-up contribute to creating a welcoming atmosphere.

3) Explore Questions that Matter

Knowledge emerges in response to compelling questions. Find questions that are relevant to the real-life concerns of the group. Powerful questions that “travel well” help attract collective energy, insight, and action as they move throughout a system. Depending on the timeframe available and your objectives, your Café may explore a single question or use a progressively deeper line of inquiry through several conversational rounds.

4) Encourage Everyone's Contribution

As leaders we are increasingly aware of the importance of participation, but most people don't only want to participate, they want to actively contribute to making a difference. It is important to encourage everyone in your meeting to contribute their ideas and perspectives, while also allowing anyone who wants to participate by simply listening to do so.

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 Café. As participants carry key ideas or themes to new tables, they exchange perspectives, greatly enriching the possibility for surprising new insights.

6) Listen Together for Patterns & Insights

Listening is a gift we give to one another. The quality of our listening is perhaps the most important factor determining the success of a Café. Through practicing shared listening and paying attention to themes, patterns and insights, we begin to sense a connection to the larger whole. Encourage people to listen for what is not being spoken along with what is being shared.

7) Share Collective Discoveries

Conversations held at one table reflect a pattern of wholeness that connects with the conversations at the other tables. The last phase of the Café, often called the "harvest", involves making this pattern of wholeness visible to everyone in a large group conversation. Invite a few minutes of silent reflection on the patterns, themes and deeper questions experienced in the small group conversations and call them out to share with the larger group. Make sure you have a way to capture the harvest - working with a graphic recorder is very helpful.

Café Conversations at a Glance (i.e., how World Cafes work):

1. Seat four or five people at small Café-style tables or in conversation clusters.
2. Set up progressive (usually three) rounds of conversation of approximately 20-30 minutes each.
3. Questions or issues that genuinely matter to your life, work or community are engaged while other small groups explore similar questions at nearby tables.
4. 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.
5. Upon completing the initial round of conversation, ask 1-2 people to remain at the table as the "host/s" while the others serve as travelers or "ambassadors of meaning." The travelers carry key ideas, themes and questions into their new conversations.
6. Ask the table host/s 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.

7. By providing opportunities for people to move in several rounds of conversation, ideas, questions, and themes begin to link and connect. At the end of the second round, all of the tables or conversation clusters in the room will be cross-pollinated with insights from prior conversations.

8. In the third round of conversation, people can return to their home (original) tables 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 that helps deepen the exploration is posed for the third round of conversation.

9. 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. 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.

World Cafe Guidelines or Etiquette:

Speak with your mind and heart

Contribute your thinking

Focus on what matters

Listen to understand

Have fun!

Play... draw... doodle...

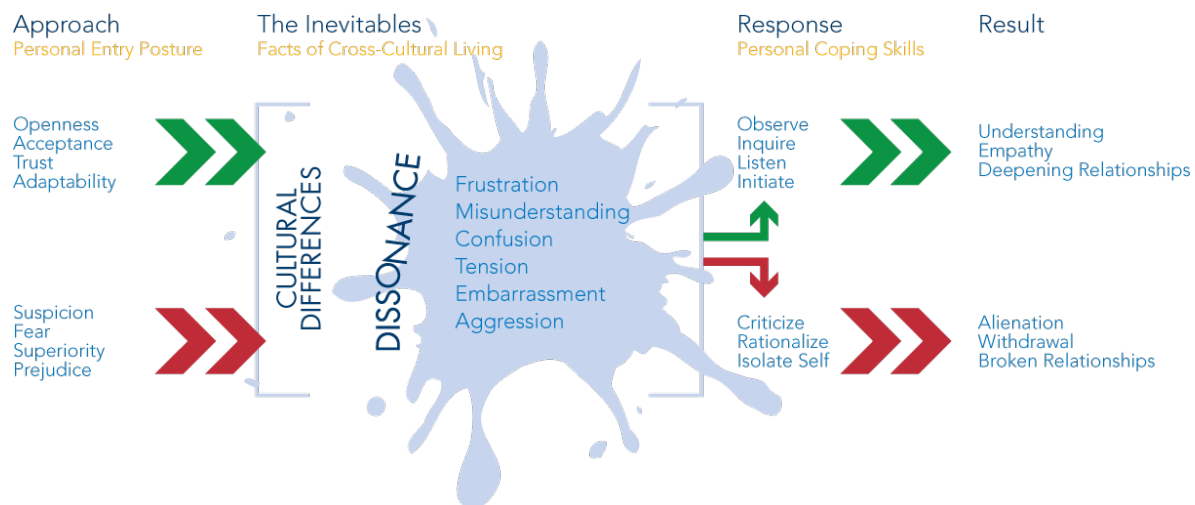
Listen together for patterns, insights, and deeper connections

Link and connect ideas

Slow down... so you have time to think and reflect.

InterVarsity's Approaching Differences Diagram:

APPROACHING DIFFERENCES



This diagram is available as a bookmark through the InterVarsity Store at tiny.cc/bkmk

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