

WORLD CAFÉ¹

/ Dynamic iteration on key discussion questions /

WHAT IS A WORLD CAFÉ?

The World Café¹ is a simple yet sophisticated method for holding meaningful conversations around important questions in large group meetings. An excellent tool to encourage participant interaction, the World Café can foster deeper engagement with complex or challenging issues

During advance planning, for each World Café session, an overall topic is set; within that topic, 3 - 5 key questions are formulated for discussion; and each question is assigned to a specific table host (an expert or someone with strong interest in the question).

At the event, 3 - 5 tables (one per question) are set up in 'café' style to create a relaxed, informal ambience). Participants divide and choose (or are assigned to) a table to start the process. The host provides a brief introduction, and then participants discuss the question.

When time is up, the participants rotate to the next table, while the host stays behind to introduce the question once more and summarize the preceding discussion for a new set of participants. The new participants then add their insights to the question, refining or modifying the contributions of the previous group. This step is repeated until participants have had the opportunity to discuss up to three different questions/issues. A concluding plenary wraps up the discussion.

By dividing a large group into smaller subgroups, conversations can be made more focused, relaxed and participatory, with greater opportunity for all participants to speak and contribute equally – thereby encouraging authentic sharing of experiences and knowledge. Rotation of groups from one table to the next adds value to the discussion, by allowing a group to build on the previous group's thoughts and ideas about a particular issue.

REQUIREMENTS:

- *Facilitator*
- *A host and a rapporteur per table*
- *12 - 30 participants*
- *3 - 5 tables (ideally round) and sufficient chairs for all participants*
- *One flipchart per table, plus marker pens*
- *Optional: Flipchart paper to cover the tables (in addition to the standing flipchart); Post-it notes or VIPP cards; marker pens (multiple colours) for participants*
- *Bell or alarm clock for time-keeping*
- *75 - 90 minutes (including concluding plenary)*

¹ This method has been adapted from "Café to go", © 2008 The World Café, <http://www.theworldcafe.com/pdfs/cafetogo.pdf>



WHEN AND WHY TO USE

The World Café is a creative participatory method best used for:

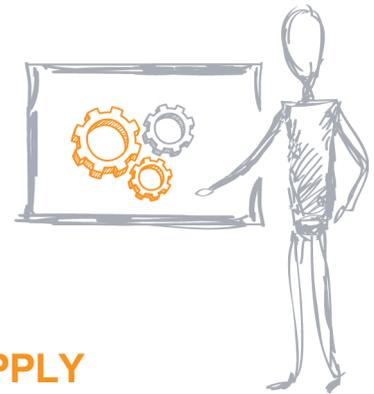
▲ **Knowledge exchange:** The World Café creates a safe environment for sharing. The informal nature of the café enables meaningful exchange between individuals. In a small group of 4 - 5 persons, the opportunity to contribute to a conversation is greater than in larger groups.

▲ **Capturing collective knowledge quickly:** The World Café can be used to tap into the collective knowledge of up to 30 participants on a topic of interest within 90 minutes. The method creates space for one group to explore a question or issue (within an overall topic), then invites a second and subsequently a third group to come in and provide additional insights, offer critiques and build further on the knowledge captured. The quality of experiences shared and knowledge gathered is rich and obtained in a relatively short space of time.

▲ **Tackling multiple related issues:** Ideally the questions addressed by a World Café are related, or represent different levels or aspects of an issue. The process of addressing them through multiple small groups can encourage greater participation and promote iterative thinking on key problems and

challenges, more efficiently than can be done in a plenary session.

▲ **Exploring diverse opinions on issues that matter:** In situations where a diversity of ideas and opinions is sought, consider inviting participants with diverse backgrounds and/or expertise. The World Café creates a conducive environment for diverse viewpoints to be shared.



HOW TO APPLY

Prepare in advance

1. Identify the topic of interest, and craft 3 - 5 specific questions or burning issues for discussion. This is the most important part of the World Café process – see ‘Tips for success’ below for more. Ideally there should be 3 - 5 questions, one per table – enough for a minimum of 3 rotations among tables. Questions/issues should not be highly complex, as this is a rapid exercise. Ideally, they should be able to be explained in 2 - 3 minutes.

2. Identify one host per question/table (in advance), and brief them on the responsibilities which they will have at the event. The hosts can be experts in the particular question, or people with a particularly strong interest in it. Their responsibilities will include:

▲ To provide a 2 - 3 minute introduction to

each group of participants, on what the question is about, why is it important/relevant, etc

▲ To manage the conversation, sustain the energy levels of the group, spur it on when there is a lull, and encourage balanced participation among the group members.

▲ To remain at the table when the others move on, and brief the arriving groups about the highlights from the earlier conversations.

▲ To provide a quick overview of key contributions from the table, during the plenary wrap-up.

3. Identify also who should participate in order to have a fruitful discussion, and invite them to the session.

Set up the room

4. Set up 3 - 5 tables, one per question (or set up a similar number of discrete working areas with simple circles of chairs). Work within a single room rather than using breakout rooms: This is a technique which involves multiple small teams working in parallel, but there needs to be a “buzz” from the group in its entirety to keep the overall energy in the room high.

5. Cover the tables with white flipchart paper (or paper tablecloths, if available) and provide marker pens in multiple colours. The paper is for participants to write, draw, or doodle in the midst of the conversation. Alternatively, advise the table host to

encourage the group to write down their ideas on VIPP card/post-its and collect them before rotation.

When you are ready to start

6. Group the participants among the tables, randomly or strategically if required (see tips below), with equal numbers of about 4 - 6 participants per table.

7. Brief the participants on how the event will unfold:

▲ **Each table will choose a rapporteur**, who will stay behind with the host when others move on, and who will take notes. Ensure that each group uses the same method of recording their discussions, such as a flipchart or computer-based note-taking. Otherwise it can be more difficult to aggregate the outputs of the groups into a coherent product at the end.

▲ **After a 2 - 3 minute introduction by the table host (e.g., what the question is about, why is it important/relevant, etc.), participants will begin the discussion** by sharing their insights and suggestions on the question/issue laid before them, listening to each other and asking questions for clarification. Table hosts will play their facilitative roles (as per the responsibilities outlined in #2 above).

▲ **While they discuss, participants are encouraged to write ideas on the flipchart paper (or paper tablecloth) that covers the tables**, so that the next group that visits the table will be able to gather impressions from it. The rule has to be that they can't write something down until they have shared it out loud first, so that the host and rapporteur can also take note. This helps the conversation to

be faster-paced and the record more accurate as people write in their own words.

8. Begin the discussion. Each round of the World Café should take approximately 20 minutes; keep track of time and emphasize that there is no time to waste.

9. When time is up, use an alarm clock or a bell to signal to participants to wrap up their conversations and move to the next table.

Instruct them on the order of movement, i.e., to the left or right, clockwise etc. Everyone at a table is to move to the next table, except for the host and rapporteur, who remain behind to welcome the new group and to share a quick summary (3 - 5 minutes) of the earlier session. Discussion then proceeds for about 15 minutes. Once again, signal participants when time is up.

10. After 3 rounds of café conversations are completed, invite all groups to join in a plenary session for reflections on the topic and questions. Invite the hosts of every table to provide a 5-minute summary of key points and insights from the conversations that have taken place. Capture key findings on a separate flipchart, if the host has not already done so. This is a good time for any person who has not been able to join a specific table discussion to add their thoughts or comments on the topic.

11. Conduct a quick debrief of the World Café method by asking participants for feedback on how it has worked for them, what they liked and what can be improved for the next time.

Follow-up after the event

12. Write a summary of the main insights from the discussions and share with participants afterwards as appropriate, as part of the minutes of the workshop or as a stand-alone document. This summary provides a useful output from the World Café in those sessions where it is important to capture in detail the feedback and contributions from participants.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS



▲ The key success factor of the World Café is the questions. Formulate the questions or issues to be thought-provoking. For each one, ask yourself whether it piques the interest of participants enough to encourage lively discussion and even to inspire some to step forth as champions or detractors. Keep questions simple, clear and most of all open-ended so they will easily inspire inquiry and lively exchange. Ideally, all the questions should be interrelated, so that they will encourage a flow and logical progression of thoughts. It is a good idea to test the questions with your colleagues before using them at the Café. Here are a few examples of questions used at a World Café:

- 'How can we retain our most important knowledge despite staff turnover?'
- 'What is the best way for our office to cope with and succeed in the 'new aid environment'?'
- 'What kind of competencies, skills and talents do we most need in order to succeed in the current initiative?'

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▲ The closer the World Café resembles a real café, i.e., with pleasant scenery, quiet clusters of tables and ambient lighting, the better the conversations will be. Encourage participants to bring their coffee or other refreshments to the table to make it more like a café conversation.

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▲ Resist the temptation to scale up the World Café too much. An ideal set-up for a World Café with one facilitator is 5 table discussions, with 3 progressive rounds and a plenary wrap-up session. Additional co-facilitators can probably handle another 5 tables each, each of which will need its own host. Be aware also of the noise factor, and the challenge of doing meaningful plenary sessions for World Cafés of more than 5 tables.

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▲ Similarly, refrain from extending the number of rotations to more than 3 – even if some participants feel as though they are missing out on some of the discussions. This is because an overly lengthy World Café risks becoming tedious rather than engaging.

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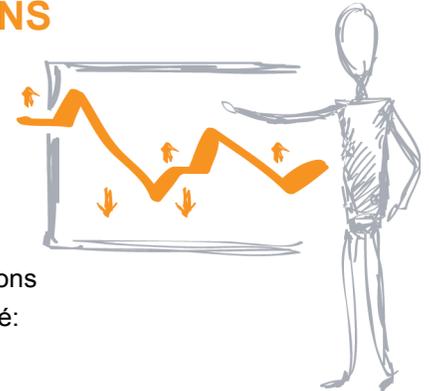
▲ When starting the World Café, you can assign participants at random to specific tables, or allow them free choice in the first round (bearing in mind the need for approximate numerical balance among tables). However, if the purpose of the session is to leverage participants' diversity of experiences and knowledge, then a pre-determined group list may work better.

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▲ In some situations, placing an employee and supervisor together at the same table may inhibit open and frank discussion. In this case, it is better to separate them.

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VARIATIONS



There are many variations to the World Café:

▲ **Different physical arrangements:** The setting can be elaborate, with round tables, snacks and drinks, or as simple as a circle of 4 chairs. At locations without any tables, one can use chairs to set up a group conversation, and participants can make notes or scribble on A4 instead of flipchart paper.

▲ **Open groups:** In this variation, the first round of the World Café is organized and conducted as usual. But then in the second round, the rotation is thrown open: participants can move to any other table of their choosing, regardless of the numbers in the group. The same open rotation applies in the third round. Hosts and rapporteurs still play their usual roles.

▲ **Parallel sessions:** One way to apply the World Café effectively in larger groups (50 - 60 people) is to hold two parallel World Cafés with 4 - 5 tables in each. Each session should use the same questions across its tables. How different groups address the same questions should make for interesting comparisons. However, holding parallel sessions will require a larger space, extra

time at the concluding plenary and more facilitators.

If you use parallel World Café sessions, then **ensure that each group uses the same methods for recording the discussions** (e.g. a flipchart, computer-based note-taking, group members writing on cards, etc.) This will greatly facilitate aggregating and/or comparing the outputs of the various groups.

▲ **Pre-determined groups:** By pre-selecting table groups according to expertise, interest or language, the café conversations take on a more focused nature. While there may not be much diversity of ideas in the first round, the subsequent rounds should more than make up for this.



REFERENCES

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