

World Café: A Professional Knowledge Networking for Colleagues with Similar Interests

by Waid Johnson

In my 12 years' experience facilitating groups, I have not found a better model than "World Café" to generate substantive discussions and ensure that everyone has the opportunity to talk to as many people in the room as possible at a meeting or event.

World Café is a conversational process using a simple methodology for hosting questions that matter. There are integrated [design principles](#) that have been refined over the years to deliver the greatest benefit for business and social value in a limited amount time. The simple version of these design principals includes:

- Setting the context
- Creating a hospitable space
- Exploring questions that matter
- Encouraging contributions from everyone and connecting different perspectives
- Listening for insights and sharing collective discoveries

In short, it is a structured process for learner-directed learning around questions that affect your organization.

The World Café started in 1995 during a two-day meeting among a global, interdisciplinary group known as the Intellectual Capital Pioneers. Since then, hundreds of groups, including large multinational corporations, educational institutions, government offices, community-based organizations, and small non-profits have used this method to meet¹. This methodology has been instrumental in creating and implementing innovative approaches to education, health care, socially responsible business, sustainable development, and many other critical issues.

This process can work whenever there is need to cover many questions under one convening question. For example, the convening question may be: "How do we deliver the best training to mid-sized companies?" Specific questions under that larger convening question could be:

- How do I deliver the best e-training?
- How do I reach a multicultural group of employees in the same room?
- How can I best measure whether the employees are transferring the content back into the workplace?
- How do I train on a tight budget?

What makes it work?

A good convening question

The facilitator needs to create a compelling, convening question. A convening question sets the topic of discussion for the group by raising a matter that is both important and of

practical use to meeting attendants. From the convening question, other sub-questions are solicited from key participants prior to the meeting. This method follows the Appreciative Inquiry approach, formulating and editing questions to focus on the positive, rather than the negative.² An example of a good question would be, “What are the best methods, techniques, and technologies to reach, train, and develop the Y generation?” We would avoid framing the question as, “Who is to blame for the difficulties in teaching the Y generation?” This is based on the theory that our minds tend to follow the energy of the questions put before them.

A “host”

Once you have solicited a question that someone is willing to discuss with their peers, you can help that person learn how to “host” a question. Hosting is quite simple and, unlike having an “expert” speaker, it is based on the assumption that the host does **not** have the answers.

Essentially, a host just needs to come to the table with an eager attitude for listening; peers at the table will also be dealing with the same question and will have resources and experiences to share. Also, the group may uncover a perspective that shows what is missing in the question, leading to perhaps an even better question to explore.

Connecting the dots

The connections, themes, and essence of the discussions come out at the end of the three rounds when the facilitator leads the larger group in a very brief summary and a process of questioning that helps the group transfer what they have learned back to the work place. Begin with data questions such as what people saw, heard, smelled, etc., then move to questions about thoughts and feelings, then into interpretational questions, and finally into questions about how participants will take new action with this new information.

Basic structure

People sit at tables of no less than three and no more than six people. The room is set up like a café to promote informality. People usually discuss questions for 20 to 40 minutes. Then a signal is given for everyone (except the hosts) to rotate to another table for discussion of another question. This process works for groups from 9 to 2000! There may be as few as one question or as many as the total number of people divided by three.

Even though there is a convening question that all participants came to explore, each host may address a specific question that may seem disconnected from other questions; the summary at the end and the line of questioning allows the group time to analyze and connect the threads of learning between different questions back to the workplace.

Recent examples where World Café has worked for ASTD-TCC members

The ASTD Corporate Connections Learning Directors Network: The meeting took place in June 2008, where this format was successfully implemented and well received. Attendees (some from Fortune 500 companies) represented people in charge of learning and development in either their companies or business units.

Entrepreneurs SIG: Attendees represented people starting and running their own businesses. Again, the format was well received. Questions included: finding the best legal advice for contracting, figuring out the best bang for their marketing buck, and controlling rapid business growth.

The possibilities of the World Café format are great if you have a group of employees with some great questions.

¹ <http://www.theworldcafe.com/history.htm>

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Appreciative_inquiry

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