

# Conversation Cafe

*'Creating a positive future begins in human conversation.  
The simplest and most powerful investment any member of a community  
or an organisation can make is to begin talking with other people as  
though the answers mattered'.*

(William Greider)

**Conversation Cafe** (internationally known as *The World Café*) is a fun, flexible and easy to use process for fostering dialogue, sharing knowledge and discussing new opportunities for action. Using the imagery of a café, Conversation Cafe is a methodology to create meaningful conversation around 'questions that matter'.

Conversation is the most basic community development tool we possess. Conversation has always been the fundamental process we have used to share knowledge and ideas. Conversation Cafe is based on the assumption that we generate meaning and energy for change as a result of the quality of the communications in which we participate.

## Key Steps

1. Determine the topics(s) you want to explore.
2. Invite through a comprehensive range of methods (especially personal invitations) as many people relevant to the topic.
3. Create a warm, inviting and hospitable environment that resembles an inviting café space
  - interesting décor
  - food and drink
  - background music
  - tables with butcher's paper as table covering.
4. Once participants arrive, and gather around the tables (no more than six to a table), Event Host introduces the purpose of Conversation Cafe and the event process. Have the question(s) being discussed during the evening prominent on each table (eg on a card resembling a tent on each table) and projected onto the wall.
5. Tables engage in conversation around that question. Felt pens on each table allow participants to record and/or draw ideas on the paper table cloth.
6. After 20-30 minutes, the Event Host asks one person to remain at the table (eg 'youngest member', 'person with least hair' etc), and other participants to leave and join another table and continue the discussion. The person remaining ensures all new table members introduce themselves and then takes one minute to summarise with the new table group the key ideas that emerged from the previous discussion. This allows the opportunity for new members to piggyback discussion on an idea already contributed or to continue brainstorm new ideas.
7. After 15-25 minutes, the process of reshuffling the tables occurs again.
8. After a further 15-20 minutes, a third reshuffle occurs.

9. The Event Host then engages in a whole group sharing experience where he/she calls for the best ideas people heard to be shared. With assistance, he/she captures the ideas. One proven technique for this is to have five sheets of flip paper on the wall, each with a key word e.g. Retain, Regain, Drop, Change and Create - and use such headings to summarise ideas / contributions.
10. Event may end with using a technique like 'Dot Democracy' for group prioritization of ideas i.e. each person is given six coloured dots and asked to 'spend' dots on the best ideas they heard - such a process immediately gives a visual record of the most popular ideas.
11. Event Host explains what will happen to the information generated, thanks everyone for their participation and invites people to continue enjoying the company of fellow community / organisation members and the hospitality of the event.

### **Key Process Principles**

1. Clarify in planning the context for holding the event -
  - topic/issue to be explored?
  - who needs to be there?
  - best timing?
  - best venue?
  - best duration?
2. Create a hospitable place - warm, inviting and non-threatening. Remember that food and drink is what water is to fish!
3. Craft the key question(s). It / they need to be -
  - simple and clear
  - thought provoking
  - energy creating
  - idea generating.
4. Encourage everyone's contribution.
5. Never allow table group size to exceed six.
6. Share and record collective discoveries and practices.

### **Key References**

- [www.worldcafe.com](http://www.worldcafe.com)
- Brown J., (2001) *The World Café: Living Knowledge Through Conversations that Matter*
- Brown J., and Isaacs D., (2005) *The World Café - Shaping Our Futures Through Conversation that Matter*

*'The power of being heard is a wondrous thing'.*

**(Mike Mather)**

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