



## The World Café: Part One

By Dr. Alexander Schieffer, David Isaacs, and Bo Gyllenpalm

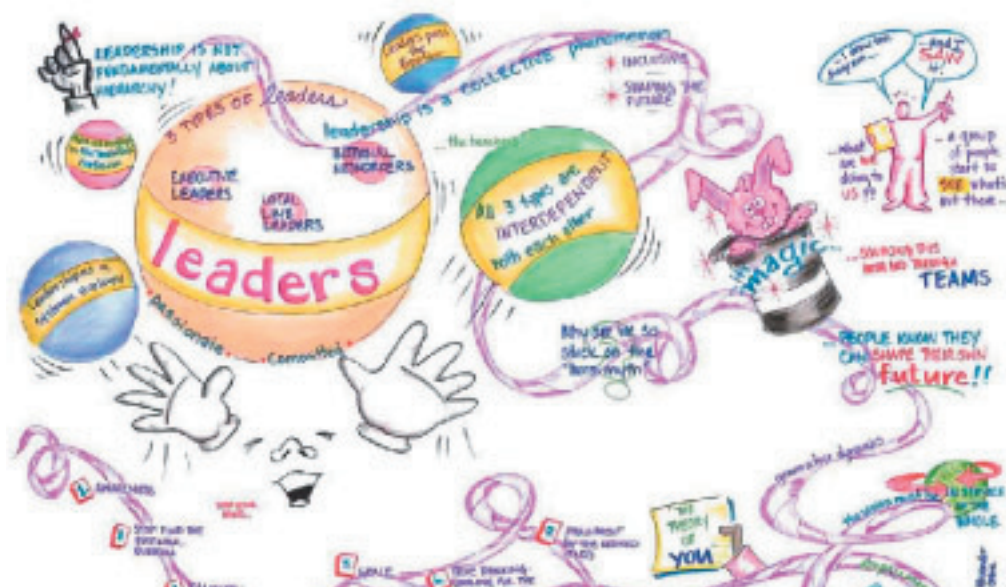
***Editor's Note:** "Group Intelligence" has long been a futuristic myth, much like perpetual motion or cold fusion. Instead, we see its opposite, group stupidity, known as "group think," a term recently reprised, that originated in an intellectual/policy audit conducted after the Bay of Bigs fiasco. The World Café is a technique for harnessing group intelligence, for channeling the brilliance of a roomful of independent thinkers into a coherent message comprehensible by anyone.*

*The concept of the World Café was conceived by Academy Fellow Juanita Brown. The following article offers a primer on the World Café concept and a practicum on how to apply the concept to your own situation.*

**Dr. Alexander Schieffer** ([a.schieffer@c-cell.com](mailto:a.schieffer@c-cell.com)) is an Academy Member, Managing Partner of CELL Center of Excellence for Leadership and Learning GmbH, and a Lecturer at the University of St. Gallen, Switzerland. There Alexander also holds the position of Head of International Network Management at the Institute of Leadership and Human Resources.

**David Isaacs** ([david@theworldcafe.com](mailto:david@theworldcafe.com)) and his partner Juanita Brown are co-founders of The World Café. David is President of Clearing Communications, an organizational and communications strategy company working with senior leaders in the U.S. and abroad. David has served as guest faculty for innovative learning programs with the University of Texas Business School (Executive MBA), the California Institute of Integral Studies (Leadership Coaching), and the Kaos Pilots University, Denmark/USA.

**Bo Gyllenpalm** ([bgyllenpalm@fielding.edu](mailto:bgyllenpalm@fielding.edu)), a faculty member of the Fielding Graduate Institute in Santa Barbara, California, has been part of the development team for the World Café concept. Bo has been working as a management consultant with large-scale change projects, and has been CEO for a Philips company and a Siemens company in the past. Bo is now leading a project on how to turn the Café principle into a new research methodology.



The World Café is becoming something of a full-fledged movement in the organizational change arena. Originated in the USA by Academy Fellow Juanita Brown and her partner, David Isaacs, in the early 1990s, it is living up to its name as it expands throughout the globe.

The following article synthesizes our experiences and insights with the World Café to answer these and other questions.

The World Café is a user-friendly method for creating meaningful and cooperative dialogue around questions that count. As an organizational or social design process the World Café offers a practical way to enhance the human capacity for collaborative thought. Born out of the worldwide interest in dialogue methodologies and readily applicable to organizations and communities, it catalyzes dynamic conversations and opens new possibilities for action.

One simple awareness has catalyzed the growing success of the World Café: the way human beings talk with one another and engage in conversations often leads neither to a better understanding nor to improved cooperation. Rather,

it can cause misunderstandings and even conflict. Acknowledging this unfortunate human tendency, the pioneers of the World Café chose to closely examine our capacity to talk and listen to each other in conversation.

### III. What is the philosophy behind the World Café?

Among the most important underlying beliefs that guide the World Café are:

- Each person has his/her own interpretation of the world, based on mental models constructed in his/her own conceptual reality. While this perspective of reality may be valid, it subjectively represents only one individual's perceptions. Only by sharing one's own viewpoint and by learning about alternative interpretations can individuals and organizations broaden their understanding of the various alternatives for action. The more options an individual or an organization can articulate, the greater the opportunity to develop successful adaptation strategies to an ever-changing environment.
- By providing the opportunity for shifting collective thinking, the World Café thus provides the opportunity for changing the status quo in areas that truly matter. Ultimately, World Café is not only a process for sharing world views, but also a tool that creates the context for collective action.
- Any system has the internal ability to develop successful survival and adaptation strategies. Organizations already possess the wisdom, the knowledge, and the creativity required to confront even the most difficult challenges. The contextual focus of a World Café enables participants to access and use these resources. Café conversations allow participants to experience their collective capability. Most organizations do not suffer from having too few smart people: they suffer from their inability to fully activate and mobilize the collective wisdom resident within their own system.
- People want to contribute, engage, and act. If an organization provides a credible space for focused intention and shared learning, as well as acknowledging and appreciating everyone's contribution, individuals develop a strong commitment to their common pursuits.
- The key purpose of any World Café is to think together and innovate collaboratively in order to open up new visions and possibilities for solutions, rather than guiding people to adapt to 'pre-scribed' existing knowledge.

### IV. How does the World Café work best?

Over the years, people have written a great deal about how the World Café works. Certainly there are an infinite number of ways to run a successful Café. However, seven simple design principles have proven their value over the [past years](#).<sup>1</sup> When they are used in combination the likelihood for thinking together in innovative ways through dialogue is enhanced, whether or not a formal World Café methodology is employed.

1. Clarify the context;

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2. Create a hospitable environment;
3. Explore questions that matter;
4. Encourage everyone's contribution;
5. Cross-pollinate and connect diverse perspectives;
6. Listen together for pattern, insights and deeper questions;
7. Harvest and share collective discoveries.

## V. What are the roles in a World Café?

**Café convenor/sponsor:** This is the person or group who wants or needs the conversation to take place, and who generally issues the invitation to participants. The job of the Convenor is not to 'sell' the Café but rather to invite members into a collaborative process which includes the convenor, the Café host(s) and the members.

**Café host:** This person or group helps to manage the World Café process. The host is not a facilitator in the traditional sense, nor an expert consultant. Rather, the Café host (or hosts) provides just enough structure and orienteering as the Café process unfolds to enable the dialogue to produce what we call conversational coherence without control.

**Table host:** As the iterative rounds of conversation unfold, this is the person who stays to welcome new arrivals and to host the evolving conversation at their table. The table host is also not a traditional facilitator, but an equal member of the conversation.

**Member/participant:** Those who travel between tables to cross-pollinate ideas and carry the essence of the conversation from their table into the next rounds of conversation.

**Design team:** This group includes the overall Café host and is responsible for the overall design and implementation of a Café dialogue. By creatively implementing the Café principles, the design team, with the participants and the Café convenor/sponsor, helps assure the success of the Café dialogue.

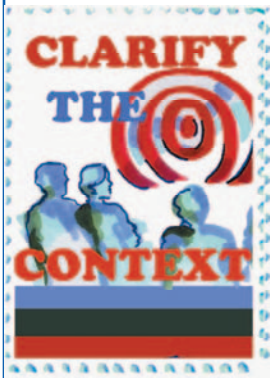
## VI. What fundamental principles underpin the World Café?

This article illustrates seven core design principles drawn from our collective experience with the World Café over the last decade.

### 1. Clarify the context

We are finding that clarifying and setting an appropriate context for a Café conversation requires attention to three key elements that, at first glance, may seem rather simple. However, each of these builds on and relates to the others, creating a whole system that surrounds and informs the conversation.

- Set the Purpose: A clear purpose sets the deeper intention that guides the design and out-



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come of Café conversations. When participants know the purpose and have a stake in its outcome, it focuses the way questions are framed and ideas are explored. Often a group will not yet have framed the questions that can help them reach their purpose. In this situation, the Café itself may be designed to use the knowledge of participants to help shape the conversation, with a cross-section of the potential participants helping to design the gathering.

The design team can begin to ask: “What conversation, if begun today, could ripple out in a way that creates new possibilities for the future of the situation we are exploring?” or, “What question, if explored deeply, could make the most difference to the future of our situation/organization?” These key questions can help shape the focus for the Café. Or, questions such as these can initiate the Café itself, with participants determining their own key questions in an initial round. The core questions that emerge can then be used to focus the ensuing conversation.

In setting the context and purpose during the Café itself it’s important to clarify, both to key members of management and to participants, that the World Café is not designed to create any pre-determined solution. Rather, it convenes people to learn together, create actionable knowledge, and build community. World Café needs the ‘blessing of the powerful,’ who are often the convenors/sponsors of the dialogue. If sponsors or other senior leaders are clear about the deeper purpose of the Café process and the specific focus of their particular Café, key members of the hierarchy will be more likely to support the learning process in positive ways.

- **Determine the right participants:** The diversity of the group matters. Diversity (in terms of interest, hierarchy, gender, age, educational background, etc.) is often key to creating innovative outcomes. It’s helpful to ask: “Who, in addition to those who first come to mind, can help this conversation achieve its purpose? What additional perspectives might contribute valuable insights? Who could receive real benefit by participating with us?” We have found that many sponsors who may initially chafe at the idea of strong diversity, ultimately acknowledge the enriching contribution that diverse views produce.

- **Work creatively with parameters:** In addition to considering venue, resources, and other planning issues, “power” presents one of the most challenging parameters to handle in planning for any learning conversation. For example, in a corporate context, the CEO might normally choose to be in dialogue primarily with his/her Vice Presidents, and they, in turn might generally choose to engage together with their managers. In a Café conversation, the intention is to collectively seek possibilities and to share learning by mixing levels and perspectives, wherever possible. Paradoxically, by not creating the pressure of expecting immediate results, people in Café conversations find themselves more able to share their best thinking around critical questions and to generate innovative possibilities for action. This more open approach actually provokes more active interest from every participant than many traditional problem-solving or action-planning approaches.

## 2. Create a hospitable environment

Café hosts around the world emphasize the power and importance of creating a welcoming environment—one that feels safe and inviting. Often, one of the first steps is having a person or a group that people respect act as a convener or sponsor of the conversation. This might be





a company, a university, a professional group, or a respected leader or colleague. Ideally, the invitees have the choice of whether to attend, although participation is at times, required. For example, in a corporate context it might be important that an entire department meet together, yet the 'character' of the invitation should be creative and express that the convening is about voluntary sharing and mutual learning.

Part of the preparation might include one-on-one talks with potential participants to explore and refine the purpose and core questions for the Café. Often a diagonal slice of the group who will be at the Café can help design the gathering. The title for the Café also creates its special ambiance. It is useful to find something that resonates with the participants and the purpose (e.g., 'Knowledge Café, Discovery Café, Siemens Creative Café). An energy company from Louisiana called their World Café 'The Pipeline Pub'. A 'personalized' name helps to build shared identity among the participants, and begins to create a welcoming environment.

The ideal World Café environment and physical set up builds on what most people like to experience in a Café: an informal atmosphere, background music, small round tables, red-checked or other table cloths, flowers, natural light, plants etc. Most World Café dialogues include an easel sheet or other white paper on top of the table cloth along with a cup of coloured markers on each table so that attendees can visually express their ideas, as in many neighbourhood Cafés. At the centre of each table it's often fun to place a small flag or another symbol to support shared identity (e.g., a flag reading 'the XYZ Café). At the same the symbol can be used as a [talking stick](#).<sup>2</sup> The varieties for creating the Café environment are endless.

Paying attention to the culture of the people attending the Café is essential. The atmosphere created for a Café in Munich might look and feel different than a Café held in Singapore; a Café created for high school students might well be very different from one designed for top level business executives. Experiments during Café conversations show that background music during a World Café dialogue can be quite helpful (if it is not too loud). Music usually keeps voice levels down, and participants tend to lean closer and listen more attentively at the table.

World Café sessions have been as small as 12 and as large as 1200 attendees. With groups smaller than 12, a dialogue circle or other small group process is generally more useful. The Café environment works best with four people per table. Five people are also workable but if the group is larger, dialogue breaks down, as some people tend to take over the conversation while others remain silent. In our experience and research, three people do not provide enough diversity of perspective. Four is ideal, because it both allows a certain amount of intimacy; everyone can have his or her share in the conversation; and it works out even if one or two people don't actively participate in talking.

The diameter of the table (the ideal is approximately 36 to 42 inches) is another important factor. Smaller tables facilitate more intimate connection between participants and draw them literally closer to each other. We have found that people are much more willing to be emotionally open and say what they really mean in closer groups. This deepens the quality and depth of the conversation and greatly elevates shared learning.

The convenor/sponsor(s) and Café host should welcome attendees. It is best if the sponsor/convenor and the overall Café host present themselves in partnership, demonstrating that they

share the purpose of the meeting as well as the attitude of inviting and appreciating everybody's contribution. After the welcome, the Café host (in large groups there might be also more than one host) takes over and initiates the Café by first talking with the participants about how the World Café works and sharing Café etiquette.

Over time, a World Café etiquette has developed. It contains a set of simple, basic guidelines for the Café conversations. In summary, they are:

- Focus on what matters;
- Contribute your thinking;
- Speak your mind and heart;
- Listen to understand;
- Link and connect ideas;
- Listen together for insights, patterns, and deeper questions;
- Play, doodle, draw – writing on the table cloth is encouraged;
- Have fun!

However, rather than just presenting the Café etiquette, it is often very effective to ask participants themselves what, for each of them, constitutes a good conversation. We often ask participants to take a couple of minutes to share with a partner at their table:

- Recall a time in a conversation, either at in your professional or your personal life, when you have experienced a significant shift in your thinking or learned something new through the power of conversation?
- What were the qualities that made that particular experience a great conversation?

We then ask people to share those qualities with the larger group for mutual inspiration. Interestingly, people from all over the world, no matter what their culture or background, mention similar characteristics. Sharing these enables people to develop their own self-developed conversational “etiquette”—creating and agreeing on the conversational principles themselves. The World Café etiquette is then simply a re-affirmation and extension of what they already know from their own experience.

The conversational principles developed by the participants should be reflected graphically on a [wall mural](#)<sup>3</sup> or easel pad. The host can then connect them to the etiquette of the World Café. This process of initial sharing and whole group feedback on the qualities of “great conversations” can take as little as ten minutes. Once there is clarity about procedures and etiquette, the host starts the table conversations by offering a first question.

*To be concluded next week.*