



## The World Café: Part Two

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

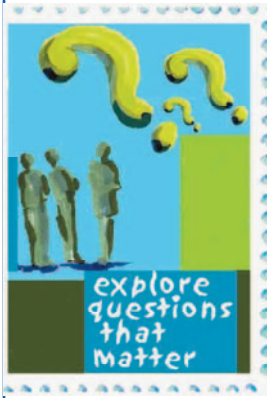
**Editor's Note:** "Group Intelligence" has long been a futuristic myth, much like perpetual motion or cold fusion. Instead, we see its opposite, group stupidity, known as "group think," a term recently rebranded, that originated in an intellectual/policy audit conducted after the Bay of Pigs fiasco. 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 and 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.

**Dr. 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.



### 3. Explore questions that matter

The World Café is intended to open new possibilities for inquiry and action around questions that matter to people. Paying particular attention to the phrasing of these questions focused on the shared topic is key. Extensive research has shown that the manner in which the question is constructed strongly influences the [answer](#).<sup>4</sup> Among the helpful hints to [follow](#)<sup>5</sup> is to focus Café questions on seeking possibilities rather than fixing problems. Powerful questions are open-ended, simple and clear, thought-provoking, and not focused on discovering an immediate answer. They generate energy, focus inquiry, and bring assumptions to the surface.

Evoking new insights is an important purpose of any World Café conversation. For example, a 'could be' question is much more likely to elicit creative thinking than a 'should-be' question. Appreciative questions like, 'What new possibilities does this challenging situation offer us?' are also very useful to engage people in dialogue. Questions like 'Why did it go wrong?' or 'How can we fix this?' imply that something is neither good nor done well. They tend to make people defensive, self-justifying, and backward looking, and rather than proactive, creative and forward looking.

The host can help participants to move from 'How should we.... ..!' thinking towards 'What if we'... thinking, as they begin to imagine creative possibilities, or frame more powerful questions in relation to the topic. The imaginative 'what if'...character of this type of thinking demonstrates the openness to further learning, research and exploration. This type of thinking is critical to effective action, particularly when dealing with complex issues, like the strategic dilemmas most organizations face in today's world.

Once a number of core questions or critical strategic issues have been gathered during the Café process, the host can move toward action by asking the participants which of them would like to host a conversation around any of the questions or action possibilities developed. "Who would like to champion the question or action opportunity and to take it further?"



### 4. Encourage everyone's contribution

Once participants receive the first question, each table starts its own dialogue. Only one person talks at a time. The others try to focus on real listening, which means: suspending judgement, holding back immediate reactions, and fully concentrating on what the person talking is saying.

Using a talking stick or other small object helps encourage everyone's contribution. When one person has finished, any other person can continue by taking the talking piece and sharing his or her view about the question. Simultaneously, other participants can start drawing and writing on the tablecloth what he or she hears. This ensures that no key comment is "lost." The table notes also serves to connect comments and ideas.

The purpose of using a talking piece is to create space for whatever wants to be said, or not to be said. Hence, its object is to allow and appreciate silence so that

those who do not want to speak can choose to say nothing by passing the talking piece. The silent spaces between the words carry as much importance as the words themselves. Once each member of the table has had an opportunity to contribute, the group opens the conversation to explore the question further. It is important that people do not start to judge other statements but try to reflect constructively on them. This round takes around 20 to 30 minutes, depending on the topic, the size of the total group and time available.

The host can signal the end of the first round of conversation by simply raising his or her hand. As people see the signal, they bring their conversation to a close and also raise their hands (this should be agreed on prior to initiating the Café). Each table selects a table host. Then, everyone except the table host moves (ideally in silence) to different tables, so that each table represents a new constellation of four people. The table host welcomes their travellers and shares the key points of the initial group's conversation. Then every other person has a chance to contribute what he or she has brought from the previous table, thus linking and connecting ideas. As all insights are shared, the conversation moves to deeper levels.

After about another 20 minutes (if time permits) a new change of tables is recommended, for a third round of conversation. People may return to their "home table" to synthesize the insights from their "travels" or may continue to a new table for a third round of exploration.

### 5. Connect diverse perspectives

One of the defining features of the World Café approach to dialogue is the intentional cross-pollination of ideas as people move from table to table in several evolving rounds of dialogue. Moving between tables, talking with new people, actively contributing each person's thinking, and linking the essence of collective discoveries to ever-widening circles of thought are hallmarks of the World Café.

In the course of the Café rounds multiple perspectives focused on common questions start to connect themselves to each other, thereby supporting the 'construction' of an invisible inter-relational tapestry of thought woven among participants during the Café. Patterns emerge, additional perspectives surface, and surprising combinations of insight and creativity reveal themselves in ways people had not previously imagined.

At times it is not practical for people to move, but the cross-pollination of ideas is still possible. For example, people at each table can write one key insight, idea, or theme from their table conversation on a large index card. Each member can then turn in a different direction and exchange their card with a person at a nearby table, thus randomly cross-pollinating insights among table conversation. Members read aloud the "gifts" they've received to provide creative input for a deepening round of conversation.

The Illustration Wall, often used to harvest insights at the end of a Café, (see Principle #7) features the shared patterns that emerge during the conversations.





Participants who reflect on these visuals after the Café concludes reaffirm their earlier experience of the interrelatedness of the individual contributions and common themes discovered within the collective conversation.

### **6. Listen together for patterns, insights and deeper questions**

At a minimum, a World Café lasts about three to four rounds, depending on the size of the total group, the overall intention, and the focus of the topic. During these rounds participants are encouraged to engage in a special type of listening. It moves beyond listening to other people speaking by simultaneously inviting members to listen with each other for connections and patterns of meaning as well as listening for new insights or deeper questions that emerge in the space between different perspectives. This is what we mean by "listening into the middle."

As each round evolves, participants are encouraged to listen together to what's emerging in their midst—for the cluster of related meanings that emerges both within and between conversations—thus focusing the attention of the group in a different way than happens in many of our day-to-day conversations.

Something quite unexpected often happens in World Café conversations when participants are asked to become ambassadors of meaning—listening together and carrying forward the essential ideas of ah-ha insights into progressive rounds of conversation. Rigid positions seem to drop away as people listen together in order to discover creative connections among the multiple perspectives that others contribute. After several rounds, people become more interested in the evolution of collective thought than in their own personal "position."

In the final round participants may return to their initial table to synthesize their discoveries. For this last round the Café host then might ask: What were the key topics and insights that arose? What patterns emerged during your rounds of conversations? What was the single most important, relevant issue you heard? or "In this Café, what key question stands out that, if we were able to explore it, would provide breakthrough results for our situation."

### **7. Harvest and share collective discoveries**

After completing their several rounds of conversation, the entire group engages in a conversation of the whole to harvest and share collective insights. We call these 'town meeting-style conversations'. These are not formal "report-outs" Rather, they provide time for mutual reflection, offering the entire group an opportunity to notice the deeper discoveries, themes, or questions that have presented themselves through the medium of the Café.

The Café host often gives participants a few minutes of silence to note down what, for them, was a key insight from the multiple conversations they've been part of. Then anyone in the room can begin, with others noticing what discoveries from their own conversations link to this initial sharing. As new threads are woven, a tapestry of thought begins to reveal itself. Connections to the larger



whole are discovered, collective knowledge grows, and new action possibilities emerge. Café conversations often lead to surprising outcomes that no one could have predicted when the [conversation began](#).<sup>6</sup> If the Café community is very large, it is important to have a couple of microphones in the room so that all contributions can be heard. It might also be necessary to have a large screen, so that all participants can see the graphics or the Illustration Wall, as insights are shared. Or, if no graphic illustrator is available, other creative ways of making the collective knowledge visible as part of harvesting and sharing discoveries at the end of a Café are:

- Gallery Tours (prior to the "conversation of the whole" people place the paper from their tables on the wall so that all members can take a 'tour', noting down what they intuitively sense as central to the conversation as a whole);
- Posting insights (each participant posts one key insight on a wall where all insights are collected);
- Creating idea clusters (grouping individual insights and ideas together in 'affinity clusters' that can be used for action planning in the next stages of working with the material.).

Café organizers can also summarize and make available the key outcomes of the Café to all participants. Some Cafés create a newspaper or storybook to share the results of their work with larger audiences. Any storybook can be written in the 'We'-style to reflect the collaborative nature of the conversation. Presumably the visual recorder or other members will have captured key insights on flip charts or wall murals. These can be photographed and included in the Café summary as well.

## V. From dialogue to action

Thousands of people on five continents have experienced the World Café in settings ranging from crowded hotel ballrooms with 1,200 people, to living rooms with just a dozen participants. The Café supports conversations that matter in every context, be it in business, government, health, education, or community-based organizations.

In New Zealand, Western and Eastern Europe, Africa, Singapore, Latin America and North America, Café conversations have been held on key issues related to business futures, sustainable development, health improvement, educational issues, government affairs, and community collaboration. Café principles have supported Conversation Cafés and Commonway Cafés, two key citizen initiatives that invite diverse groups to explore contemporary issues. Another powerful example of the World Café in action is the initiative of Academy Fellow Margaret Wheatley, '[From the Four Directions: People Everywhere Leading the Way](#).' The effort is intentionally weaving a global network of conversations among leaders of all ages on several continents. Using the internet and other information technologies, local conversation circles feed insights back into the network, catalyzing these world-wide leadership dialogues into a growing force for societal innovation."<sup>7</sup>



*A crucial success factor for organizations is to continue to engage their members in meaningful conversations, thus contributing to an organizational “culture of dialogue.”*

One core question frequently arises: "How can the positive experience of collective creativity and shared learning advance into action?"

Findings from the Café can be used to develop action in different kind of situations, e.g., small task groups can specifically evaluate the various concepts and ideas for later implementation. Or, after the completion of the Café dialogue phase, the group can move into an action planning mode, prioritizing key ideas generated in the earlier Café dialogues, and determining appropriate implementation infrastructure and next steps. The World Café approach has been used to develop business and organizational strategy, to create new product ideas, to harvest collective expertise to serve clients' needs, to enhance safety performance, to support executive education, to foster community development, and for a host of other specific applications.

A crucial success factor for organizations that use the Café is that they continue to engage their members in meaningful conversations, thus contributing to an organizational "culture of dialogue." The continuous use of the World Café methodology ensures that knowledge sharing and joint learning become a more natural habit for the organization. Indeed, the World Café can have a great impact on individual behaviour and on organizational culture. It has the potential to positively transform an organization in the process of discovering its collective knowledge and creativity.

## **VI. Conclusion**

The World Café process provides a real opportunity for any organization or group of people to build community, to share learning and to develop new ways of thinking and acting collaboratively. The World Café process has demonstrated a remarkable capacity to foster authentic conversation and knowledge sharing among people of varied backgrounds – even if they have never met or had formal dialogue training.

When it is well designed and hosted, The World Café works effectively in diverse situations and cultures because participants resonate with the same design principles for creating conversations that matter.

The preparation of the World Café, especially the design, is the most important phase. If enough attention has been paid to this phase, often supported by members from different levels within the organization or the group who take ownership for the Café process, a strong base is laid for a successful Café.

As a dialogue process, the World Café has no real limits of scale with meetings being organized for 1200 people or more. The dialogue process is present at each table, and every table represents a fractal of the entire group. We are intrigued by how differently human beings think. Yet, in spite of the immense diversity of individual perspectives, when we create the context for deep, meaningful conversations, a common or collective consciousness seems to emerge, from which unique and innovative solutions reveal themselves.

The World Café also challenges a traditional view that talking is not consistent with doing "real work." We regard collaborative conversation as a core process–

– an essential part of the the work of any group or organization. Given the exceptional results that come out of World Café dialogues, it is surprising that within organizations not enough attention, time, nor space are given to hosting quality conversations. Time for reflective conversations is rare. However, its impact is very strong, especially in terms of quality of relationship, shared identity and shared vision, trust and community building, learning and knowledge, creativity and innovation, flexibility, and adaptability.

All these elements are crucial ingredients for the building of effective and successful organizations and communities. In the ever-changing environments which require innovation and constant adaptation, World Cafés provide a clear pathway to resilience, innovation, and sustainable success. And that's what really matters to most organizations.

## NEW WAYS TO DESIGN MEETINGS

Any corporation has numerous events in which the World Café could play a role. It has immediate practical implications for meeting and conference design, strategy formation, organizational development, knowledge creation, and large-scale systems change. Here are a few specific examples for meeting types where World Café can be applied:

- **Internal meetings** (board meeting, department meeting, and employee gathering): Potential questions: What are the key strategic challenges and opportunities our organization is facing? How could the ideal communication in this organization be achieved? How could we jointly foster the level of innovation of our organization? How do employees' individual visions fit into the organizational vision?
- **Assessment Centers / Recruiting new employees:** Potential new employees could explore: How would we want our ideal employer's organization to be?
- **International representative meeting:** How could the cooperation between the organization and its international representatives ideally occur?
- **Post Merger Integration:** What kind of joint culture of our two newly merged organizations do we want to create together?
- **Client meetings:** What would we like to hear a most satisfied client say about our organization, our product and our services?
- **Multi-Stakeholder-Meeting:** How can all stakeholders best support each other? How can we all be of best service for the ultimate client of the organization's product?

## A BUSINESS CASE

A large pharmaceutical company wanted to find new ways to provide service to its customers. Therefore the organization aimed to expand its relationships

*The World Café challenges a traditional view that talking is not consistent with doing “real work.” We regard collaborative conversation as a core process— an essential part of the the work of any group or organization.*

with all its stakeholders by involving them in this goal. Earlier, the company had learned that they were engaged only in internal conversations but not with external groups. In a first internal Café the company identified all its respective stakeholders (e.g., dealers, pharmacies, doctors, nurses, patients, patients' associations, etc.). Then, they invited representatives of the various stakeholder groups to engage with them in conversation. The purpose was to jointly develop a set of relationships in which all stakeholders could best be of service to the patient as the ultimate consumer of the company's products and services.

## ENVIRONMENTAL CONFERENCE CASE

32 people came together in 2002 to discuss environmental issues and convened a World Café. The group included people from Greenpeace, politicians, and executives from businesses like transportation companies, etc. Usually, these people did not talk to each other. They had received an invitation that asked them to participate in a round table conference.

They were surprised when they arrived as they did not expect small round tables but one big one. The small round tables, in conjunction with the new Café dialogue-based conversation approach, literally moved them out of their normal reference model for conversations. New relationships developed and creative ideas emerged from the diversity of thought present in the group that members could take back to their own constituencies.

## References

- Allee, Verna, *The Knowledge Evolution: Expanding Organizational Intelligence*, Burlington / Massachusetts: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1997.
- Brown, Juanita, *The World Café, A Resource Guide for Hosting Conversations that Matter*, Mill Valley, 2002.
- Brown, Juanita, Doctoral Dissertation. *The World Café: Living Knowledge Through Conversations that Matter*, Mill Valley, 2001.
- Cooperrider, David, Sorensen, P., Whitney, D., Yaeger, T. (Eds.), *Appreciative Inquiry: Rethinking Human Organization Toward A Positive Theory of Change*, Champaign / Illinois: Stepes, 1999.
- Gyllenpalm, Bo, "Virtual Knowledge Cafés," in *Handbook of Online Learning: Innovations in Higher Education and Corporate Training*, eds, Rudestam, K.E. And Schoenhotz-Read, J. Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage Publications, 2002.
- Vogt, Eric, Brown, Juanita, Isaacs, David, *The Art of Powerful Questions: Catalyzing Insight, Innovation and Action*, Mill Valley, 2003.

## Useful websites:

- [www.theworldcafe.com](http://www.theworldcafe.com)
- [www.fromthefourdirections.com](http://www.fromthefourdirections.com)
- [www.fromthefourdirections.org/](http://www.fromthefourdirections.org/)

Artwork credits: Nancy Margulies and the SystemsThinking Conference shots to Betty Alexander, Gretchen Pisano, and Michelle Boos-Stone.



**Footnotes:**

1. Brown, Juanita, *The World Café, A Resource Guide for Hosting Conversations that Matter*, 2002.
2. Talking stick: reference to an old native American tradition where a talking stick was held by the current speaker and, after the speech, placed back in the conversation circle or handed over to the next speaker.
3. It has proven to be a worthy investment to engage a professional visual recorder who can collect all contributions at a wall mural in form of words, phrases, symbols, graphics, and even little sketches. At the end of the World Café sessions a large, colorful, perhaps even humorous illustration captures the essence and the most important outcome of the session.
4. E.g., compare: Cooperrider, D., Sorensen, P., Whitney, D., Yaeger, T. (Eds.), *Appreciative Inquiry: Rethinking Human Organization Toward A Positive Theory Of Change*, 1999.
5. Vogt, Eric E., Brown, Juanita, Isaacs, David: *The Art Of Powerful Questions: Catalyzing Insight, Innovation And Action*, 2003.
6. Brown, Juanita, *supra*, page 17.
7. Brown, Juanita, *supra*, page 5.

Copyright © 2004 World Business Academy, 428 Bryant Circle, Suite 109, Ojai, CA 93023  
Academy Phone 805 640-3713 Fax 805 640-9914 Website [www.worldbusiness.org](http://www.worldbusiness.org)  
Senior Editor, David Zweig [david@worldbusiness.org](mailto:david@worldbusiness.org) Phone 510 547-3223