



Civic Reinventions, Inc.

Reinventing Futures Through Strategic Conversation

THE WORLD CAFE

BY MARK K. SMUTNY

The World Café is a way to structure democratic conversations around questions that matter. It works in groups numbering from twelve to the thousands. World Café is an approach to strategic collaboration that engages all voices and energizes groups. Most importantly, it is democratic. When used as a core element in a strategic planning process, it results in system-wide ownership.

A World Café begins with participants gathering in groups of four or five around small, round café tables. Tables are covered to resemble a French café, frequently with red-checked tablecloths. Flower vases, a candle, and a cup of brightly colored markers adorn the tables. A few sheets of large flipchart paper are placed on the tables for people to record ideas, doodle, and draw.

Participants explore “questions that matter.” Questions are shaped specifically for the challenges before the group. They must be written carefully to stimulate greater thinking, release imagination, and create commitment. Asking the right question makes a difference in how the group discovers knowledge and commits to action. See the chapter on *The Art of Strategic Questions* in my book **THRIVE: The Professional Facilitator’s Guide to Radically Inclusive Meetings**.

A typical World Café has three rounds of twenty minutes, followed by a thirty-minute plenary called the “harvest.” Everyone, except the person hosting each table, moves to a different group following each round. The host shares highlights from the previous conversations with the newbies at his or her table, inviting cross-pollination of ideas and insights. As conversations connect, they spark new discoveries and expand collective knowledge. After ninety minutes of table conversation, participants share their insights, learnings, and opportunities for action in a whole group harvest.

I have hosted dozens of World Cafés: at a homeless shelter engaging staff, neighbors, and homeless guests regarding how to ensure the shelter’s success; with a residents’ association developing key public policy strategies; and with

faith-based groups imagining their future. I am always amazed by the energy, imagination, and collective intelligence that emerges in the harvest.

Like all the methods described in this chapter, World Café is grounded in the hypothesis that ordinary people have amazing wisdom. Every group, organization, coalition, and business has the chops and creativity to imagine their future through strategic conversation. They can confront the most difficult challenges and the most potent issues of our time.

Six principles guide effective World Cafes. They are outlined in the book *The World Café: Shaping Our Futures through Conversations That Matter* by Juanita Brown and David Isaacs. The principles described below are adapted from their book.

Set the Context – Attend to why you are bringing people together and what you want to achieve. Context includes who should attend, what questions will generate the most creativity, and how the harvest will be designed.

Create Hospitable Space – Meeting spaces make a difference. You want one that feels safe and inviting. When people feel comfortable, they think creatively. They listen better. Make your invitation warm and welcoming. Create a welcoming atmosphere.

Explore Questions that Matter – Craft questions relevant to the real-life concerns of the group. Powerful questions attract collective energy, insight, wisdom, and action. The most powerful questions are open-ended, invite curiosity, and emerge from the lives of the people involved.

Encourage Everyone’s Contribution – Central to a World Café is welcoming every participant’s contribution. All have ideas and thoughts to share. Some prefer, nonetheless, only to listen. The World Café method provides a structure for both sharing and listening.

Connect Diverse Perspectives – New ideas and discoveries develop as participants move between tables and meet new people. New perspectives, insights, and recognition emerge.

Listen Together for Patterns and Insights – Listening well determines the success of a World Café. By listening and paying attention to themes, patterns, and insights, the whole group discovers wisdom. People see new connections, common themes, and insights.

Share Collective Discoveries – Conversations at one table connect with conversations at other tables. The harvest makes these connections visible to the whole group. Encourage a few minutes of silent reflection on the patterns, themes, and deeper questions experienced in the three rounds of small group conversations. Then, invite the larger

group to share common insights and discoveries. Capture the harvest by working with notes and a graphic recorder.

The World Café method has been successful at engaging all kinds of groups across the world. From women’s health collectives in Sub-Saharan Africa seeking improved health outcomes for women and children, to Fortune 500 corporations imagining better ways to improve safety, the method is versatile and effective.

For more information about the World Café movement, check out the website at <http://www.theworldcafe.com> and order the book, *The World Café: Shaping Our Futures through Conversations That Matter*, by Juanita Brown and David Isaacs.

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