

World café method

World Café is an effective and flexible format for hosting an event that facilitates large group dialogue. It is useful as a starting point for engagement as it gives an idea of what issues need to be explored further or more in-depth.

The setting

The event takes place either in an actual cafe or a room set up to look like one. Participants are seated around small tables with paper tablecloths, drinks and/or snacks, as the ambiance allows for a more relaxed and open conversation to take place. A facilitator welcomes the participants, explains the purpose of the event and how the information will be used, and gives an introduction to the World Café process.

The process

An open question or topic is laid out on each table with flipchart paper and pens. Participants move around the tables at intervals in a series of small focus groups, discussing the question or topic at their table and writing or drawing on the flipchart paper to capture ideas as they emerge. One participant or staff member stays at each table as a 'host', welcoming people who join the table and explaining the previous conversation. You can decide on the number of questions and whether to set the participants a time limit at each table (for example 20 minutes on each question) or allow participants to move freely, spending time on the questions they feel are more important or that they have more to contribute about.

The Feedback

When the participants have visited the tables and discussed the questions, everyone is invited to hear the feedback. The facilitator invites each table host to summarise the discussions that took place at their table. (This summary can be sent to participants). The facilitator then thanks everyone for their time, offers a reminder of how the information will be used and when feedback will be provided. Follow up possibilities may need to be discussed.

World Café principles

The World Café method can be modified to meet a variety of needs. Context, numbers, purpose, location can all be factored into each event's unique invitation, design, and topic choice. It can also serve as a springboard for further engagement by recruiting participants to a focus group or advisory panel on similar subjects.

The following seven principles form the basis of the World Café process:

1. Set the context

Pay attention to the reason for bringing people together, and what you want to achieve. Being clear on the purpose of your meeting enables you to choose

who should be part of the conversation, what themes or questions will be most important and how to collate the views expressed (known as the 'harvest')

2. Create a welcoming space

It is very important and powerful to create a space that feels safe and inviting. When people feel comfortable they do their most creative thinking, speaking and listening. In particular, consider how your invitation and your physical set-up contribute to creating a welcoming atmosphere.

3. Explore questions that matter

Depending on the timeframe and objectives, your Café could explore a single question or use a progressively deeper line of inquiry through several conversational rounds.

4. Encourage everyone's contribution

It is important to encourage everyone in your meeting to contribute their ideas and perspectives, while allowing those who want to join in by just listening to do so.

5. Connect different perspectives

One of the main characteristics of a World Café is the opportunity to move between tables and meet new people, contribute your thinking to different groups, and link your discoveries to other peoples. As participants carry ideas or themes to new tables they exchange perspectives, increasing the possibility for surprising new insights.

6. Listen for patterns and insights

As a facilitator, listening is the most important factor in determining the success of a Café and enables you to see themes, patterns and insights emerge. Listen to what is not being said along with what is being shared.

7. Share collective discoveries

A conversation held at one table is part of a pattern that connects with the conversations at other tables. The last phase of the Café, the 'harvest', involves making all of the discussions visible to everyone in a large group conversation. Invite a few minutes of silent reflection on the patterns, themes and deeper questions experienced in the small group conversations and then share them with the group. Make sure you have a way to capture the harvest – an audio recorder, or someone making notes and reading out themes

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