



Hosting a World Café

Description:

This tool provides the steps to hosting a World Café.

How it can be used:

A World Café is an effective way of encouraging group dialogue using focused questions and is an excellent method to conduct a community session. Use this tool to host an effective World Café.

What is World Café

World Café is a simple, effective, and flexible approach for hosting a large group dialogue. It helps a large group understand a set of issues at their own pace.

When to use a World Café

The World Café format is flexible and adapts to many different circumstances. It is often used to help a group reach a state of common understanding and alignment.

Considerations	Use World Café	Don't Use World Café
Objective	You want to explore a clearly articulated topic, question, or set of questions	You need to agree or decide by the end of the discussion You need to solve a problem
Credible informants	Participants are familiar with the topic selected for the mapping activity and the organization's or initiative's work related to it	Participants cannot credibly speak to both the topic and/or the organization or initiative's work in that area
Level of facilitation needed	Minimal level of facilitation required to generate conversation and insight from participants	The topic or question requires skilled facilitation to get participants to contribute their thoughts
Group size	You have a large group (more than 15–20 people)	You expect a small gathering (fewer than 15–20 people)
Room setup	Tables and chairs can be moved to create 4-top tables, allowing participants to sit knee-to-knee	Furniture is not flexible There is not enough space for small group conversations.





Principles of a World Café

- Context – pay attention to the reason you are bringing people together and what you want to achieve.
- A welcoming space – create a space that feels safe and inviting. People do their most creative thinking when they are comfortable, welcomed, and accepted.
- Questions that matter – knowledge emerges in response to compelling questions. Find questions that are relevant to the real-life concerns of the group.
- Everyone contributes – people don't only want to participate but they want to actively contribute to making a difference. It is important to encourage everyone in your meeting to contribute in their own way, by sharing their ideas and perspectives or by simply listening.
- Diverse perspectives – offering the opportunity to move between tables, meet new people, and actively contribute thoughts are key features of the World Café. As participants carry key ideas or themes to new tables, they exchange perspectives, greatly enriching the possibility for surprising new insights.
- Listening and sharing – Through shared listening and noticing themes, patterns, and insights, people also understand what is not being spoken.
- Collective discoveries – conversations between and among tables offer opportunities to see all discussions as part of a great whole.

Setting up a World Café

Regardless of the size of your group, it is essential to create the right environment. Make the space look like an actual café, with small tables with tablecloths, that seat four or five people. Arrange the café tables in a random fashion rather than in neat rows.

Place at least two large sheets of paper on each tablecloth with colorful markers, paper, and pens to encourage scribbling, drawing, and connecting ideas as they emerge.

Consider displaying art or adding posters to the walls (as simple as flip chart sheets with quotes) and play music as people arrive and you welcome them. To honour the tradition of community provide beverages and snacks. A Café isn't complete without refreshments!

A World Café is most effective when each small group includes four people; however, the total number of participants can vary significantly, as long as they can all be seated in one room for their small group conversations.

Note that each round of small group conversation on a new topic is 20–25 minutes. (If the World Café is structured to focus on just one question, the time can be reduced in each round, for example, by starting with a 25-minute discussion, then 20 minutes, then 15 minutes.) Regardless of whether the group focuses





on one or more questions, it is recommended to have at least three rounds of discussion. Multiple rounds allow participants to dig deeply into the question and generate substantive insights on the topic.

Depending on how many rounds of conversation you wish to have, sessions can range from 90 minutes (for three rounds of discussion and report-outs to the large group) to 2.5 hours (for four or five rounds of discussion and report-outs).

World Café roles

World Café Overall Host

The job of the World Café Overall Host is to see that the guidelines for dialogue and engagement are put into action. The World Café Overall Host can make the difference between just an interesting conversation and one that truly matters.

- Work with the planning team to determine the purpose of the World Café and decide who should be invited to the gathering.
- Name your World Café appropriately to describe its purpose, for example: Leadership Café; Knowledge Café; Strategy Café; Discovery Café, etc.
- Welcome participants and explain the purpose of the gathering. Explain the World Café guidelines and World Café Etiquette and post them on PowerPoint, flipchart, or on cards at each table. Explain how the logistics of the World Café will work, including the role of the Table Host.
- Pose the question or themes for rounds of conversation and make sure that the question is visible to everyone on a PowerPoint, flip chart, or on cards at each table.
- During the conversations, move among the tables. Encourage everyone to participate. Remind people to note key ideas, doodle and draw.
- Let people know in a gentle way when it's time to move and begin a new round of conversation.
- Make sure key insights are recorded visually or are gathered and posted if possible.

World Café Table Host

The job of the World Café Table Host is to remain at the table when others leave and welcome participants from other tables for the next round of conversation.

- Briefly share key insights from the prior conversation so others can link and build using ideas from their respective tables.
- Gently and as appropriate, encourage people at your table to jot down key connections, ideas, discoveries, and deeper questions as they emerge. (Because people are used to behaving a certain way when they are a facilitator or “being facilitated”, there can be a danger with inexperienced Table Hosts taking on more of a role than is meant here.) At the end of each conversation, one person remains at the table to be the Table Host for the next round of conversations.





World Café questions

The question(s) you use for a World Café conversation are critical to its success. Your World Café may explore a single question, or several questions may be developed to support a logical progression of discovery throughout several rounds of conversations. Considerations:

- Well-crafted questions focus our attention to what really counts.
- Use open-ended questions – the kind that don't have yes or no answers.
- Good questions invite inquiry and discovery vs. advocacy and advantage.
- You'll know you have a good question when it continues to surface new ideas and possibilities.
- In advance, get feedback from key people to see if the questions are clear and encourage interest.

World Café process

1. Introduction (10 minutes)

Introduce the World Café method and the purpose of the present conversations. Be sure to highlight what makes World Café different from typical breakout sessions. The World Café Host explains to the group they will now have 3 rounds of conversation of approximately 20-30 minutes each.

2. Small group discussions (approximately 20-25 minutes per round, plus 2–3 minutes for re-settling)

Instruct each table to begin the first round of conversation. Be sure to remind participants of the:

- Timing of the conversation
- Props available (e.g., markers, large pieces of butcher paper)
- Question(s) for discussion

The Table Host encourages the table members to write, doodle, and draw key ideas on their paper tablecloths or to note key ideas on large index cards or placemats in the center of the group.

After completing the 1st round of conversation, the World Café Host asks each table to agree a 'Table Host' who remains at the table while the others travel to different tables.

The travelers now get up from the table and move to another. They can go to whichever table they prefer carrying with them key ideas, themes and questions from their old table into their new conversations.

The World Café Overall Host asks the Table Hosts to welcome their new guests and briefly share the main ideas, themes and questions from the initial conversation (max 2 mins). Encourage guests to link and connect ideas coming from their previous table conversations – listening carefully and building on each other's contributions.





At the end of the 2nd round, all of the tables and conversations will be cross-pollinated with insights from previous conversations. Again, new Table Hosts are chosen.

In the 3rd round of conversation, people can return to their home (original) tables to synthesize their discoveries, or they may continue on to new tables, leaving the same or a new host at the table.

In some World Café events the whole group conversation is captured by a graphic recorder who draws the group's ideas on flip charts or a wall mural using text and graphics to illustrate the patterns of the conversation. At times, people will place the paper tablecloths from their tables on the wall so members can take a tour of the group's ideas during a break.

Participants can place large Post-Its with a single key insight on each on a blackboard, wall, etc. so that everyone can review the ideas during a break. The group can move the Post-Its into "affinity clusters" so that related ideas are visible and available for planning the group's next steps.

3. Report-out

There is no strict rule regarding the number of large-group report-outs that are included in a World Café discussion. The number of report-outs will depend on several factors, including the number of unique questions posed, the relevance or importance of large group discussion, and the time available for the session. For example, you may wish to pause for a report-out after each round of conversation, or you may wish to hold just one report-out at the end of the World Café.

For each report-out, the World Café Overall Host begins by asking participants to silently reflect on their small group conversation(s) for 2-3 minutes. Following this reflection period, invite each Table Host to share a few (often two to three) ideas, insights, or other responses to the guiding question(s) with the large group. (Additional participants may contribute to this report-out, as appropriate.) The recorder will record the room's responses to the guiding question(s) at the front of the room, using a whiteboard, flipchart, or graphic facilitation board. Try to group responses together as appropriate, highlighting patterns, key topics, and insights.

4. Next steps

At the conclusion of the World Café session, consider providing participants with a clear overview of next steps. For example, you may wish to share how the insights from the session will be used within the organization, or whether the transcribed comments will be shared with participants. Consider converting the comments from the session into a brief memo of insights, observations, and questions for consideration.

