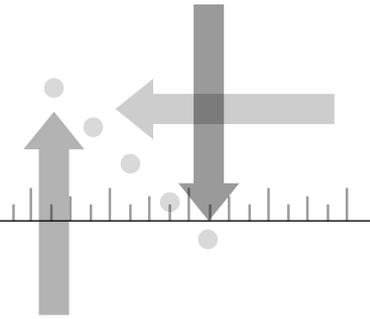


---

## WORLD CAFÉ™ (WITH “SPEED DATING” VARIATION)



### **Purpose**

The World Café is a format for collaborative conversations designed to yield deeper insights into pressing collective issues. The collaborative conversations bring together stakeholders in group settings to formulate directions (or ideas, opinions, and so on) concerning needs, next steps, and solutions.

### **Needs Assessment Applications**

The World Café format has gained in popularity over recent years because it is an easy approach to gathering information through collaboration; also it is a generally quick and usually fun process. (See <http://www.theworldcafe.com> for more information on the approach.) The following discussion draws on the trademarked World Café approach, but it has been adapted for needs assessment purposes.

When used in a needs assessment context, the World Café approach offers a useful, fluid framework for structuring a productive, problem-solving discussion among a group of participants who typically would have diverse perspectives (but, in many cases, they could have shared or common perspectives). Because of the way in which the conversations are structured, participants circulate about the room, cross-pollinating ideas and building upon one another's suggestions. This approach lends itself well to needs assessment because it can provide unique opportunities for gathering information when other techniques would not be appropriate, viable, affordable, or useful.

## **Advantages and Disadvantages**

### ***Advantages***

- This approach can be used with a large and diverse group of participants and stakeholders.
- A collaborative setting allows for transparent decision making.
- The approach can yield more nuanced data and findings than can structured interviews or focus groups.
- The flexible technique can be applied in many settings and for different objectives.

### ***Disadvantages***

- The “results” of World Café sessions are subject to interpretation.
- The findings of this approach will depend largely on which stakeholders participate.
- The approach requires substantial advance planning for determining key discussion questions.

## **Process Overview<sup>1</sup>**

1. Have organizers determine in advance the targeted questions that will address the key objectives for holding the World Café.
2. Seat groups of four or five people at small tables or in clusters. Each table is led by a host who has been given some guidance about duties of facilitating the table work.
3. Set up progressive (usually three) rounds of conversation of approximately 20–30 minutes each.
4. Encourage both table hosts and members to write or draw key ideas using the markers and paper provided.
5. When groups have completed the initial round of conversation, ask one person to remain at the table as the host while the other group members become ambassadors. Ambassadors carry key ideas, themes, and questions from their first group into their new conversations.

6. Ask the table host to welcome the new guests and to briefly share the main ideas, themes, and questions of the initial conversation. Encourage the ambassadors to link and connect ideas coming from their previous table conversations as they listen carefully and build on each other's contributions.
7. In the third round of conversation, either have people return to their first table or have them continue traveling to new tables. Sometimes facilitators will add a new question in the third round of discussion to help deepen the exploration.
8. After several rounds of conversation, initiate a period of whole-group discussion.

### **Tips for Success**

- Clarify your purpose, and keep in mind the reason for gathering your group. Design the session with targeted questions and issues in mind.
- As an important component of the World Café approach, create a welcoming environment so participants can share their ideas. Consider how your invitation and the meeting's location will contribute to a hospitable atmosphere.
- Have your World Café explore only one question or a set of related questions. Remember that choosing questions that are of central importance to your meeting objectives and, for that matter, to your participants can produce powerful results.
- Importantly, encourage participants to be active contributors of their ideas and perspectives while allowing those who wish to participate by simply observing to do so.
- Remember that in the World Café design, participants circulate about the large group and take ideas from each small group's discussion to the next table as they become ambassadors. Typically, one participant stays behind as a host, sharing the previous group's ideas with the new arrivals. By using the center of the small-group tables as spaces for drawing with markers, your facilitators and hosts can draw attention to the illustrations and diagrams created as an example of a shared, collaborative vision.
- Encourage participants to sharpen their listening skills as they go into the World Café. Encourage participants (a) to listen rather than plan

their response to the current speaker, (b) to be open to being influenced by another's ideas, (c) to listen for deeper questions and insights that may emerge in the group discussion, and (d) to listen for what questions are not being asked or for what is not being spoken.

- To tie in the whole group's progress, first ask each table to spend a few minutes brainstorming about what has emerged in their World Café rounds that has been most meaningful. Depending on the range of ideas that have emerged, the ambassadors and table participants might want to prepare a summary list of the ideas. The list could include those items that were suggested frequently, but it could also include ideas that were suggested less often but that could represent an important and perhaps underrepresented view. Because the World Café is meant to collect expansive ideas around an issue, under many circumstances it will be useful to think beyond the "top five" type of items and to dig deeper about items that were not suggested as frequently. After this period, begin a whole-group discussion. Perhaps tailor this exercise into thematic clusters by asking people from each table to share one thing that they found new or surprising, and then asking others to share ideas and observations that build on that one thing. Ask the whole group the following questions:
  - If there were a single voice in the room, what would the group say are the key takeaways?
  - What deeper questions are emerging as a result of these conversations?
  - Do we notice any patterns emerging? If so, what do these patterns point to?
  - What do we now see and know as a result of these conversations?

### **"Speed Dating" Variation**

As with speed dating events—where single adults meet to have timed interactions with other singles so they can determine if there is a match—adding a similar set of timed and focused conversations among pairs of participants can be a useful variation of World Café. The same general World Café setup would occur, but instead of starting with small groups for 20 minutes, you would start with paired participants talking and brainstorming together for about 5 to 8 minutes.

Following two or three rounds of the paired conversations, you would then begin the process of sharing ideas on white boards or through index cards handed to a facilitator. This information would then be collapsed into the whole-group session of the World Café. This variation on the format allows for more sharing by each participant and potentially for an even deeper conversation on issues (with a reduced threat that a single person would dominate a group conversation).

## Notes

1. Based in part on “Café to Go” in World Café (2008) at <http://www.theworldcafe.com/pdfs/cafetogo.pdf>.

## References and Resources

- Brown, Juanita, and David Isaacs. 2005. *The World Café: Shaping Our Futures through Conversations That Matter*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Brown, Juanita, David Isaacs, Eric Vogt, and Nancy Margulies. 2002. “Strategic Questioning: Engaging People’s Best Thinking.” *The Systems Thinker* 13 (9).
- Brown, Juanita, David Isaacs, Nancy Margulies, and Gary Warhaftig. 1999. “The World Café: Catalyzing Large-Scale Collective Learning.” *Leverage Magazine* (33): 1–2.

## Websites

- “Café to Go: A Quick Reference Guide for Putting Conversations to Work” is available at <http://www.theworldcafe.com/pdfs/cafetogo.pdf>.
- Additional World Café information is available at <http://www.theworldcafe.com/>.