

Edited by Robert Steele

# **The World Café: Awakening collective intelligence and committed action**

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*Awakening & engaging collective intelligence through powerful conversations about questions that matter.*

## **Introduction**

It is through our conversations that the stories of our future unfold, and never has that process been more critical. We now have the capacity, through neglect of the planetary commons on which our lives depend, to make this precious earth, our home, uninhabitable. We now have the capacity, through escalating violence and weapons of mass destruction, to make our precious human species, along with many others, extinct.

Yet this is also a moment of opportunity. We are connected as never before in webs of communication and information-sharing through the Internet and other media that make our collective predicament visible on a much larger scale than we could have imagined only a few years ago. And for the first time, we now have the capacity for engaging in connected global conversations and action about what is happening and how we choose to respond—conversations that are not under the formal aegis of any one institution, government, or corporation. It is time for us to engage in those conversations more intentionally. Our very survival as a human community, both locally and globally, may rest on our creative responses to the following questions:

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<sup>1</sup> To learn more, visit <http://www.theworldcafe.com>

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- *How can we enhance our capacity to talk and think more deeply together about the critical issues facing our communities, our organizations, our nations and our planet?*
- *How can we access the mutual intelligence and wisdom we need to create innovative paths forward?*

### **The World Café: A Doorway to Collective Intelligence**

The World Café is a simple, yet powerful conversational *process* for fostering constructive dialogue, accessing collective intelligence and creating innovative possibilities for action, particularly in groups that are larger than most traditional dialogue approaches are designed to accommodate. Since its inception in 1995, tens of thousands of people on six continents—including business, government, health, education, NGO, and multi-stakeholder groups—have participated in World Café dialogues in settings ranging from crowded hotel ballrooms with 1200 people to cozy living rooms with just a dozen folks present.

Anyone interested in creating "conversations that matter" can engage the World Cafe approach, with its seven core design *principles* to improve people's collective capacity to share knowledge and shape the future together. World Cafe conversations simultaneously enable us to notice a deeper living *pattern* of connections at work in our organizations and communities—the often invisible webs of conversation and meaning making through which we already collectively shape the future, often in unintended ways.

Engaging the World Café *pattern, process, and principles* empowers leaders and others who work with groups to intentionally create dynamic networks of conversation and mutual intelligence around an organization's real work and critical questions.

### **How Does a World Café Dialogue Work?**

Café conversations are designed on the assumption that people already have within them the wisdom and creativity to confront even the most difficult challenges. The process is simple, yet often yields surprising results. The innovative design of the World Café enables groups—often numbering

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hundreds of people—to participate together in evolving rounds of dialogue with three or four others while at the same time remaining part of a single, larger, connected conversation. Small, intimate conversations link and build on each other as people move between groups, cross-pollinate ideas, and discover new insights around questions or issues that really matter to their life, work, or community. As the network of new connections increases, knowledge-sharing grows. A sense of the whole becomes increasingly visible. The collective wisdom of the group becomes more accessible, and innovative possibilities for action emerge.

In a Café gathering people often move rapidly from ordinary conversations—which keep us stuck in the past, are often divisive, and are generally superficial—toward “conversations that matter” in which it is possible to engage both collective intelligence and committed action in relation to a situation that people really care about. The seven World Cafe design principles, when used in combination, also create a kind of “conversational greenhouse,” nurturing the conditions for the rapid propagation of actionable knowledge. These design principles are not limited to a formal Café event. They can also be used to focus and enhance the quality of other key conversations—enabling you to draw on the collective wisdom of an organization or community to a greater extent than generally occurs with more traditional approaches.

The World Café, both as a designed conversational process and as a deeper living systems pattern has immediate, practical implications for meeting and conference design, strategy formation, knowledge creation, rapid innovation, stakeholder engagement, and large-scale change. Experiencing a Café conversation in action also helps us make personal and professional choices about more satisfying ways to participate in the ongoing conversations that help shape our lives.

### **The Emergence of Wholeness**

World Café hosts have commented on the excitement and energy that spirals upward as people and ideas move from one round of Café conversation to another, developing new connections and relationships. At times it feels as if the evolving rounds of conversation are sparking new synapses in the larger mind of the group as a whole.

The World Café intentionally connects the parts to the whole by combining the intimacy of a four- to five-person dialogue with the cross-pollination of ideas that occurs through radiating rounds of conversation. By encouraging people to carry forward the essential and/or most exciting ideas from their earlier conversations, the essence of the whole tends to become more visible as key ideas and insights travel rapidly through the conversational web. Café participants have described this experience as a “resonance of thought,” “lighting up the system in the room,” or “an accelerated evolutionary development of ideas.”

We’re especially intrigued by the lines of inquiry that the new sciences are revealing and the questions they raise for the theory and practice of dialogue. World Café conversations hold the promise of providing one intentional way not only to engage the fascinating network dynamics of emergence, but also to access—in their best moments—the unique relationship between the individual and the collective that enables a special type of mutual intelligence to emerge—the type of intelligence that the physicist David Bohm saw as the great promise of dialogue for our common future. Bohm described the type of awareness and holistic intelligence that emerges in authentic dialogue as occurring not only at the individual but simultaneously at the collective level. “It’s a harmony of the individual and the collective,” he said, “in which the whole constantly moves toward coherence” (1996, 27).

Our colleague, Tom Atlee (2003), describes the type of creative integration and higher-order thinking that occurs when diverse perspectives are engaged in dialogue as “co-intelligence.” Co-intelligence is an apt description of the magic that World Café hosts and participants often describe when they reflect on their most productive Café dialogues. Mark Gerzon, the president of the Mediators Foundation, provides a poignant example of “the magic.” While hosting a very challenging dialogue between Israeli Arabs and Jews, he recalls that “at the crucial mid-point, when the group seemed at an impasse, I suggested that we shift into a World Café process over dinner. The question was: ‘What story can you tell that will help the others at your table understand your perspective on the conflict in Israel between Jews and Palestinians?’ The stories were incredibly powerful, and the experience of consecutive storytelling with many different partners across the various fault lines fertilized the hard soil. The next morning, the breakthrough happened, I knew in my heart that the fertilizing

process of Café storytelling among all of the members was a key factor in making that breakthrough possible.”

Kenoli Oleari, a community development specialist, describes the moment he had a similar experience in a large group Café conversation. “Something clicked for me about the World Café,” he says. “I developed a visceral sense of what could come from the ‘voice in the center of the room.’ As the conversations wove themselves through the Café, shifting between various configurations of people and chemistries of interaction, I could feel how a sense of the whole—of something more than the assembled individuals—could grow. I was a bit awestruck by this epiphany.”

Carolyn Baldwin, the former Assistant Area Superintendent of Schools in Polk County Florida, adds that the networked structure of the World Café enables the group “to have multiple eyes focused from different parts of a system on the same set of questions. Those eyes are literally moving around the questions with all their perspectives.” “The wholeness” she explains, “comes from being able to see the system from many different angles.” Connecting people and perspectives around core questions in ways that make seeing the whole more likely is what World Café learning is all about.

### **Designing for Emergence**

The World Café process is not simply an interesting vehicle for the random emergence of collective intelligence. Rather, it embodies a simple but intentional architecture of engagement—creating the conditions for the arrival of serendipitous discoveries, new patterns of meaning, and the “voice in the center of the room”—especially in groups that are larger than most traditional dialogue circles.

But how does this actually work? Our conversations with physicist Fritjof Capra have shed light on this question. He points out that there’s a natural tension between designed structures, like formal organizational charts, and emergent structures, like the informal ways work actually gets done in most organizations. Designed structures have pre-determined specifications; emergent structures often self-organize in ways that cannot be predicted. World Café conversations simultaneously engage both the intentional process of design and the natural process of emergence in order to encourage coherence without control.

In designing for emergence, all seven of the Café design principles discussed below work together to increase the likelihood (but never the certainty) of enlivening a generative and focused field of inquiry, where the magic of collective understanding and insight can be revealed.

*However, it is the creative cross-pollination of people and ideas combined with the disciplined use of questions as “attractors” that is perhaps the World Café’s defining contribution to dialogic learning and collective intelligence.*

David Marsing, former senior executive at Intel, points out that carefully framed questions operate as attractors around which the web of cross-pollinating ideas evolves to create coherent patterns of meaning. In reflecting on how he believes this works, Marsing says, “You have the question sitting on the table as a starting point, but as people move in the rounds of dialogue, each person orients to the question in a different way. The connections grow fast with each rotation. You can imagine a three dimensional network forming, both in depth and breadth, around the original question. I would call it the focused development of a higher order of collective thinking around critical questions—it’s co-emergence in action.”

### **Seven Integrated World Café Design Principles**

1. *Set the context:* Clarify your purpose: Ask "What conversation, if begun today, could ripple out in a way that creates new possibilities for the future of whatever you are presently exploring?" Determine the right participants: the diversity of the group matters; diverse views produce richer contributions. The intention of Café conversations is to collectively seek possibilities and share learning by mixing levels and perspectives. Consider the parameters you are working with, including the venue, time, or other boundaries that will affect your choices in designing the conversation.
2. *Create a hospitable environment:* Think of ways to create a safe, inviting, life-serving and welcoming space. Smaller tables, for instance, facilitate more connection. Flowers, food and music often help a to create a space that people associate with comfortable exchange rather than “formal” meetings.

3. *Explore questions that matter:* If you focus the collective attention on powerful questions that truly matter to those present, you will attract collaborative engagement.
4. *Encourage everyone's contribution:* With tables of four people, no one can "hide," so everyone is heard; respect each person present, and invite full participation and mutual giving.
5. *Cross-pollinate and connect diverse perspectives:* Gather together people who will bring a wide range of perspectives and then retain a common focus on core questions. Assure the cross-pollination through moving people and ideas in innovative ways through multiple rounds of conversation.
6. *Listen together for patterns, insights and deeper questions:* Focus shared attention in ways that nurture coherence of thought without losing individual contributions. Encourage people to "listen into the middle" together.
7. *Harvest and share collective discoveries:* This can be done in various ways from writing on paper table cloths to having someone diagram collective ideas on the wall. However you choose to do it, include sharing of insights and discoveries in the full group—making collective knowledge visible and actionable.

### **Shaping our Common Futures: A Continuing Conversation**

The world as we know it today is the legacy of innumerable conversations over the ages and the product of all the conversations taking place around the world every day. To change the future, we have to change the conversation.

We look forward to continuing our exploration of both the World Café and of other doorways to collective intelligence and wise action at this critical time when the creation of a world at peace and our very survival together on this fragile and beautiful planet may depend on it.

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