



CONVENE & CONNECT

Convening is the art of bringing the community (of practice) and relevant stakeholders together to connect members and engage them in meaningful conversations. The diversity of a community and a risk-free and inclusive environment help develop conversations and engage members.

Start small, create the conducive environment to convene and network people.

Proper community management to ensure diversity of views, prioritize equity for access to opportunities and resource and where everyone feels they belong and can actively participate.

Diversified, equity and inclusiveness environment where there is diverse representation, fairness and everyone feel valued and heard.

Activities oriented to developing the practice – World café conversations

WHAT

World café conversations

Exploring the take of the whole community on a specific question. We have used this format for groups of various sizes ranging from a dozen to a few hundred people.

A World Café (also known as Knowledge Café) brings people together to have open, creative conversation on topics of mutual interest. It can be organised in a meeting or workshop format, but the emphasis should be on flowing dialogue that allows people to share ideas and learn from each other. It encourages people to explore issues that require discussion in order to build a consensus around an issue.

WHY

In the fast changing work environment, it can be challenging to keep informed of trends, issues and the ideas and perspectives of colleagues and peers. The world café/knowledge café brings to the surface, in an informal environment, all the understanding we have in an area.

HOW

The first step is to clearly define the question for the groups to discuss, so that it will engage participants and focus the conversations. For this purpose, it is usually best to have a single question. But in some cases, it is necessary to have two or three to cover a topic.

Groups of 4-6 sit at café-style tables or in online breakout rooms. They elect or are assigned a host. Paper tablecloths or an online whiteboard serve as a shared sketch pad for people to doodle, jot down key words and ideas, or even draw. The groups start to discuss the driving question(s). We encourage them to share stories rather than just engage in general statements or abstract arguments.

After 15-20 minutes everyone moves to other tables or breakout rooms. They do not move together but try to disperse maximally, since the idea is to continue the same conversation, but with different people. The host stays at the table or in the breakout room.

The table hosts welcome new people to their table, give a quick sense of what happened so far, and invite them to add to what has been discussed, weaving together what they bring from other tables. Depending on the size of the group, we do 3-5 rounds of this. The idea is to have everyone engage around the same question with as many other members as possible.

After the café conversations, we ask people to report patterns they have seen as they discussed the question in different groups.

Variations

Introductions. Café conversations can be a way to make group introductions. Introductions with a smaller subset of people are more meaningful and by rotating round the tables people get to introduce themselves to all or most of the larger group.

Individual versus group reporting. Sometimes we do the reporting at the end of the table discussions with the whole group “popcorn” style, letting anyone volunteer something. But sometimes we do it table by table from the last group they were sitting at. First discussing their reflections and ideas at the table before presenting them to the whole group avoids participants throwing up their personal pet peeves, ideas, and issues.

Dot voting. As people report on their conversation, we write each emerging idea or theme on individual flipchart papers. We then post them on the wall in the room or online on sticky notes that go on a whiteboard. We give everyone a small number of dots that they can spend on the ideas or themes that are most significant to them (many digital whiteboards support this kind of voting online). The result creates a visual, prioritized representation of the “mind of the room.”

Word cloud. Another way to create a collective picture of the outcome is to use a polling software that can create a word cloud. We invite participants to enter 3–5 words or phrases that reflect their experience of the café. Those that come up more often are in bigger fonts.

Building a learning agenda. As mentioned under the launch section, a specific use of this café format is to build a synoptic view of how a community could be useful. Members are invited to talk about the challenges they are struggling with, with the driving question something like what keeps you up at night. This is a good launch activity for a community, and it can be used (again) at various points in a community’s lifecycle.