from the toolbox/ TABLE TALK

Café conversations TOOL

PURPOSE: To engage in collaborative dialogue to explore a single question or several questions that matter in your work.

PLANNING THE CONVERSATION: The café host works with the planning team to determine the purpose of and the participants in the café. Here are a few questions to ask during the planning:
• What is the topic or issue we want to address or explore?
• Who needs to be invited to join this conversation?
• Who represents both the conventional and the unconventional wisdom?
• How long do we have for the inquiry?
• What line(s) of inquiry do we want to pursue? What themes are most likely to be meaningful and stimulate creativity?
• What is the best outcome we can envision? How might we design a path toward that outcome?

The host and the planning team will craft the question(s) that will be explored and identify a name for the café (e.g., Leadership Café, Knowledge Café, Strategy Café, Discovery Café).

INVITING PARTICIPANTS: Send participants a written invitation that includes the theme or central question for the conversation. State it as an open-ended exploration, not a problem-solving intervention.

PREPARING THE LOCATION: Select a space with natural light and an outdoor view to create a more welcoming atmosphere. Make the space look like an actual café. Use small, round tables of 36 to 42 inches in diameter (although card tables will also work) with chairs for four or five people. Arrange tables in random fashion rather than neat rows. Cover the tables with colorful tablecloths and place at least two large sheets of paper over each tablecloth along with a mug or wineglass filled with colorful markers and a small vase of flowers at the center. Place plants, greenery, and posters around the room to add to the atmosphere. Place an additional table at the front of the room for the host’s materials. Plan to provide beverages and snacks to add to the café atmosphere. Play appropriate background music. Create a banner or appropriate sign with the name of the café at the entrance.

Write the question(s) on an overhead, flip chart, or on cards on the table.

Have flip chart paper, mural paper, or rolling white boards available to record the collective knowledge at the end of the conversations.

TIME: Two hours.

Café conversations are particularly useful:
• When you want to generate input, share knowledge, stimulate innovative thinking, and explore action possibilities around real-life issues and questions;
• To engage people — whether they are meeting for the first time, or are in established relationships — in authentic conversation;
• To conduct in-depth exploration of key strategic challenges or opportunities;
• To deepen relationships and mutual ownership of outcomes in an existing group;
• To create meaningful interaction between a speaker and the audience; or
• To engage groups larger than 12 in an authentic dialogue process.

Café conversations are less useful when you:
• Are driving toward an already determined solution or answer;
• Want to convey only one-way information;
• Are making detailed implementation plans; or
• Have fewer than 12 people (better to use a more traditional dialogue circle, council, or other approach for fostering authentic conversation).

ON THE DAY OF THE CAFÉ:

The café host welcomes participants into the room in much the same way that a maitre d’ greets customers arriving at a restaurant. The host invites participants to join any table they like.

The café host explains café etiquette and describes the process — three progressive rounds of conversation, each 20 to 30 minutes long, followed by an open conversation among all participants — and the logistics of the process. Before the conversation begins, the café host asks for a volunteer at each table to be table host and explains that person’s role.

The host directs the participants’ attention to the question(s) and invites them to begin their conversations.

Conversation #1

After 20 or 30 minutes, the café host announces that it’s time to switch tables. The travelers or “ambassadors of meaning” will carry key ideas, themes, and questions into their new conversations at the next table. Make sure participants go to tables with different people as the conversational rounds progress.

Conversation #2

Ask the table host to welcome the new guests and summarize the main ideas, themes, and questions of the initial conversation. Then, the table host invites the travelers to also do a brief sharing of the essence from the previous round allowing everyone to become more deeply connected to the web of conversation.

After 20 or 30 minutes, the café host announces that it is time to switch tables again. Once again, the table host remains at his/her original table.

Conversation #3

Repeat the process of Conversation #2. The café host reminds participants to listen carefully and build on each other’s contributions.

Break

Take a break before moving into the meeting-style conversation. Select one of these five ways to make the collective knowledge visible during this time.

Take a gallery tour: Each group posts the paper from its table on the wall and everyone can take a tour of the ideas during the break.

Post your insights: Individual participants place large sticky notes with a single key insight on a wall so that everyone can view the notes during the break. As participants read the wall, they can begin grouping the sticky notes into affinity groups.

Meeting-style conversation

The last phase of the café involves making the pattern of the whole conversation visible to everyone. To do so, hold a conversation between individual tables and the whole group.

Designing a question

Find questions that are relevant to the real-life concerns of the group. Powerful questions that “travel well” help attract collective energy, insight, and action as they move throughout a system. Depending on the time-frame available and your objectives, your café may explore a single question or use a progressively deeper line of inquiry through several conversational rounds.

A powerful question:

- Is simple and clear;
- Does not have a yes-or-no answer;
- Is thought-provoking;
- Generates energy;
- Focuses inquiry;
- Surfaces assumptions;
- Opens new possibilities;
- Invites deeper reflection; and
- Seeks what is useful.

Ask the table groups to spend a few minutes considering what has emerged in their café conversations that has been most meaningful to them. Distill these insights, patterns, themes, and deeper questions down to the essence and then provide a way to get them out to the whole room.

Consider asking participants for a new or surprising idea and then asking people to share only those ideas that link and build on that particular aspect. When the group has exhausted this topic, ask for another new or surprising idea and repeat the process until you have given each table or person the opportunity to speak about what matters to them.

Ensure that you have a way to capture this, using flip charts or having each table record them on large sticky notes or their tablecloths, which can then be taped to a wall so that everyone can see them. After the report out, the whole group may wish to spend a few minutes silently reflecting and consider:

- What is emerging here?
- If there were a single voice in the room, what would it be saying?
- What deeper questions are emerging as a result of these conversations?
- Do we notice any patterns and what do those patterns point to, or how do they inform us?
- What do we now see and know as a result of these conversations?