



PUT YOUR SPIRITUALITY TO WORK

Conversation Starters for the Workplace

3.14 HOSTING CONVERSATIONS THAT MATTER

How can you bring diverse people together to become aware of what's most important to them and to engage them in finding solutions to their most common challenges? Try the "World Café" approach!

EVERY LEADER knows that it's vitally important to stay in touch with those whom they lead and others who are impacted by their leadership (i.e., the stakeholders of their organisation). But how is it possible to stay genuinely aware of the things that are most meaningful to these people, especially if they have diverse and often differing views?

While our last two articles have focused on "dialogue" and "appreciative inquiry" as ways to foster meaningful conversations, bringing people together in the format of the "World Café" is another rich option.

The World Café is a structured approach to use in larger settings of 20 or more people, especially when there could be a wide diversity of cultures or viewpoints. The World Café is an immensely creative process to use when you want to empower breakthrough ways of thinking, or even to stimulate a transformation in your organisational culture.

Like the dialogue and appreciative inquiry processes, the World Café evokes the best that people have to offer. As stated in a quick reference guide that can be downloaded at no cost from the internet¹:

The Café is built on the assumption that people already have within them the wisdom and creativity to confront even the most difficult challenges. Given the appropriate context and focus, it is possible to access and use this deeper knowledge about what's important.

The World Café is a lively process that takes place in a friendly environment made up of small tables with 4 to 6 people. But just like all successful and meaningful efforts, it's important to start by creating an inspiring purpose for the conversation you want to have. For example:

A bank brought 50 people together in a World Café setting to generate project ideas for "how technology could create new approaches to old business challenges".

¹ For more information and many stories about the World Café process, please visit: www.theworldcafe.com

A township outside of Oslo, Norway, employed the Café process to foster a more holistic view from a wide range of organisations for their future cultural activities.

A group in South Africa used the World Café to host African women with disabilities in order to set up a new African network that would inspire ideas and tools for their work.

During the Café process, people engage in conversations stimulated by a series of meaningful questions, which are designed to awaken the heart as well as the mind. For example, a group of 80 mediators for legal disputes engaged in a World Café after a week-long training program. The first question they discussed was:

What did you discover this week about mediation or yourself... and how will that discovery affect your work?

In the Café process, people move to different tables about every 20 minutes, sharing and receiving a wider range of ideas. One person remains behind as the “host” for each table, briefly filling in the new table-mates about what the previous group had discussed. This movement is unique, as described in the World Café guide:

The opportunity to move between tables, meet new people, and actively contribute your thinking, to ever-widening circles of thought is one of the distinguishing characteristics of the Café. As participants carry key ideas or themes to new tables, they exchange perspectives, greatly enriching the possibility for surprising new insights.

Each time people go to a new table, they converse on a new question. For example, in the 2nd and 3rd rounds, the mediators discussed:

What new things would you attempt to do if you knew you would NOT fail?

What does it mean to you to be REALLY GOOD at what you do?

After 3 rounds of 20-minute conversations, the entire group comes together and reports the key insights and ideas generated during the conversations. This final conversation among the whole group is the opportunity to heartfully connect the overall themes and ideas that emerged during the smaller conversations. Filled with energy and inspiration, the participants leave the Café meeting ready to engage in activities that forward the purpose that was set out for the Café.

So, ask yourself: *How could I use the World Café to bring diverse people together to become aware of what's most important to them? What questions could I create to engage people in finding heartfelt solutions?*

This article is an excerpt from the book, *Put Your Spirituality to Work: Spiritual-Based Leaders*. To download the full book of articles, as well as additional book chapters, articles, workbooks, and research on the subject of “spirituality and human values for leadership and work”, visit our website: www.globaldharma.org