The World Café: Catalyzing Large-Scale Collective Learning
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It is a rainy morning at our home in Mill Valley, California. Twenty academic and corporate leaders will soon begin arriving for the second day of a key strategic dialogue on the emerging field of Intellectual Capital. As I set out breakfast, I wonder how we will manage if the rain continues and we can’t begin the day by visiting over coffee on the patio. David suggests, “Why don’t we put up our TV tables in the living room and just have people hang out there while we’re waiting for everyone to arrive?” That sounds great to me. As David puts out the tables and chairs, our interactive graphics specialist, Tomi, arrives and adds, “Those look like café tables. I think they need tablecloths.” She puts a sheet of white easel paper over each of the paired tables, along with colored crayons, just like in many neighborhood cafés. I add vases of flowers. As folks arrive, they are delighted and amused. People get their coffee and croissants, and gather in small, informal groups around the café tables. Soon, they are deeply engaged in conversation. They begin to scribble on the tablecloths. David and I quickly huddle and decide that, rather than have a formal opening, we will simply encourage people to continue to share what’s “bubbling up” based on the question we were exploring at the end of the previous day’s session: “What is the role of leadership in maximizing the value of intellectual capital?”

Forty-five minutes pass, and the conversation is still going strong. Someone in the room calls out, “I’d love to have a feel for what’s happening in the other conversations. Why don’t we leave one host at each table and have the other members ‘travel’ to different tables?” With everyone’s agreement, folks wrap up their current explorations and then move to different tables. Each individual carries threads from the initial conversation to link with those being woven at other tables.

This round lasts another hour. The room is alive! People are excited and engaged. Another person speaks up, “Why don’t we leave a new host at the table, while the others travel to new tables, connecting ideas and seeing the patterns in what we’re discovering?” And so it was. People huddled around the TV tables, testing assumptions, building new knowledge together, adding to each other’s diagrams and pictures, and noting key ideas on the tablecloths. As lunch time drew near, we gathered around a large piece of mural paper. David asked, “What have we learned?” As I watched Tomi visually capture our collective insights, I knew that something unusual had happened that morning. We had accidentally tapped into something very simple but potentially powerful. A collective knowledge base larger than any individual or group in the room had made itself visible to us through the café conversations. We were becoming aware of our “collective knowing.”

Café Conversations
Since that initial session, groups as small as 10 and as large as 1,000 from around the world have engaged in facilitated “café learning conversations” to explore issues as varied as fostering treaty negotiations with Maori leaders in New Zealand; developing a shared knowledge base among R&D specialists; doing corporate scenario planning in Mexico; and designing a new world-wide marketing strategy with consumer product executives from over 30 nations. On each occasion, the participants reported feeling a profound sense of empowerment and engagement in building both relationships and shared knowledge. What is it about café conversations that produces such powerful outcomes?

Throughout history, new ideas have been born through informal conversations in cafés, salons, neighborhood pubs, and living rooms. In a comfortable setting over a cup of coffee or a glass of wine, small groups of people have traditionally shared their thoughts—however tentative or incomplete—and engaged in a process of shared learning. Over time, the members of these groups often spread their ideas to others, carrying “seeds” for new conversa-
LEVERAGE POINTS
HOSTING A CAFÉ CONVERSATION

Café hosting is limited only by your imagination. The following elements are common to many café conversations:

- Café-style tables or another relaxed setting
- Informal conversation focused on key questions
- Sharing or “seeding” of ideas as members move among small groups
- Opportunities to record ideas in words and images
- Weaving of emerging themes and insights
- Awareness of the social nature of learning
- Understanding that individual conversations are part of and contribute to a larger web of knowledge creation