

# LEVERAGE<sup>®</sup>

NEWS AND IDEAS FOR THE ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNER



## The World Café: Catalyzing Large-Scale Collective Learning

BY JUANITA BROWN, DAVID ISAACS, NANCY MARGULIES, AND GARY WARHAFTIG

*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 [Juanita] 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-

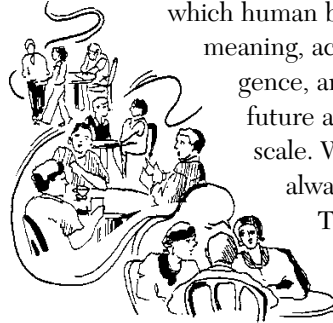
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## The World Café

tions, creative possibilities, and collective action in ever-widening circles. In this way, sewing circles and “committees of correspondence” helped birth the American Republic; cafés and salons helped spawn the French Revolution. Earlier this century, Scandinavian “study circles” stimulated a social and economic renaissance in Northern Europe. Today, the Internet makes global conversations commonplace.

Café-style conversations can involve large numbers of people simultaneously in collaborative learning. One of their key elements is that everyone is encouraged to both speak and listen in small groups. Participants enter into an exchange about a topic that is important to them and follow their curiosity without worrying about “getting it right.” Café conversations evoke people’s natural capacity to share ideas, learn from others, and discover innovative possibilities.

Although this process doesn’t have to be taught, it can be guided (see “Hosting a Café Conversation”). Intentionally designing events such as “Knowledge Cafés” or “Strategy Cafés” enables participants to gather in an informal setting to inquire into questions that matter. Café conversations help draw people’s attention to the knowledge and skill that they already possess. They provide a context for groups to discover powerful questions, foster conscious conversation, access deeper wisdom, build shared knowledge, expand organizational capacity, and create value.



### The World as Café

Whereas café conversations are specific learning events, “The World Café” is a metaphor that we use to describe the informal webs of conversations and social learning by which human beings discover shared meaning, access collective intelligence, and co-create the future at increasing levels of scale. We are, in effect, always participating in The World Café as we create our lives, our organizations, and our communities through interaction

with others. By acknowledging the importance and connectedness of these natural networks of conversation, we can become more intentional about focusing their power at the collective level.

In recent years, a number of theorists, including Meg Wheatley, Fritjof Capra, and Humberto Maturana, have introduced the concept of self-organizing systems to the

business world. Many of us have been captivated by this approach, because it addresses the shortcomings of the mechanistic view of organizations. The challenge has been to find ways to apply these new insights within our organizations. The World Café makes visible how people naturally self-organize to build relationships, develop collective intelligence, and generate new possibilities. It can help people to discover and apply at a systemic level what they already know about the power of good conversation to inspire common purpose, creative problem-solving, and committed action.

*Juanita Brown is founder of Whole Systems Associates. David Isaacs is president of Clearing Communications. Nancy Margulies leads strategic thinking sessions using her form of graphic representation, Mindscaping. Gary Warhaftig is president of Point of View Public Telescopes. For more information, please visit [www.theworldcafe.com](http://www.theworldcafe.com) or call (415) 381-3368.*



### 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