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What is a “World Café”?

By Juanita Brown, David Isaacs, et al.

*Reprinted by permission from **A Resource Guide for Hosting Conversations That Matter**
Whole Systems Associates, Mill Valley, California, 2002*

The World Café model was developed by Juanita Brown, David Isaacs, and several colleagues as a way to tap into the collective knowledge and experience of large numbers of people quickly. David will be our World Congress Café host in San Francisco on March 16-17; we have been working with David for the past several months to design the agenda and create a context for the World Congress that will enable the Delegates to explore a series of Important Questions, to draw deeply on each others' experiences, and to create new relationships – all in the space of about 48 hours.

The Power of Conversations That Matter

“Since our earliest ancestors gathered in circles around the warmth of a fire, conversation has been a core process for discovering what we care about. It’s how we’ve always shared our knowledge, imagined the future, and created communities of commitment.

“Innovation and change can often be traced to people conversing informally in living rooms, cafés, kitchens, and church halls. Consider the sewing circles and Committees of Correspondence that helped birth the American Republic, as well as the cafés and salons that spawned the French Revolution. The U.S. civil rights movement was born through conversation in people’s homes and churches. Study circles stimulated a culture of collaborative learning and democratic participation throughout Scandinavia.

“Conversation is also the lifeblood of the new economy. Where information is the raw material and ideas are the currency of exchange, creative conversations become a crucible for accessing the collective intelligence needed to create value-added products and services.

“With the advent of the Internet, dynamic networks of conversation and innovation are springing up around the globe as we face critical social, economic, political, and environmental challenges. Ideas spread and large-scale change happens when small groups of people, both face-to-face and in on-line communities, spread seed ideas for new conversations, creative possibilities, and collective action in ever-widening networks. The era of the ‘World Café’ is in full swing!

What is the World Café?

“**The World Café is . . .** an easy to use *method* for creating a living network of collaborative dialogue around questions that matter to the real-life situations of your organization or community. World Café conversations offer a practical yet creative way to grow our capacity for thinking together. They are part of a growing global movement to support ‘conversations that matter’ in business, government, health, education, and community-based organizations. By hosting a Café you are intentionally fostering learning conversations, knowledge sharing, and new possibilities for action.

“Imagine joining three or four people at a Café-style table or in a small conversation cluster to explore questions where collaborative thinking can really make a difference. Nearby, other small groups are exploring similar questions, noting down key insights and perspectives. Soon, you move to another group or Café table, visit with new people, and cross-pollinate ideas and insights. As the conversations connect, they spark new discoveries. Innovative opportunities begin to appear. Collective knowledge grows and evolves. A sense of the larger whole becomes real, and the wisdom of the group emerges for all to experience.

“***The World Café is also*** . . . a provocative metaphor for noticing the already existing living networks of conversation through which we develop new knowledge and co-evolve the future together. As we create our lives, our organizations, and our communities, we are, in effect, always moving among ‘table conversations’ at the World Café.

“Just as fish don’t see the water in which they swim, we rarely notice the larger systemic influence of the webs of conversation in which we participate. The ideas shared and commitments made in these exchanges often shape the future in ways we don’t anticipate. Once we become aware of this powerful reality we can use it more effectively for our mutual benefit....”

We are deeply grateful to David and Juanita for permission to share this brief excerpt about the World Café with you. If your curiosity has been piqued and you are interested in learning about this method of sharing learning, please visit the World Café Society web site at www.worldcafe.com.

About the Work Design Collaborative and *Future of Work Agenda*

The *Work Design Collaborative* is an applied research and development consortium focused on defining the future of work and helping its members achieve new levels of workforce and workplace productivity. The Collaborative is widely recognized as the leading source of knowledge and expertise related to the future of work. The Collaborative produces and distributes management tools, surveys, benchmark databases, white papers and technical reports, conferences and workshops, newsletters, books and articles, and public presentations on the changing nature of work. Our consortium is composed of senior business, IT, HR, and facilities executives, as well as smaller technology companies and service providers selling into these markets.

Future of Work Agenda is a free monthly electronic newsletter produced by the *Work Design Collaborative*.

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