

Conversation Café—A How to Guide—by Paul Born

About the Conversation Café

For people to collaborate in initiating significant community change, they must, first and foremost, talk to each other. Great change begins with simple conversations. A conversation café is an exchange of ideas, feelings and thoughts between people. It is not difficult to arrange or onerous to carry out. As the members in a community talk and share, they can reach a better understanding of each other's values and concerns. If they take the time to really listen, they can learn from each other's perspectives. Together, they can reach unexpected and inspired conclusions, which may lead to equally inspired social change.

The Conversation Café offers an opportunity to share our humanity through simple conversations so that we can understand one another better. It is a simple but wonderful tool for hosting fantastic and meaningful conversations.

My Experience

It was nearly 8 p.m. A group of 75 leaders from across Canada were meeting to learn together with Tamarack about communities collaborating. This was our first day together and we spent the afternoon taking part in exercises that would help us build the learning community that we would all be part of for the rest of the week. After listening to an inspirational speech given by Sherri Torjman of the Caledon Institute, the leaders entered a dimly lit room with nine tables, each surrounded by 10 chairs, covered in brown paper tablecloths similar to a family restaurant, and topped with a candle, flowers and coloured markers. Light folk music played in the background – Bob Dylan, if I remember correctly. Participants randomly chose a table to sit at and started talking – some debriefed Sherri's motivational speech, some began by introducing themselves to each other, and others began by expressing their feelings, often by the words, "I am so tired!"

As participants settled into their groups, four waiters entered the room, including me, dressed as if we were part of a 1960's folk festival. We handed out Conversation Café menus to participants who were chuckling and smiling about our costumes. After some good-natured bantering, we took orders for beer, wine and soft drinks from the participants.

As drinks were served, Garry Loewen – the evening's conversation host – welcomed the group, cracked a few jokes and introduced the concept and instructions for the Conversation Café. Participants were directed to appoint a table leader who would ensure that everyone had the opportunity to speak, as well as use the markers and brown paper table covers to record the group's thoughts. Groups were instructed to talk for 30 minutes about the first question on their menu: What are my personal motivations and fears about being involved in collaborative work?

Within seconds the room was filled with conversation as people self-organized to appoint table leaders and move quickly into the conversation. The participants shared their stories, highlighting their fears and motivations to the extent that they felt comfortable. The conversation overpowered the music. Thirty minutes quickly passed. After considerable effort, Garry focused the group's attention to the next set of instructions, which required participants, with the exception of the table leaders, to leave their original table and continue the conversation with a new group. Table leaders were instructed to use the notes they scribbled on the brown paper tablecloths to share the conversation that had just unfolded with the new participants. The conversation would continue from this point. Participants wasted no time – the room instantly filled with group introductions and intense conversation. It was difficult to stop the conversation. Garry now faced the task of getting the group to repeat the exercise with the second question: What are my wicked questions about this work?

Nearly two hours had passed in the Conversation Café and, despite mental exhaustion from the day's learning, participants could not stop talking. Even after attempting to bring the Café to a close,

participants remained in the room to continue their conversations. This is the power of a conversation café.

I am amazed at how this simple technique can bring people together. It is as if people are just waiting for an opportunity to share their story, their hopes and fears with one another. After the event, participants commented on their interesting conversations and that the collection of conversations had become so intense and loud that they had difficulty hearing their own group. Simple conversation between people who care – it does not get any better than that!

Tips for a Great Conversation

- Focus on what matters
- Acknowledge one another as equals
- Speak with your heart and mind
- Beware of judgments
- Listen in order to understand – suspend certainty and let go of assumptions
- Slow down to allow time for thinking and reflection
- Listen for patterns, insights and deeper questions
- Share collective discoveries

Six Ideas for a Conversation Café

I use conversation cafés more than any other technique. They are simple and fun, yet extremely effective. Here are a few tips from my experience:

1. Give the Room a Fun Feel

Take the time to decorate the room like a café, complete with appropriate music, mood lighting and some refreshments. This can go a long way in setting the right mood. I love when people enter the room together and are amazed by its ambiance. There is a sense of “Wow!” Every detail counts. The brown paper tablecloths and markers can be replaced by post-it notes and pens, but the brown paper creates a more inviting restaurant feeling. I have created conversation cafés with themes that mimic an outdoor Italian café or formal restaurant. I have even used actual restaurants to host conversations. Your only limitations are creativity and time.

2. Choose the Questions and Create a Menu

Consider asking two questions. I like to begin by asking participants a question that is slightly personal, such as their fears, reasons for being here or why they are personally committed to this work. The second question is often about the work and the change we are seeking to address, such as “Why does poverty exist?” and “How might we reduce poverty in this community?” Or, “Why do arts organizations matter to our community and what can we do to promote them?”

3. Consider Wicked Questions

Wicked questions do not have an obvious answer. They are used to expose the assumptions that shape our actions and choices. What’s more, they articulate the embedded and often contradictory assumptions we hold about an issue, context or organization. Not to be confused as a trick question, wicked questions do not have obvious answers. Their value lies in their capacity to open up options and inquiry, as well as to surface fundamental issues that need to be addressed.

4. Follow a Process

Experience has taught me that a conversation café takes at least two hours to host, and even longer if you want to debrief at the end. Here is a simple formula for a two-hour conversation:

- Welcome – 5 minutes
- Question One: Round A – 25 minutes
- Question One: Round B – 25 minutes
- Introduce Question Two – 5 minutes
- Question Two: Round A – 20 minutes
- Question Two: Round B – 20 minutes
- Closing: Group debrief – 25 minutes

5. Enjoy!

Conversation cafés should not be overly formal or business-like. I have found that the spirit of conversation is broken if you try to control every aspect of the environment. If people stray from the topic, do not get too worried – participants will find their way back soon enough.

6. Debrief the Event to Gather Information

I seldom have the opportunity to use conversation as a community-forming tool as described in my conversation café experience. When I want to capture the ideas that people talk about in order to write a report, I have found that debriefing helps me gather information. At the end of a conversation café, I ask participants to gather with their first conversation table. For 15 minutes, I ask the group to debrief what they have heard by identifying three to five ideas to share with the larger group. They report each idea to me on sticky notes that I sort on a flip chart in columns, grouping similar ideas into themes. I share some of the themes with the larger group. After the event, I wander around the tables to see what other ideas were recorded on the brown paper tablecloths. Often, I find a gem or two to add to the themes. This list of ideas can form the basis of a substantial report. Another way to debrief a conversation is to ask the whole group, “How was that?” It is amazing the kinds of thoughts people will share.

Conversation cafés are fun! They build trust between people, and they are a great forum for hosting ideas where people desire to see what they have in common and what it is they should be doing together. This conversation technique has a remarkable way of building a sense of “in common,” and it is a fantastic tool to use early in a collaborative process.