



THE COMPLETE HOSTING MANUAL

What, generally, makes a good conversation? Many things: an alive topic of interest to all, an open and receptive mood, people willing to listen as much as speak, a willingness to drop preconceptions and explore many different ideas, a comfortable setting in which people can easily hear each other, a group small enough for everyone to speak. A good conversation is more like a game of hacky-sack than a game of tennis—the objective is to keep the ball in the air, not to defeat your “opponent.” At its best, such conversation gets deeper and richer the longer it can be sustained.

Setting the Stage: Opening the Conversation Café

So—imagine you have convened your group and they have arrived and you have welcomed them warmly. Then state the theme or topic for the Café and let them know the ending time (90 minutes is best, 60 minutes minimal, and less would be a Café Light)

The Agreements:

Next, read the Agreements out loud. The introduction of these Agreements begins to mark the shift from daily busy-ness and ordinary chit-chat to the wiser, generative depths at a slower pace of ‘being-in-time.’ You could have each person read one of them. This begins the sense of ownership of the process and gives a few people their first opportunity to speak. You may want to elaborate on each one, along the lines of the italicized words:

Open-mindedness: listen to and respect all points of view. Conversation isn’t just talking. It’s talking and listening. In fact, in a group of 4-8, you’ll be listening more than you are talking! By focusing on listening, you may also benefit from the variety of ideas around the table.

Acceptance: suspend judgment as best you can. We all judge one another, but do your best not to. Doing so will enable you to hear new things from others. It also helps everyone feel safer if they think others are trying to not judge them!

Curiosity: seek to understand rather than persuade. We’re not here to convince others that we are right and they are wrong. If someone expresses a point of view that seems different from yours, see if you can ask some questions to gain clarity or understanding.

Discovery: question assumptions, look for new insights. Conversation Cafe dialogues aren’t polite conversation—they are designed to expose us to new ideas or possibly even see old ideas in a new way. Insight—seeing more deeply into a topic—can come if we watch for it.

Sincerity: speak from your heart and personal experience. We want to hear what’s important to you, not just your opinions or data you’ve collected. Relate your ideas or reports to your personal experience.

Brevity: go for honesty and depth but don’t go on and on. Honesty and depth are important to a good conversation, but so is giving everyone a chance to speak. People are polite. They may not stop you if you go on and on. But you can stop yourself. Try to stay under a couple of minutes.

After reviewing each of these agreements, make sure you get everyone’s buy-in—by nodding their heads or even raising their hands. It is essential that everyone makes the commitment to do their best to abide by these agreements for the next hour and a half.

The Process

After reading the agreements, explain how the process will involve two rounds with a Talking Object, followed by open conversation, and end lastly with a final round where each will reflect on their experience.

Talking Object:

The talking object is a deceptively simple yet powerful tool for transformation. It creates the space for deep reflection as it creates the capacity to hold the floor in silence, without concern or possibility of interruption. It invites deep listening from the rest of the circle which in turn invites a higher quality and greater depth of expression, yielding new levels of thoughtfulness and wisdom. Further, it is a powerful tool for creating equality: Everyone in the circle (which in itself is a powerful tool/symbol of non-hierarchy) has an equal voice, an equal turn. This is the essential expression of democracy. It equalizes power differences that arise from rank, class, ethnicity, age, gender, as well as personality and communication styles.

You can use whatever you want for a Talking Object. Pick anything that is easily held and handy—even a salt shaker. Some hosts like to choose something with symbolic meaning to them, or an object from nature.

Offer participants pencils and scrap paper or index cards where they can jot down thoughts that intrude in their listening and just won't go away. The point isn't to write complete sentences or plan what you'll say next. It's to jot down a word or two to settle your mind and return to listening.

Before beginning Round 1, you can invite people to be silent for a moment to quiet their minds and collect their thoughts, as you remind them of the question.

Regarding late comers: People might drift in after the starting time, but we find it works well to start on time and allow newcomers to just sit down and join in when their turn comes. Resist the impulse to break the flow. Simply hand them the wallet card to review the process, being sure to point out the agreements. If there are more than ten people, it's best to divide into two (or more) separate groups so everyone will have time to be heard. You and your co-host can each be with a group or you can ask one of the other guests to serve as 'host'. The dividing can happen right after this point, where you've explained the process. Or if the people know each other and want more connection, you could do the first round together, then divide—and then come back together for the final round.

Round 1:

Go around the circle once, inviting each person to say their name and speak to what brought them to the conversation and briefly mention what is on their heart and mind regarding the theme (people can pass if they like). Remarks should be succinct (perhaps 1 minute each, 2 at most) to allow time for everyone to speak. The speaker holds the Talking Object, passing it to the next person when through speaking. Listen to each person, with no feedback or response. Remind people that it's not necessary for their comments to relate to the previous ones. You can go first and model the depth and brevity of the desired response. Remind people, no cross talk at this point if they begin to respond or ask questions (unless it's just to repeat something they couldn't hear).

The Process: Round 1, continued

Caveat to the host: As the host, you get to be a participant—yet to the group, you have a certain level of power and privilege and will be heard as more influential. So be careful to keep an especially open-minded tone and say less rather than more. For those hosts who have experience as facilitators, this is challenging: a conversation café calls for a very light touch, with minimal intervention or directing ever called for. There is no agenda—no desired, expected or needed outcome. The topic is a starting point, but once the flow of conversation is going, follow the thread as long as the dialog is lively and interesting. As long as the group is engaged and co-creating (not hijacked by any one member), this is an exciting and desired happening! You may want to read more about this in Susan Partnow's article, "*Inquiry, not Persuasion*".

Round 2:

Go around the circle again, with the Talking Object, giving each person another chance to speak without feedback or response. Explain how in this round people may deepen their own comments or offer a fresh insight; they can also relate their comments to what others have said. Request that everyone keep their comments brief, less than two minutes, so that most of the time will be available for the open back and forth that follow the second round. Remind them, still no cross talk.

Caveat: It may feel tempting to skip the second round, to start discussion sooner. Yet that is likely to bring the group to the conversation as usual, covering the same ground with the same thoughts people came in with. When we adhere to the discipline of the simple but powerful structure of two rounds with the Talking Object, new thoughts, generative ideas, and unforeseen connections begin to arise.

The Middle: Open, Spirited Conversation

Now it is time to open up the conversation. Place the Talking Object in the middle of the table. No one now has to hold it to speak, but anyone can pick it up if they want to speak next (and then put it down so it's available to others.)

Here are some guidelines for you to keep in mind during the conversation:

Listen to understand—to expand your insights, to see differences and similarities, to learn.

Speak to share and inform, raise or answer questions, offer an insight, help focus the discussion, state an opinion.

Keep it inclusive—share the airtime, encourage everyone to join in, avoid dominating or interrupting.

Search for deeper meaning. Look for core needs or values underlying people's feelings.

Offer and ask for specifics rather than generalizations.

If the conversation gets hot, with interruptions and excited repartee, consider using the Talking Object to slow things down.

Ask for a time out if the conversation seems to be fragmenting, confusing or chaotic. A moment of silence can be helpful.

The Process, Round 2, continued

If stuck in disagreement or debate, respectfully acknowledge your differences and change course to explore underlying assumptions, differing information, beliefs, values, etc.

The Ending: Closing the Conversation—the Final Round and Afterwards

About five to ten minutes before the ending time (depending on the size of the group—you'll need more time the larger the group), introduce the final Talking Object round of individual reflection. Ask the group to take a minute to think about this experience. You may invite them to write a few words on notepaper or cards, which you can then collect to use as a record of the insights that came. Invite each person to briefly express what is fully alive in this moment regarding what they are taking from this conversation. You may ask, "What surprised you? Or moved or touched you? Or inspired you? Or challenged you?"

After the final round, people are free to stay and keep talking. During a Conversation Café there is no need to agree or come to consensus or commit to a shared action. In fact, this is what makes it so open, safe and generative. Afterwards, however, if some people want to do projects together, they are free to network and plan, but as a new group, not as a Conversation Café.

How to Take Your Conversation from Good to Great

For the most part, the process runs itself. Yet there may be occasions when people break the agreements. They go on and on. They misunderstand others and assume they are right. They lecture. The agreements are your biggest ally. Just gently stop the process—even with a hand signal, and redirect the group to review the agreements to help get it back on track.

The Talking Object is another "ally." If things are contentious, you—or anyone at the table—can pick it up and ask to be the next to speak. You can even hold it and ask for a minute of silence. "Let's stop, breathe, and reflect on what we would like to happen here." And very often, asking a key question can redirect the conversation to get beneath positions or intellectualizing to the heart of the matter. This helps keep it interesting and inclusive.

Here are some ways to stay at ease, curious and inviting and keep the conversation interesting:

(If your curiosity is piqued) **Tell me more about...**

(If your instinct is to counter another's statement) **This is what I heard you say... is it what you meant?**

(If you are with someone who begins advocating for a fixed position) **What led you to this point of view?**

(If you are with someone who begins campaigning for a candidate) **What is most important you in a leader?**

(If someone begins lecturing and intellectualizing) **I notice your passion on this issue: What makes this so important for you?**

(If you are with someone who always agrees with you) **What if the opposite were true?**

(If you suspect you don't understand) **Can you say that in another way?**

(If you hold a different opinion) **I'd like to offer another point of view...**

(If someone has been silent) **I'm wondering if you have some thoughts or feelings about what you've been hearing?**

(If someone's ideas are very abstract) **If what you are proposing came to pass, how would things be different?**

The “Two Traditions”

These aren't exactly conversation “agreements.” They are overall agreements that keep Conversation Cafes true to the intent—free, open inquiry.

“No Committees with be formed.”

We all have so much to do. If joining a conversation means you'll walk away with yet another “to do” list, you may not come. Your only “to do” is to show up and enjoy. If you have an insight that applies to your work or life, use it. Freely. Also, at Conversation Cafes we don't have to agree with one another. If we're being candid, we'll probably find that we don't see eye to eye even with our closest friends. The point is not to form common cause and then get out there and make something happen together. The point is to refresh our thinking. You can walk away with your original opinion. You can change your mind. And so can everyone else.

“No marketing.”

People often avoid conversation for fear they will be a target of unwelcome arm twisting. They don't want to be sold anything—be it a cause, a point of view, a product, a business service ore even a date. Conversation Cafes are oases in time when no one will try to convince you of anything—you are free to speak, listen, learn, discover and simply relax among open minded and hearted folks.

Final Thoughts on Hosting

So what is our most important role as host? It is not to flawlessly facilitate a successful conversation. Rather, it is to hold the space—and be part of the space—of community/safety/love. We are stewards; we are providing a comfortable environment for people to explore deeply enough to find out what they really think and feel about the topic. Part of this safety is that WE are also open—disclosing our own thoughts and feelings. We are part of the process. We honor the folks who come to these conversations; we honor the risk they may be taking in talking with strangers about the often confusing and complex questions of our times. .

Hosting is simple—like breathing is simple. It can be as minimal as showing up, introducing the process and keeping time. Yet the practice of hosting can be very profound. It is a dynamic, honest, humble process of staying present to your own reality while drinking in the reality of everyone else at the table. It contributes to the reweaving of the web of community and builds the critical thinking, social engagement and conviviality that is the best of what human society has always been and the essence of what we intend to be in the future.