



Creating Café Questions

Use questions effectively:

- Questions should relate to hoped for outcomes for your time together.
- Well-crafted questions attract energy and focus attention on what really counts. They are open-ended, not “yes” or “no” questions.
- Good questions need not imply immediate action steps or problem solving. Instead they invite inquiry and discovery rather than advocacy and advantage.
- Choose 3-5 questions, if answered, would make the most difference to the future of your work.

Determine if the question is a good question:

- Is this question relevant to the real life and real work of the people who will be exploring it?
- Is this a genuine question – a question to which I/we really don't know the answer?
- What “work” is this question intended to do? That is, what kind of conversation, meanings, and feelings do I imagine this question will evoke in those who will be exploring it?
- Is this question likely to invite fresh thinking/feeling? Is it familiar enough to be recognizable and relevant – and different enough to call forward a new response?
- What assumptions or beliefs are embedded in the way this question is constructed?
- Is this question likely to generate hope, imagination, engagement, creative action, and new possibilities, or is it likely to increase a focus on past problems and obstacles?
- Does this question leave room for new and different questions to be raised as the initial question is explored?

Create a series of questions* that build on one another:

- First question (spirit): Participants reflect on their own beliefs, wishes, values, and assumptions. Their responses help them know each other better, and connect at a deeper level. *What's important to you about (your specific situation) and why do you care? How have your personal values been reflected, or challenged, in this discussion? What is our intention here? What's the deeper purpose (the big “why”) that is really worthy of our best effort? What gifts do you bring to this situation? Is there anything that you have been finding difficult to figure out or speak about?*
- Second question (heart): Participants develop a more encompassing awareness of their situation and the perspectives of others. Based on their discoveries, realize a need to create a better future. Participants share their own hopes and visions and consider possible pathways to those futures. *What assumptions do we need to test or challenge here in thinking about (your specific situation)? What would someone who had a very different set of beliefs than we do say about (your specific situation)?*

What is the real issue at the center of the table? How can we make our good work better? What's possible here, and who cares (rather than "What's wrong here and who's responsible?")

- Third question (head): Participants explore the helps and hindrances for achieving their vision. *What has been getting in the way? What challenges might come our way and how might we meet them? What do we need to talk about that is being left unsaid – what “undiscussables” do we need to discuss? What question, if answered, could make the most difference to the future of (your specific situation)?*
- Fourth question (body): Participants consider their own personal actions, group actions, and the systems and structures that will help them achieve that future. *What conversation, if begun today, could ripple out in a way that created new possibilities for the future of (your situation)? What's the next level of thinking we need to do? What do we need to do to create change on this issue? What could happen that would enable you/us to feel fully engaged and energized about (your specific situation)? What needs our immediate attention going forward? If our success was completely guaranteed, what bold steps might we choose? What seed might we plant together today that could make the most difference to the future of (your situation)? What systems and structures need to be in place that will help us become (your specific situation)?*
- Fifth question (individual transformation): Participants reflect on their experience and internalize the intent of the dialogue. *What is an idea, feeling, or promising question that you will take away with you? What parting words can you offer that will help bring your participation to a satisfying close? What is one thing you'd like to remember about this conversation? When you think about our time together today, and returning to the people groups, or communities with whom you normally discuss these issues, is there something you hope to carry with you, maintain, or communicate?*

*Please note that these sample questions are just a starting point. Tailor questions to fit your specific needs.

References:

- Brown, J. and D. Isaacs (2002). The World Café Presents Café to Go: A Quick Reference Guide for Putting Conversations to Work. Mill Valley, CA: Whole Systems Associates.
- Brown, J., et al, (2002). “Strategic questioning: Engaging People's Best Thinking.” Systems Thinker 13(9): 2-6.
- Herzig, M. and L. Chasin (2006). Fostering Dialogue Across Divides: A Nuts and Bolts Guide from the Public Conversations Project. Watertown, MA: Public Conversations Project.
- Vogt, E., et al, (2003). The Art of Powerful Questions: Catalyzing Insight, Innovation, and Action. Mill Valley, CA: Whole Systems Associates.