



## Steps to Hosting a LPA Partner Conversation Café

### Set “the Context”

There is an old saying that if you don't know where you are going any road will get you there. When you have a clear idea of the what and why of your Café then the how becomes much easier. Here are a few questions to ask yourself and those helping you plan:

- What is the topic or issue we want to address or explore?
- Who needs to be invited to participate in this conversation?
- Who represents both the conventional and the unconventional wisdom?
- How long do we have for the inquiry?
- What line(s) of inquiry do we want to pursue? What themes are most likely to be meaningful and stimulate creativity?
- What is the best outcome we can envision? How might we design a path toward that outcome?

### Create Hospitable Space

Most meeting places are sterile, cold, and impersonal. Consider choosing warm, inviting environments with natural light and comfortable seating. Honor our long traditions of human hospitality by offering food and refreshments. Hospitable space also means “safe” space--where everyone feels free to offer their best thinking.

Hospitable space begins with the invitation to attend a Café. Include the theme or central question you'll be exploring in your Café in the invitation. State it as an open-ended exploration, not a problem-solving intervention. Use color, hand printing, graphics and other ways to make it stand out from the deluge of paper and e-messages we all receive.

When we ask people where they have experienced their most significant conversations, nearly everyone recalls sitting around a kitchen or dining room table. There is a easy intimacy when gathering at a small table, that most of us immediately recognize. When you walk into a room and see it filled with café tables you know that you are not in for your usual business meeting.

Creating a Café ambiance is easy and need not be expensive:

- Stagger the tables in a random fashion, don't set them up in straight rows
- Use plastic red checked tablecloths
- Cover these with two sheets of flip chart paper
- Place a mug or wine glass filled with water based markers to encourage people to write and draw on the tablecloths
- A small bud vase and a votive candle will complete the table set up
- Have some soft music playing as people arrive
- Be sure to have some food and beverages available

## **Explore Questions That Matter**

Knowledge emerges in response to compelling questions. Find questions that are relevant to the real-life concerns of the group. Powerful questions that "travel well" help attract collective energy, insight, and action as they move throughout a system. Depending on the timeframe available and your objectives, your Café may explore a single question or use a progressively deeper line of inquiry through several conversational rounds.

As we have worked with groups over the years we have asked hundreds of people what makes a powerful question. Several themes have emerged. A powerful question:

- Is simple and clear
- Is thought provoking
- Generates energy
- Focuses inquiry
- Surfaces assumptions
- Opens new possibilities
- Invites deeper reflection
- Seeks what is useful

A note about appreciative process... David Cooperrider has long championed something he calls "appreciative inquiry." After several years of studying how people ask questions he has stated that the most important lesson from appreciative inquiry is that "people grow in the direction of the questions they ask." The questions we ask and the way we construct them will focus us in a particular manner and will greatly affect the outcome of our inquiry. If we ask: What is wrong and who is to blame? We set up a certain dynamic of problem-solving and blame assigning. While there may be instances where such an approach is desirable, when it comes to hosting a Café, we have found it much more effective to ask people questions that invite the exploration of possibilities and to connect them with why they care.

One potential pitfall is posing questions that ask about the nature of truth. Philosophers have spent thousands of years arguing the nature of truth and many of the wars in history have been fought over such questions. We are seeking to reach "shared understanding about what is meaningful to each individual." Such shared understanding does not mean that we all share the same perspective on what is true, but rather, that each participant has the opportunity to share what is true and meaningful for them. This in turn will allow us all to see our collective situation in a different light, hopefully enlarging our individual views of truth along the way. Our experience has been that questions which focus on "What is useful here?", are more effective at generating engagement on the part of participants and tend to provoke less defensive reactions than questions which focus on "What is true?"

## **Encourage Everyone's Contribution**

People engage deeply when they feel they are contributing their thinking to questions that are important to them. Encourage all participants to contribute to the conversation. As Meg Wheatley says "Intelligence emerges as a system connects to itself in new and diverse ways." Each participant in the Café represents an aspect of the whole system's diversity and as each person has the chance to connect in conversation more of the intelligence inherent in the group becomes accessible.

For the speaker the responsibility is to focus on the topic and express as clearly as possible their thoughts about it. For the listeners, the responsibility is to listen to what the speaker is saying with the implicit assumption that they have something wise and important to say. Listen with a willingness to be influenced, listen for where this person is coming from and appreciate that their perspective, regardless of how divergent from your own, is equally valid and represents a part of the larger picture which none of us can see by ourselves.

### **Connect Diverse Perspectives**

Ask members to offer their individual perspectives and listen for what is emerging "in the middle of the table." Use the tablecloths and markers to create a "shared visual space" through drawing the emerging ideas. Sometimes the co-created pictures can really be worth a thousand words in showing the relationships between ideas.

A woman we know once remarked: "The most radical thing you can do is to introduce people to folks they don't know." Make sure those participants from each round each go to tables with different people as the conversational rounds progress. This cross-pollination of ideas often produces surprising results that could not have happened otherwise.

Setting up your Café in conversational rounds and asking people to change tables between rounds allows for a dense web of connections to be woven in a short period of time. Each time you travel to a new table you are bringing with you the threads of the last round and interweaving them with those brought by other travelers. As the rounds progress the conversation moves to deeper levels. People who arrived with fixed positions often find that they are more open to new and different ideas.

Our experience shows that it's very useful to ask one person to remain at a table to act as the table host. This person will summarize the conversation of the previous round for the newcomers ensuring that any important points are available for consideration in the upcoming round. They then invite the travelers to likewise do a brief sharing of the essence from the previous round allowing everyone to become more deeply connected to the web of conversation.

### **Listen Together and Notice Patterns**

Listening is a gift we give to one another. The quality of our listening is perhaps the most important factor determining the success of a Café. Whole books and courses have been written about how to listen. One of our favorite analogies comes from jazz great Wynton Marsalis who explains that when jazz musicians get together to jam, whoever is the best listener ends up contributing the most to the music, because they are able to play off of whatever is being offered by the other cats in the band. Café conversations share that jazz element, of inviting each person to express themselves authentically, and those who listen skillfully are able to easily build on what is being shared. A few tips for improving our listening:

- Help folks to notice their tendency to plan their response to what is being said actually detracts from both the speaker and the listener
- Listen as if each person were truly wise, and sharing some truth that you may have heard before but do not yet fully grasp

- Listen with an openness to be influenced by the speaker
- Listen to support the speaker in fully expressing themselves
- Listen for deeper questions, patterns, insights and emerging perspectives
- Listen for what is not being spoken along with what is being shared

### **Share Collective Discoveries**

Conversations held at one table reflect a pattern of wholeness that connects with the conversations at the other tables. The last phase of the Café involves making this pattern of wholeness visible to everyone. To do so, hold a conversation between the individual tables and the whole group. Ask the table groups to spend a few minutes considering what has emerged in their Café rounds which have been most meaningful to them. Distill these insights, patterns, themes and deeper questions down to the essence and then provide a way to get them out to the whole room. It can be helpful to cluster this aspect of the conversation by asking for one thing that was new or surprising and then asking people to share only those ideas which link and build on that particular aspect. When it is clear that the group has exhausted this topic ask for another one and repeat the process until you have given each table or person the opportunity to speak about what matters to them. Make sure that you have a way to capture this, either on flip charts, or by having each table record them on large post-it notes, or even their table cloths which can then be taped to a wall so that everyone can see them. After each table has had the opportunity to share their insights, the whole group may wish to take a few minutes of silent reflection and consider:

- What is emerging here?
- If there was a single voice in the room, what would it be saying?
- What deeper questions are emerging as a result of these conversations?
- Do we notice any patterns and what do those patterns point to, or how do they inform us?
- What do we now see and know as a result of these conversations?