

The Knowledge Café

A useful collaboration tool

A Knowledge Café¹ brings a group of people together to have an **open, creative conversation** on a topic of mutual interest to surface their collective knowledge, to share ideas and to gain a deeper understanding of the issues involved. Ultimately the conversation should lead to action in the form of better decision-making and innovation.



What do you need?

- a venue (where people can be comfortable and relaxed, with tables and chairs to seat 4 or 5 people per table, preferably with refreshments - think "pub conversation")
- a group of people (20 people works well, but fewer is ok)
- a facilitator (to introduce and oversee the café – they need not be a specialist, simply a good listener with chairperson skills)
- a **powerful question** (to spark the conversation)
- time (allow 1.5 to 2 hours)

Times are a guide only. But remember, good conversation can take time to develop.

The value of open, creative conversation

Open, creative conversation embraces dialogue rather than debate. Rather than defending a position, strive for mutual understanding through a frank exchange of ideas or views. In particular:

- suspend assumptions, do not judge
- observe and listen to one another
- welcome differences and explore them
- allow taboo subjects to be raised safely
- listen to your inner voice
- slow the discussion
- search for the underlying meaning

How does it work?

- The facilitator takes 5-15 minutes to introduce the café, making its purpose clear and posing the question
- A guest speaker can be used to introduce the café, but their speaking time must be strictly limited
- Participants form into small groups of 4 or 5 to discuss the question for 30-60 minutes
- At the request of the facilitator, participants change groups once, twice, or at most, three times (depending on wider group size)
- After the small group conversations the wider group re-assembles to exchange ideas for 15-30 minutes

For the facilitator

- Encourage full participation
- Don't take a lead in the discussions, rather wander around and listen into the groups
- Listen out for problems and remind people gently of the rules of 'dialogue'

¹ This tip sheet, prepared and made available by Steve O'Hagan, Knowledge Manager at Crown Law NZ, draws extensively from resources provided by David Gurteen on Gurteen Knowledge Cafés <http://www.gurteen.com/>

When introducing the small group conversation

- Don't appoint a leader or chairperson
- Don't appoint a note taker but give permission for participants to take their own notes, if they wish (remember that the focus is on the conversation)

When introducing the wider group conversation

- Bring participants back into a relatively tight group so that they can easily see and hear each other (try a circle)
- Remind them that their comments should be addressed to the whole group and not directly to the facilitator (the objective is to hold a "group conversation")
- Invite someone to begin the conversation – it may be slow to start, so tolerate silence
- Connect diverse perspectives
- Keep the wrap up short and simple, and thank the participants

How do you record the outcomes of a Knowledge Café?

Participants should not be burdened with recording, as they need to be fully engaged in the conversation. It is best to appoint an external note taker if a record is required. Another option is to invite participants to consider one action point within their sphere of influence that they can take away from the conversation.

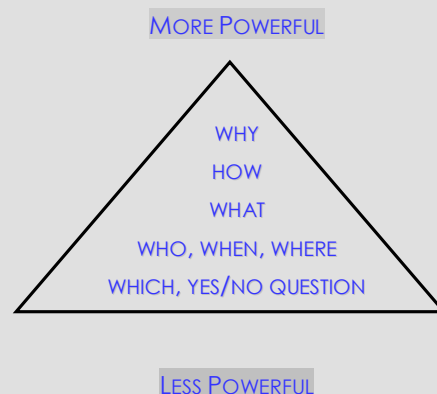


The powerful question: A gateway to insight, innovation and action²

The powerful question is at the heart of the knowledge café. Think of it as an invitation to creativity and breakthrough thinking. By considering the three dimensions of powerful questions – construction, scope and assumptions - we can increase the power of the questions we ask and, as a result, increase our ability to generate insights that help shape the future.

Construction

The construction of a question can make a critical difference in either opening our minds or narrowing the possibilities we consider. By using the words toward the top of the pyramid we can make many of our questions more robust.



Scope

Tailor and clarify the scope of the question as precisely as possible to keep it within the realistic boundaries and needs of the situation you are working with. Avoid stretching the scope of your question too far.

Assumptions

To formulate a powerful question, be aware of assumptions within it and use them appropriately. Contrast the question, "What did we do wrong and who is responsible?" with "What can we learn from what has happened and what possibilities do we now see?" The first question assumes error and blame; whoever is responding is likely to feel defensive. The second question encourages reflection and is more likely to stimulate learning and collaboration among those involved.

² *The Art of Powerful Question: Catalyzing Insight, Innovation and Action* by Eric E. Vogt, Juanita Brown, and David Isaacs, 2003