

Café Conversations in the Partnership Journey:

adapting organisational development
tools to the partnership process

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1. Summary

This paper has its foundation in three unfinished conversations. The first began as an internal conversation about my own professional development at the time I applied for PBAS Part I and has gone on sharpening my thinking during Part I and Part II.

The questions I've had as internal dialogue include:

- What do I as a partnership broker specifically have to offer partners?
- What is my core talent and competency?
- Since I have not had considerable multi-sector partnership experiences, what personal competencies will inform my early broker's practice?
- What value do these competencies add to achieving the partnership's purpose?

The second short conversation was with one of the directors of PBAS Part I, in which I began to test out the opportunities for organisational development models and methodologies to inform the multi-sector partnership phases. The third conversation was with my mentor as we discussed embedding and institutionalising the lessons of partnerships into partner organisations and what organisational development knowledge could add to these brokering initiatives.

My current position is that some organisational development models and methodologies have strong resonance and use in the multi-sector partnering process. Over the last four months I have given specific thought to:

- Cooperider's Appreciative Inquiry theory and processes (referenced and introduced later in the paper).
- Group process consultation, a model which goes beyond facilitation of groups. Group process consultation provides an intervention framework in ongoing group events and dynamics in order to help the group attain its stated end more effectively. (Adapted from Reddy and Phillips: 1998)¹

This would be of particular value to the partnership building and maintenance phases as a preventative process for groups which are not functioning as well as they could.

I have also considered large group interventions from organisational development methodologies. My thinking is that many of these methodologies will have considerable value to multi-sector partnering. I've chosen to focus in the paper on just one example of a large group intervention: the world café methodology.

The paper is an opportunity to contribute my organisational development experience to my newer kitbag of partnership broker's knowledge and experience. This is a small beginning. I see the need to do much more thinking about the potential synergies between organisational development tools and those of the broker.

For me this will be in the spirit of the second PBAS principle: "Apply the most practicable tools at each stage of the partnering process (giving due acknowledgement to the source of any tools I may use from elsewhere) and demonstrate innovation in the development and application of new tools where appropriate" (PBAS Principles).

2. Introduction

Large group interventions for organisational and community change are methods for involving “the whole system in the change process”.² These methodologies will have use as ‘staging posts’ in the ‘route map’ of multi-sector partnerships (Phrases used by Ros Tennyson in PBAS Part I).

They are methods initiated as part of organisational or community development when high commitment and engagement are both wanted and needed to address a strategic issue. Large group interventions allow a critical mass of people to participate in:

- understanding the need for change in a strategic direction or a critical issue
- generating ideas about how to change existing situations, processes or develop programmes
- building changes in the relationships with stakeholders
- implementing and supporting changes in structures, policies or procedures.

There are a range of methods and design features in these large group interventions.³

The benefits of a large group intervention instead of, or in addition to, small group methods include: speed of engagement of a range of stakeholders and the inspiration of creating significant ‘staging posts’ together, building understanding of differing perspectives, innovative thinking and the motivation of a larger number of stakeholders through in depth conversations. The benefits of a larger group are that it creates a wider platform for engagement in change than the more usual smaller representative groups will achieve.

This paper discusses one methodology, the World Café, as one example of the methods and principles of large group interventions. This example is chosen because it will be shown to have several potential uses in the partnership development process.

The paper outlines the World Café methodology and principles. It then discusses how, when and with what constraints this methodology can be useful to multi-sector partnerships.

3. What is World Café Methodology?

World Café conversations is a method used when a large group (best when it’s over twenty and can stretch to hundreds or even thousands) are brought together “creating a living network of collaborative dialogue around questions that matter in service of the real work”.⁴

The ‘World Café’ is a metaphor for the network of conversations that are natural and yet invisible and happen everyday in ‘cafes’ around the world. The methodology is designed for sharpen these natural processes for sharing collective knowledge and shaping the future.

“The Café is built on the assumption that people already have within them the wisdom and creativity to confront even the most difficult challenges. Given the appropriate context and focus, it is possible to access and use this deeper knowledge about what’s important”.⁵

The design of the café experience includes six principles: clarity of purpose; create a hospitable space; explore questions that matter; encourage everyone’s contribution; connect diverse perspectives and listen for insights and share discoveries. Each of these will be described.

3.1 Clarity of Purpose

The earliest requirement in design is to get a clear focus on the purpose of engaging a wide group of stakeholders in an issue. For these large group interventions the issue needs to be systemic, cutting across all levels of an organisation or spectrums of stakeholders. It must be important enough so that the people involved have information to share on the subject as well as a strong desire to influence it.

Typically a small design group for the intervention/s will, through dialogue, create the purpose and the questions that will best focus the collective attention on the purpose.

For example the design group might ask itself:

- What question, if answered, could make the most difference to the future of (the specific purpose and situation)?
- What is the next level of thinking that we need to do about (the situation)?
- What assumptions do we need to test or challenge here in thinking about (our situation)?⁶

3.2 Create a Hospitable Space

The power of creating an appropriate space in which people feel both safe and stimulated. Based on the notion that when people feel comfortable to be themselves, they do their most creative thinking, speaking and listening. World Café methods include culturally appropriate versions of an invitation and a venue with café tables (round and with bright tablecloths or surfaces that are able to be drawn or written on), food or beverage, and some expression of nature or culture: flowers, candle, pens for artwork, music. In some cases a “talking object” on the table: a stick, a stone, a cellphone, a symbol is passed among the people at the table to signify the speaker and the listeners. When a person holds the object or has it in front of them, they are speakers and others are the listeners.

3.3 Explore Questions that Matter

This is a significant principle and a key contribution of this methodology. The key is to frame questions that matter to those participating in the café experience.

Vogt, Brown and Issacs define a powerful question as one that:

- Generates curiosity in the listener
- Stimulates reflective conversation
- Is thought-provoking
- Surfaces underlying assumptions
- Invites creativity and new possibilities
- Generates energy and forward movement
- Channels attention and focuses inquiry
- Stays with participants
- Touches a deep meaning
- Evokes more questions⁷.

The design group for the ‘Café’ experience will typically design questions to begin the dialogue and set the framework for the joint exploration. The focus may be on a single question or several questions could be developed to support a logical progression of discovery throughout several rounds of dialogue. In many cases, one of the outcomes of the café experience is discovery and consensus on what are the most significant questions that underline the situation or issue.

The powerful questioning techniques in the methodology are informed by David Cooperrider’s appreciative inquiry theories and practice.⁸ In short, Appreciative Inquiry contends that the questions we ask and the way they are asked will focus people’s thinking and greatly affect the outcome of the inquiry. Questions that focus on ‘the best of’, explore when strategic issues have been at their best and the possibilities of what could be; connect the participants with why they care and what innovation is possible.

One potential pitfall noted in posing questions for large group interventions is taking the questions to the level of the nature of truth. Rather than this, what large-scale interventions can do is create a deeper shared meaning of the situation and can answer the questions:

- What are the different perspectives on truth on this issue?
- What do we find useful in this situation to move forward?

The conversations framed by these questions will create an opportunity to see the collective situation in a different light, frequently enlarging individual views as well as building a common picture of what can best be worked on in the situation.

3.4 Encourage Everyone’s Contribution

“Intelligence emerges as a system connects to itself in new and diverse ways”.⁹

The design group needs to create an environment early on in the café experience where this principle is stated and modelled. One way this can be done is in the welcome and setting of the purpose and process and ‘etiquette’ for the exchange. The design group, made up of representatives of stakeholders, needs to have some visibility in welcoming and valuing everyone’s contribution. The facilitation of the ‘Café’ needs to model this and set the guidelines or ground-rules for the conversations.

The café methodology suggests participants engage in several ‘rounds’ of conversation and listening at different tables and a phase of collecting of the emerging themes and possibilities.

3.5 Connect Diverse Perspectives

“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 travellers. 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.”¹⁰

The methodology suggests that progressive (usually three) rounds of twenty to thirty minutes each, though these can be longer. People are encouraged to write, draw or doodle the key issues of the conversation on the ‘tablecloths’ or to note key ideas on large index cards or placemats in the centre of the table.

At the end of each round the participants are encouraged to move to new tables, achieving a new mix of participants. One person from each conversation is asked to remain at the table to act as a ‘host’ while others are asked to be travellers – ‘ambassadors of meaning’,¹¹ carrying the key ideas, themes and questions into their new conversation.

The table host welcomes the ‘travellers’ and briefly shares the main ideas, themes and questions from the previous conversation. Others at the table are asked to link and connect ideas from their previous conversation. Writing, drawing on the joint cards or placemats is encouraged.

In the final round of conversations people can return to their original tables to synthesis their discoveries or they can move to another table.

Often at this point a new question may be posed by the facilitator, the table’s host or participants may have their own question that deepens the exploration.

3.6 Listen for Insights and Share Discoveries

The process encourages participants to pay attention to themes, patterns and insights in the conversation about the situation.

After several rounds of conversation, it is usual to have a whole group conversation to collect the overall themes, questions and suggestions. Each table will contribute to this.

In some examples of café experiences, graphic representations of the themes or a story board or a ‘gallery’ of table mats is used to display the themes at break times.

Some café experiences create recommendations for actions others create connections between people that are further developed outside the session. A multitude of formal and informal next steps is possible, depending on the purpose of the gathering and the results of the conversations.

For the design group there needs to be a plan for follow-up in place prior to the café experience. There also needs to be a thorough review process after the café experience/s to gather insights, communicate to participants and build the café recommendations into the design group’s intentions for follow-up.

4. How the Café Principles and Methodology Can Be Used in Multi-Sector Partnerships

This section will discuss:

- the congruence between the principles of café experiences and partnership building;
- how the café methodology could be used or refined in the partnership phases;
- the benefits and constraints in the methodology for partnerships.

4.1 Congruence of Principles

Underlying the café experience and in a broad sense, the multi-sector partnership (MSP) process, is a ‘bone-deep belief in participation’.¹² In the café methodology there is “a fundamental conviction that when people have the important information about a system and are allowed to become collaboratively and fully engaged with others around the issues they become highly motivated to take responsibility for change and improvement”.¹³

The partnership approach to development holds to the principle that all main sectors in society have a role in development, sound governance and social responsibility. Partnerships are built on inclusion, empowerment and joint action, based on mutual respect and mutual benefit.¹⁴

A multi-sector partnership process has a strong outcome focus – creating sustainable responses to strategic issues. The large group interventions described above are more focused on participatory engagement and process outcomes.

In the large scale interventions, such as the café experience, a high value is placed on the process as signifying the change. There is a tendency to elevate the process or methodology to being the end point.

“As we have explored these methods [large group interventions] we have come to realise that the process *is* the message. Selecting the right issue is important, but the process by which we engage people around that issue is what communicates a different way of developing an organisational culture and doing business. Issues – the ‘what’ – will always be around. More important is the process, the methods we use to get the issues addressed.”¹⁵

The MSP process is one which has a focus on both the process (the means) of engaging across sectors, and the end result, the sustainable outcome. Large group interventions based on the principles and methodologies illustrated above are contributions to “the route maps that indicate the way to move partnerships into the mainstream”.¹⁶ Organisational development tools of large group intervention can be useful ‘staging posts’ in the ‘route map’.¹⁷ They are methodologies rather than ends in themselves. In the bigger picture, MSP are mechanisms for development and equally not ends in themselves.

4.2 How and when a large group intervention, such as Café methodology, can be used in a partnering phases.

There are four significant uses for well planned large group intervention methodologies:

- Adding a new toolkit for partnership consultation;
- A method for changing mindsets when exploring partnership possibilities;
- Building new levels of engagement and commitment within and between sector groups;
- As a method of embedding and institutionalising the partnership lessons into partners’ organisations.

At each phase of the partnership process an appropriately designed large group intervention would be a useful ‘staging post’ in the development of a well grounded partnership.

In the exploration phase of the partnership there are at least two uses. First, a café intervention could be designed for the internal organisational assessment phase. A design team could design a café process to engage the initiating organisation in discussing its interest, knowledge and resources for addressing a strategic issue.

For example: a national branch of a pharmaceutical company which has developed a global intention of social responsibility – thinking globally, acting locally – could design a café experience with a central purpose of uncovering what this strategic intent means for the particular business. It is likely that the system engaged in the café experience would be a ‘vertical slice’ of the organisation’s staff, leaders from other country branches and could potentially include customers and suppliers and other stakeholders already engaged with the company. This grouping would represent the ‘internal system’ of the organisation as it currently exists. The ‘café’ intervention would:

- Indicate the level of potential for the initiating organisation to sustain a partnership engagement and work on the strategic issue;
- Identify allies and resources within the organisation to contribute to a partnership approach;

- Build awareness and commitment amongst a sample of staff to the strategic issue and possibilities of partnering with other sectors;
- Open minds in the organisation to the ‘questions that matter’ for moving forward on the strategic intent.

This café experience would be one innovative methodology for the ‘health check’ on the readiness for partnering.

Second, a café experience engaging a wider range of stakeholders will be a useful consultation methodology when the exploration phase is assessing external factors and potential partners. The initiating organisation would invite potential partners to be on the design team. Alternatively they may ask another organisation, seen as more ‘neutral’ on the issue, to take the lead on the café consultation. This would allow the initiating organisation to contribute more to the discussion and the consultation to be seen as open and exploratory. The design team experience of setting up the café consultation would provide an opportunity for a ‘trial’ of the working relationships that could progress into a partnership. It would also provide a solid foundation for a later workshop identifying the outcomes, design parameters and resources required for the specific partnership.

In the life cycle of building the partnership and maintaining it, the café methodology could be utilised to:

- Deepen the ‘whole system’s’ engagement and contribution to the strategic outcomes of the partnership;
- An input of new or renewed commitment and motivation when the partnership has plateaued;
- Provide a rich source of qualitative data on progress in achieving the outcomes
- As a tactic for institutional engagement, influencing the organisation’s cultural change, communications and “getting out of the box”.¹⁸

4.3 Benefits and Constraints of the Methodology for Partnerships

The café methodology, as an example of large group interventions, has the flexibility to be adapted to suit the diversity of partners and sustainability issues, without losing the integrity of its principles.

The methodology is based on group and inter-group dynamics and as such is a microcosm of the flow between small groups and large groups. This is a mirror of the interplay in the MSP methodologies between smaller groups and larger social systems.

The small group dynamics is self directed, self organising based on systems thinking rather than a mechanistic view of organisational life. MSP processes are self-directive and infinitely diverse: “a revolution without route maps”.¹⁹

Large group interventions have the benefit of speed and immediacy in gathering opinions information, engagement and building commitment. They can also provide rich qualitative data to brokers and partners. For partnerships, these large group interventions could be one methodology in an action plan for each partnership phase.

Large group methodologies provide access to information from people closest to the issue being addressed by the partnership. Traditional consultation methodologies such as focus groups or surveys may not illicit the same-level of information, nor would it build the level of wide engagement or commitment common in café experiences.

The diversity of participants in large group interventions often creates more innovative suggestions or solutions than a smaller representative partnership group could produce.

One of the strongest benefits and contributions of the café methodology is its foundations in strategic questioning to engage peoples' best thinking.

“In our own work with creating positive futures, we are discovering that the usefulness of our knowledge depends on the quality of the questions we ask. Clear, bold, and penetrating questions tend to open up the context for new learning and discovery, which is a key component of strategy innovation...Between our deep attachment to the answer – any answer – and our anxiety about not knowing, we have inadvertently thwarted our collective capacity for deep creativity and fresh perspectives in the face of the unprecedented challenges we face, both in our own organisations and as a global human community.”²⁰

Building a partnership group's capability to ask questions that evoke strategic thinking, is a core competency for a broker. The foundation work done by the originators of the café experience methodology, on building the art of powerful questions²¹ is fundamental to successful large-scale interventions as well as the everyday life of a MSP.

There are constraints in the café methodology for partnerships. It requires a strong value on participation and local democracy and an openness to what will emerge in the process. If the methods are used simply to get a stamp of approval on an already decided partnership approach then the methodology will backfire. Stakeholders will become cynical of the methodology and therefore the partnership.

A café experience may not fire if the purpose is unclear, too broad or too narrowly focused. It needs to be systemic, framed as “possibility” rather than “problem” thinking. Getting agreement on the key questions from the design group, which includes partners or potential partners, may take some planning time.

Selecting the right people for the large group intervention is critical. The partnership process has a parallel requirement. In a large group intervention it does require the design group to ask: Who does the issue affect? Who has a stake? Who has information? Whose influence and perspective are important? The inclusive response of these questions can lead to “politically untenable” mixtures of people. Courageous decisions about selection need to be made which balance the outcomes wanted from the methodology and the realism of the current politics and relationships.

The methodology could be experienced as a ‘talk fest’ if it is not well framed within the partnership life cycle and there is follow-up both well planned and communicated. The more intangible outcomes of new thinking, broadened perspectives and new commitment and relationships, need to be acknowledged alongside the more tangible outcomes.

5. Conclusion

Large group methodologies such as the café experience can apply, at a systemic level, what people already know about the power of good conversation to inspire common purpose, new possibilities and committed action. There are real synergies between this tool and what we currently know works in building MSPs for sustainable development.

This paper is a small contribution to linking organisational development tools with those in the partnership broker's kitbag.

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- 4 From: What are Café Conversations? On the website www.theworldcafe.com
- 5 *Ibid*.
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