

Parish Café - A Strategy for Listening

The café is a creative way for leaders to consult with group members in a non-threatening environment. This approach is particularly helpful for strategic planning and facilitating change. The approach draws inspiration from such popular methodologies as Encuentro, Appreciative Inquiry and the World Café with an emphasis on open-ended conversations that foster common identity and a warm community.

1. Invite Guests - One way to set the tone is through the invitation. Extend a gracious invitation that communicates the importance of a guest's attendance. Make it personal. Include the benefits of attending. Make it easy to say yes and difficult to say no. Consider offering transportation for those who might benefit. If there is a focus question, include it in the invitation. State the issue as an open-ended inquiry, not a problem-solving intervention. Ask yourself:

- What is the topic that we want to explore?
- Who needs to be invited to this conversation?
- Who represents both the conventional and the unconventional wisdom?
- What themes are most likely to be meaningful and stimulate creativity?

How much time do we have for the inquiry?

2. Set the Table - The physical arrangements for any meeting predict what is expected. Some seating arrangements invite intimacy while others invite chatter and cross talk. In this way the space already directs group expectations and boundaries.

- Do the arrangements invite people in?
- Does the physical space create a point of focus or priority of position?
- How does the space frame the conversation?
- What is the best outcome we can envision and what design would guide us best?

3. Welcome Guests - A café is a warm, inviting place with natural light and comfortable seats. Cafés extend hospitality (invitation, greeting and refreshments). Welcome space also means "safe" space in which everyone feels free to take risk and do their best thinking. When most people are asked where they have had their best conversations, they typically recall sitting around a drink or a meal with friends. There is an easy intimacy when gathering at a small table. When you walk into a room filled with café tables you know that you are not in for a business-as-usual 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 inexpensive, colorful tablecloths or cover tables with 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

4. Present a Menu that Matters - Just as Abraham found himself host to a divine conversation, we too hear God's answers when we gather around the important questions. People of faith know that breaking bread is a spiritual act. It is preceded by a blessing that acknowledges who we are, gathered in God's company.

In a café, insights emerge from responses to compelling questions (What is God asking of us at this time? How can we become a more effective team? What do we have to do to get there? What am I willing to contribute to the team or to our mission?). These questions are a natural outgrowth of prayer and reflection. Find questions that are relevant to concerns of the group.

Powerful questions affirm identity and purpose, suggest impact, and invite movement. Common purpose is energizing to people.

When complex issues come to the table, consider hosting multiple conversations that follow a progressively deeper line of inquiry. These conversations can explore implications for relationships in an ever-wider circle of people. Where statements can provoke debate, questions exercise creative faculties. It is the way the questions are phrased that determines the outcome of the inquiry. 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

When we ask, "What is wrong?" and "Who caused the problem?", we create a blame assigning dynamic. In a parish café it is much more effective to ask people questions that invite an exploration of possibilities or that connect the guests to why they care about most. Because absolute or closed questions create debate it is better to focus on "What is useful here?" as ways to invite engagement and creativity.

4. Encourage Everyone's Contribution - Each participant represents one aspect from the diversity of that community. All participants have something to contribute either through expressions, questions or affirmations. Intelligence emerges within a group when the people discover new connections or when they integrate diverse outlooks. And as each person has the chance to connect in conversation more of the intelligence inherent in the group becomes accessible.

Consider the use of a "talking object". Originally used by numerous indigenous peoples, a talking object can be a bread loaf, a wine glass or a salt shaker, almost anything that is singular, visible and easily passed among the people at the table. It is not necessary to use a talking object all the time, but in cases where the topic being explored raises impassioned responses, it can be a very effective way to ensure everyone has the opportunity to contribute, even if they simply choose to hold the talking object and observe a few minutes of silence.

The talking object identifies two aspects of the power of the community. Whomever holds the talking object is the one empowered to speak. Anyone who is not holding it is empowered to listen. 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. Listeners give power through a willingness to be influenced but listeners exercise great power in receiving and weaving together the threads of the communal wisdom. Both the listener and the speaker possess a piece of the larger picture which none of us can see by ourselves.

5. Stir the Pot - Ask café participants to listen for what is emerging "in the middle of the table." Use the paper tablecloths and markers to create a "shared visual space" by collecting and recording the emerging ideas. This allows the group to express both the co-created thoughts and the respective threads that connect these thoughts. A woman we know once remarked: "The most radical thing you can do is to introduce people to folks they don't know." Groups can produce surprising results from such cross-pollination.

Organize your café time into conversational rounds and ask people to change tables using a predetermined method between rounds. This creates a dense web of conversational connections in a short period of time. Each time a guest travels to a new table, the guest brings with them the threads of the last conversation, weaving them with the conversations of the other guests.

In café rounds, people who arrived with fixed positions often find that they are more open to new and different ideas. One person should remain at each table to act as the host. This person will summarize the conversation of previous rounds for the newcomers and ensure that any important points are available for consideration in the upcoming round. The hosts invite travelers to share briefly on the essence of the previous round allowing everyone to become more deeply connected through the web of conversation.

6. Make Music and Listen for Harmonies - Cafés are musical places. 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. The jazz great Wynton Marsalis once noted that when jazz musicians play together, whoever is the best listener ends up contributing the most to the music, because they are able to play off of whatever else is playing. 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 great listening:

- Help folks to notice how planning a response to what is being said actually detracts from both the speaker and the listener
- Listen as if each voice bears a wisdom, as yet not fully grasped
- 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

7. Broadcast Refrains for Everyone to Hear - Take notice of themes or refrains in the conversation. One way to do so is to invite those at tables to spend a few minutes considering what has emerged as most meaningful in their discussion. Explore similarities, patterns, and themes until deeper questions and issues emerge. Start by asking for the comment that either most surprised them or seemed to be most significant.

- What is emerging as a common refrain in the comments?
- If there was a single voice in the room, what would it be saying?
- What deeper questions are emerging?
- Are there any trajectories or directions in the conversation?
- What do we now know as a result of these conversations?

When it is clear that the group has exhausted connections on a particular topic, ask for another comment and repeat the process until you have given each table the opportunity to speak about one issue that matters most to them. Capture the refrains on flip charts or use large post-it notes on a wall so that everyone can see the refrains. Invite the whole group to take a few minutes of silent reflection and consider what pastoral priorities emerge.

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