

# Building Local Conversations: Specific Process Tools to involve the Public

*Prepared for the 2016 Dane County Housing Summit:  
Addressing Workforce Housing in Dane County*

5/2016

Prepared by Mindy Habecker and Sharon Lezberg  
Dane County UW-Extension

This factsheet provides an overview of three specific process tools that can be used as methods to involve the public to give their insight and ideas on public issue of importance to them. Each is briefly described and resources are provided where more detailed information can be found. The three tools described are Community Conversations (a modified version of World Café), World Café, and Appreciative Inquiry. This is only a sampling of many tools that are available to get the public involved in public issues.

## **Community Conversations – A public input process to engage community residents in conversations that matter**

Dane County UW-Extension has piloted a public input process we call “Community Conversations.” This process brings together diverse individuals to discuss an issue in which they share an interest, and to which they can provide insight, ideas for action, and perspective. Community conversations are orchestrated, in that the process is deliberate in many regards:

- Invited participants are selected to reflect the diversity of the population,
- The parameters of the conversation are determined by the organizers,
- Table conversations are hosted by trained facilitators,
- Discussion questions are crafted in advance, and are consistent across table groups,
- Each small group discussion table has a trained recorder who takes notes on participant comments,
- The record of the conversation is compiled and shared with participants in order to check for accuracy of the transcription,
- The organizers of the conversation undertake a detailed analysis of the conversation transcriptions in order to inform next steps, policy direction, or recommendations to a decision-making body.

### **Process for Community Conversations**

A detailed discussion of the process that was utilized by County Supervisors during one public input process can be found at: <http://fyi.uwex.edu/danecountycommunitydevelopment/files/2015/10/Planning-and-Hosting-a-Community-Conversation-final-version.pdf>

The steps in designing a community conversation process, in general, should include:

- 1) Identify the group that is organizing the conversation: this could be elected officials, members of a public entity, a non-profit organization, or even a community-based business.
- 2) Select a time, date, and venue for the gathering(s).
- 3) Identify the participants to reflect the widest diversity of opinions possible.
- 4) Invite participants.
- 5) Determine the general format for the event and questions that will be posed to participants. It is often beneficial or necessary to combine an opportunity for public awareness or education with public input, so that participants know the authority of the organizing entity. This is also an opportunity for the organizing entity to explain the significance of the public input, and how comments will be considered and utilized.
- 6) Recruit and train table hosts, recorders, and other volunteers.
- 7) Develop a more explicit format for the public input session and the table conversations. It is helpful to prepare both a participant’s agenda (more general) and a facilitator’s agenda (very specific details on the format of the day for facilitators). Determine how participants will be made to feel welcome and respected (space, food, etc.).
- 8) Prepare handouts (if using) and develop any items that will be displayed for background information.
- 9) Getting ready on the day of the meeting: Have location, materials, greeters, and food organized prior to participant arrival. Conduct a training review for table hosts and recorders.

- 10) Event implementation: Maximize opportunities for participants to share their ideas, connect with others, and feel 'heard.' Carefully collect recordings (either paper or electronic) of proceedings.
- 11) Follow-up: Acknowledge that participants have contributed with their time by sending prompt thank-you notes. The organizing team consolidates all notes from the session, and sends all participants a summarized record of the deliberations (be careful to avoid mention of names – or anything that can identify a participant - with comments).
- 12) Amplification: Participants should be given an opportunity to provide additional comments or clarification of their comments. This 'reporting back' allows for continued learning and feedback. Additionally, it is beneficial to provide a means for members of the public who were not at the public input session to provide input. As analysis of public input is posted, it is possible to capture comments using web-based technology.
- 13) Analysis: The organizing group reviews the full record of participant comments and determines findings and next steps.
- 14) Evaluation: Conduct a short evaluation of the process utilized, in order to determine what was learned about engaging public input. Be sure to use this knowledge in designing the next session.

### **Communication Guidelines**

Most public input processes begin with a discussion of communication guidelines (also called 'ground rules'). It is important to review these guidelines to assure that all participants understand acceptable group communication process. Additionally, if someone is out of line, the facilitator can step in to realign a conversation if the ground rules have been accepted.

### **Sample Communication Guidelines**

- Respect self and others
- Create space for everyone to participate
- One person talks at a time
- Everyone participates, no one dominates
- Listen, ask, and be curious
- There are no right or wrong answers
- Create "relationship enhancing" conversations
- Agree to disagree. Use dialogue, not debate.

### **Small Group Conversation Processes**

General considerations revisited: Engaging community through community conversations require trained facilitators to guide small group discussions, as well as a mechanism for recording public comment. Public comments made in small groups should be reported back to participants in an abbreviated form, and a record of the conversation should be made available to participants and anyone else interested in learning what transpired at a public input session.

There are numerous facilitation techniques that can be utilized in small group conversations. Regardless of the small group conversation method chosen, trained facilitators should assure that all participants are given a chance to speak and that no one dominates the discussion. Providing participants with reflection sheets and an opportunity to reflect on their own ideas prior to opening up the group conversation will assure that each individual's perspective is honored. Two techniques that are suitable for community conversations are World Café and Appreciative Inquiry. These are detailed below.

## World Café - Shaping Our Futures Through Conversations That Matter

A World Café is a process tool for creating small group reflective conversation where participants consciously focus attention on questions that matter for families, organizations and communities. Conversations are the core process used to think about issues and coordinate actions. The conversations in World Café processes promote collective learning and lead to transformation of the realities in which we live. World Cafes foster constructive dialogue, access collective intelligence and create innovative possibilities for action for groups.

Juanita Brown and David Isaacs developed the World Café approach in 1995. It is based on the assumption that people already have within them the wisdom and creativity to confront even the most difficult challenges and opportunities. The theory of World Café is that participants, given the appropriate context and focus, can access and use this deeper knowledge to create innovative possibilities.

The Café process is useful when you wish to:

- Generate input, share knowledge, stimulate innovative thinking, and explore action possibilities around real life issues and questions
- Engage people –whether they are meeting for the first time, or are in established relationships –in authentic conversation
- Conduct in-depth exploration of key strategic challenges or opportunities
- Deepen relationships and mutual ownership of outcomes in an existing group

There are seven integrated core design principles for the World Café process. These include:

- Set the context: Clarify the purpose and broad parameters within which the dialogue will unfold. With World Café, the issue being discussed is predetermined and the dialogue focuses on that issue.
- Create hospitable space: Ensure that the environment is welcoming and that participants feel safe, comfortable and respected. This will enable them to share their opinions openly in dialogue.
- Explore questions that matter: Focus collective attention on powerful questions that attract collaborative engagement. Questions are predetermined based on the issue being discussed.
- Encourage everyone's contribution: Enliven the relationship between the "me" and the "we" by inviting full participation and mutual giving.
- Cross-pollinate and connect diverse perspectives: Use the living-system dynamics of emergence through intentionally increasing the diversity and density of connections among perspectives while retaining a common focus on core questions.
- Listen together for patterns, insights, and deeper questions: Focus shared attention in ways that nurture coherence of thought without losing individual contributions.
- Harvest and share collective discoveries: Make collective knowledge and insight visible and actionable.

For information on how to conduct a World Café session, please see: <http://www.theworldcafe.com/>)

## Appreciative Inquiry – Helping to Create a Preferred Future

Appreciative inquiry is grounded in exploration of *positive questions* that seek to identify best practices and innovations, along with the conditions that allow success and continuous improvement. The process typically involves asking questions to get at the heart of what conditions are present when things are going really well, and probing as to how to create or amplify these conditions in different settings and geographies.

Appreciative inquiry group discussions build on the shared wisdom and experience of participants. Sessions are interactive with opportunities created for all participants to interact. **The goal is to typically to identify workable options and enabling conditions to address the topic being discussed.** The convener's job in an appreciative inquiry session is to set the stage for positive conversation where all participants have the opportunity to contribute (if they would like to) and no one person dominates the conversation. The convener also keeps the group on track, monitors time, and models good listening and civil discourse.

The diagram below describes an affirmative action process. The goal is not just to appreciate what is currently working, but to envision what could work well for the future and to design to make this happen.

For example, if the issue at hand is to forge a path toward the development of more affordable and workforce housing, participants would first identify examples of what works and interrogate why they work. This would be followed up by designing systems that amplify the conditions that make affordable housing work.



### The 4-D Cycle of Appreciative Inquiry

---

For more information on appreciative inquiry, see: <https://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/>