

AFTERWORD

Discovering the Magic of Collective Creativity

By Peter M. Senge

All my life I have been drawn to the puzzle of collective creating. *How is it that sometimes, as if by magic, people create something together that has beauty, power, and life?* A sports team that suddenly moves to another plateau where the game is no longer the game but a vehicle for an aesthetic statement (and yet the game is still there). A symphony orchestra that disappears into the music. A dance troupe that ceases being individual dancers. An individual racer who joyously hugs her “opponents” at the end of a race, knowing that it was only from their collective striving that her performance was possible.

This question has drawn me and guided me, but it has worried me as well. Do the recurring examples of collective creating only happen in sporting events or in the performing arts? Is this why singing, dancing, drumming, running, and jumping have bound human cultures together for all our history? But these activities are less central in modern cultures, and as adults we are more likely to encounter them as spectators than as participants. Instead, our lives revolve around teaching, managing, engineering, parenting, doctoring, and coping with countless daily stresses. As one of many who has argued that collective creating can be cultivated in our daily working lives, I worry if the case has been overstated. While the possibility is undeniable, the practices for reliably realizing that possibility have remained elusive.

This is why the World Café has drawn me. Café conversations are the most reliable way I have yet encountered for all of us to tap into collective creating. The stories in this book provide ample illustration. They bring back many memories for me, from when Juanita and I first started experimenting with using World Cafés in countless different gatherings over the past decade—small and large, east and west, north and south.

Peter Senge is a senior lecturer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the founding chair of the Society for Organizational Learning (SoL). Author of the widely acclaimed book *The Fifth Discipline*, which introduced dialogue as a key to organizational learning, Peter shares his decade of experience with the World Café and its contribution to collective creativity.

Throughout all of these experiences, I have been repeatedly struck by the ease of beginning a World Café-style dialogue—how readily people shift into heartfelt and engaging conversations. No formal instruction is needed to start, unlike most organizational development or group techniques. This suggests something important. The World Café is not a technique. It is an invitation into a way of being with one another that is already part of our nature.

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I have been struck also by the power and impact of many World Café conversations. At the end of a three-day gathering of fourteen executives engaged in Café dialogues, Arie de Geus, one of the pioneers of organizational learning, said simply, "I am always amazed at what can arise from a collective learning process." As importantly, I have been struck by the elegance and simplicity of the whole process and consequently by its transferability. I can think of very few processes for thinking together that work equally well in executive retreats, annual corporate budget and planning meetings, one-thousand-person conferences, and community gatherings where strangers come together to consider the environment we create for our kids to grow.

The World Café is not only a reliable method for tapping into collective creating. It is also a powerful metaphor for transforming how we think about work in general and why organizations succeed or fail as vehicles for collective creating in particular. *What if we thought of teams of people working together—either formal or informal teams—as being like individual "table conversations" in a larger Café? What if we thought about each such team interacting with other teams as being like what happens when team members rotate from one Café table to another, influencing and being influenced by each other through the web of conversations in which they are participating.*

Following this line of imagination, it is not difficult to envision an organization as a living network of people and groups "in conversation." This is happening all around us, already. But it is

mostly happening much less powerfully than it might. Although interwoven conversations of people interacting are indeed occurring, these interactions do not necessarily carry the power and energy that they could. Indeed, this one distinction differentiates the vast number of mediocre organizations from the few great ones. It also suggests why organizations that are great for a while later fade. In short, *do the conversations that define the organization succeed or fail in generating creative energy?*

The answer to this question lies, I believe, less in the character or talents of the individuals involved than in the quality of the questions that sit at the heart of their conversations. A Café that fails to center on questions that have real heart and meaning becomes a mechanical process of people talking and moving and reporting back. It fails to generate energy and excitement for the same reason that most organizations fail to generate energy—the questions and issues with which people are engaging simply do not compel their commitment and imagination.

Having said that, it is curious how rarely this happens in actual Café conversations. Why? Could it be that, when left on their own in a conducive environment, people naturally gravitate toward questions that matter? That they naturally do not waste their time on things that are unimportant? Perhaps authentic conversation often fails to occur in organizations because we believe we lack the permission to focus on what truly matters to us, or because we are actually kept from doing so? Whatever the combination of internal and external forces, the nature of the problem is clear. Life is too short to waste time on anything but what is truly important—and we all know this.

The biologist Humberto Maturana, who has been a major influence on how many of us think about communication and human communities, says, “History follows the path of our desires.” When I first heard Humberto say this, I was confused. It seemed to me that much of the history I have seen, including recent history, follows the path of no one’s desire. Indeed, it seems to be dominated by unanticipated and undesired side effects of our actions—climate change that no one desires, growing stress

between rich and poor that no one desires, growing insecurity that no one desires.

As I have pondered this statement I have come to realize that Humberto is inviting us into a stance of responsibility that we usually shirk. Although the consequence of our collective actions may not be what we seek, the motivations that give rise to these actions, and thus the consequences, are expressions of our desires. But these desires are too small. They are too self-centered. They arise in ways too disconnected from the desires of others. In short, the desires guiding history today are not the desires that can create a future big enough for all of us.

I believe the underlying purpose of the World Café is to let loose the true desires of the larger whole. Is it too big a stretch of our imaginations to envision a world engaged in conversations that have real heart and meaning for us all? Start hosting your own Café conversations and see for yourself.

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