



Power of Social Technologies: Conversational Tools Lead to Quick, Effective Solutions

Social Technologies, like the World Cafe, are powerful tools that can be used to create dynamic changes and kick-start organizational learning. Alanna Kennedy used the World Cafe with a group of welders at Emerson and solved a massive impasse in two hours.

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The act of talking through problems is one that is well touted in self-help books and mainstream media. But in work environments, it can often be the case that most of the talking comes from one direction: the top. And solutions from this top-down talking often don't address all of the concerns of the problem, or can be difficult to implement on the ground because of the separation between the decision makers and the decision-enactors.

In examining these systemic problems—problems of communication and buy-in—rethinking traditional meeting styles and decision-making procedures can have a powerful impact. Let's start by diving into a real-world problem.

Welders Create Solution to Long-Term Problem in Two Hour World Cafe Conversation

In Minnesota in 2013, welders at Emerson were at an impasse.¹ New quality standards at the company were being determined, and key stakeholders were having difficulty creating a new standard that everyone could agree to. Alanna Kennedy, a second-shift production manager with a Ed.D. in Organizational Development, used this opportunity

to try a different approach: the World Cafe.

With a focus on small group discussions contributing answers to the larger group, the World Cafe provides an opportunity for individuals to weigh in on questions posed by the group's facilitator. After the first round, members of each group disperse around the room, bringing pieces of their original conversation with them, thereby tying the conversation into itself.

Kennedy identified that this collaborative conversational tool could be used to draw out answers from those who were undersampled in the problem solving process: the welders. After completing training, and educating her peers and supervisors at Emerson, Kennedy teamed up with and shared the information with her peers and supervisors at Emerson. Together, they planned and hosted a two hour Cafe for twenty welders, from across all shifts. Everyone was compensated for their time. For this initial discussion, managers were present and acted as facilitators, but floor supervisors and engineers were absent.

During the two-hours of rotating conversations

about quality control, a key insight emerged: a preference for high standards. The group articulated three distinct components for these standards, and were more comprehensive in their solution than higher level stakeholders had been in initial conversations. Because of the robust nature of these recommendations, the quality control measures were easily agreed upon throughout the company, and implemented shortly after.

Two hours of charged, directed conversation resulted in changes that lead to higher-quality work throughout the organization.

Social Technology Tools can help Solve a Variety of Problems

Alanna Kennedy's use of the World Cafe to foster action-oriented solutions drew on her experience and insight in creating change-oriented outcomes. Kennedy saw the need to include all voices in the conversation, and pursued a workshop on the World Cafe. The effectiveness of her session with the welders then led her to further explore Social Technologies—and in 2014, she participated in a training co-led by Kathy Jourdain called *The Art of Hosting Conversations That Matter*.

In Jourdain's words, *The Art of Hosting Conversations That Matter* (AoH) is about "sharing conversational technology with the participants."² These tools include the World Cafe, Open Space Technologies, Circle Practice, and Appreciative Inquiry. Each tool provides a unique opportunity to host a conversation—where World Cafe has the facilitator asking the questions, Open Space Technologies gives participants an opportunity to ask the questions as part of the conversation.³

These tools are a "set of patterns and practices that help deal with complexity and engagement," says Jourdain. They invite every voice in the room to participate; if everyone isn't invited to contribute early on in a meeting, they are less likely to be heard from throughout the conversation. These tools also help level the playing

Social Technologies

*Social, or conversational, technologies span a variety of forms and methodologies, but all minimize structure and maximize connection in order to help facilitate powerful connections. Here are four conversational tools taught in *The Art of Hosting Conversations That Matter* workshops:³*

World Cafe

A cafe style setting where participants sit in groups of four or five and have a conversation. The groups then spread themselves throughout the other groups, making new small groups of 4 or 5, and bringing their conversation with them. This tool is helpful for understanding the feelings of a group or community about topics provided by the facilitator.

Open Space Technology

This conversational tool harnesses the collective interests by providing the space for them to ask their own questions around a central topic of inquiry. This technology is well suited for complex, dynamic work that has a variety of stakeholders with multiple perspectives.

Circle Technology

The simple act of working in a circle engages all the members of the group and allows for easy verbal communication between stakeholders. By encouraging "check-ins" and "check-outs" at the beginning and end of the conversations, all group members can remain engaged and motivated through their work.

Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry shifts the focus from a problem-solving focus, to a focus on the possibilities and potential of a group. In the words of the Art of Hosting community, appreciative inquiry is a way to "tap into the latent capabilities of the group to create the success they're seeking."³

field. Where hierarchy and power can get in the way in a traditional conversational setting, the AoH provides methods to help even those patterns out.

Connection and Action Working Together

The idea of bringing together individuals in a conversational setting to solve these problems isn't a new one. In the sixties, quality circles, a tool from



Japan, focused in on ways to connect and problem solve together. Today, as these inherent checkpoints and conversations have been devalued, this approach to continuous improvement is underutilized and harder to find.

Connecting through tools like Theory U and Circle Way provide connection by putting people together in groups. Like the World Cafe and other practices, these conversations can lead to action. However, too much connection, without an action or implementation phase, can stand in the way of productive forward movement.

Particularly with Open Space Technologies, participants set the agenda for what they want to talk about, and at the end of the conversation, they are more committed to seeing the action through. In Jourdain's words, "The engagement and action is evident—there is more passion visible."

Systems Lie at the Heart of Organizational Learning

These tools foster conversation and action through an engagement of all parts of the system. Bringing together stakeholders from throughout the company—not at the top—allows each component of the system to be made visible. "There's a lot of literature on how the top-down model isn't fast enough to accommodate new emerging digital technology. The use of these social technologies can effectively speed up the pace at which organizations are able to innovate, work, and solve problems," Kennedy notes.

Starting these small conversations and then adding the information together into a big-picture solution also articulates the systemic elements of this work. By considering not just piece A or piece

Sources:

1. Jourdain, Kathy. "Long Term Impasse at a Manufacturing Company Resolved with Two Hour World Cafe." *ShapeShift*, April 2014. <http://shapeshiftstrategies.com/2014/04/25/long-term-impasse-at-a-manufacturing-company-resolved-with-two-hour-world-cafe/>

2. "Art of Hosting." <http://www.artofhosting.org/>

3. "Art of Hosting Methods." <http://www.artofhosting.org/what-is-aoh/methods/>



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"We're on the brink of dramatic change. There is an opportunity to include more people than ever before. The new paradigm is about knowledge, contribution, and moving quickly—everyone can have a say."

- Alanna Kennedy

B independently, but rather how they relate to each other and to the developing solution, a richer, and more dynamic solution can emerge.

Social Technologies Facilitate Paradigm Shift

Looking at the world and the effectiveness of these tools shows a recurring pattern—one where the information we have isn't sufficient. We don't have time to wait for just the select few at the top of an organization to develop the answers—instead, we can tap into the power throughout our organization to develop new solutions. Not only does this engagement provide stronger, more knowledgeable answers; it also sends the message that the thoughts of individuals throughout the organization matter.

And these technologies don't exist at the exclusion of other frameworks and strategies. Whether Lean management, or Six Sigma, or other approaches, these business tools can work together to leverage a system's potential for growth opportunities.

As Alanna Kennedy demonstrated with the welders at Emerson and later, with the shippers, these tools are powerful across the board. While manufacturing and service industries are viable opportunities for using these tools, so are any situations where rapid, solution-oriented problem solving can take place. By taking a break from daily activities, minimizing structure, and maximizing connection, it is possible to host powerful, change-oriented conversations.

Thanks to Alanna Kennedy and Kathy Jourdain for speaking with us!

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