

Reading's World Café:

Increasing Community Engagement in Planning For the Future

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On the evening of February 27, 2008, the town of Reading, Massachusetts (population 23,708) held its first World Café conversation. The event, open to anyone who lived or worked in Reading, attracted about 220 participants, including high school students; senior citizens; businesspeople; representatives from cultural, religious, and other non-profit institutions; volunteers; activists; and residents who had never been involved in local activities before. Teenagers, people new to Reading, and lifelong residents—some now octogenarians—were present to talk about what they wanted for the future of their town.

To the town staff's knowledge, no other Massachusetts municipality has hosted a World Café or similar event. The World Café model of conversation is gaining popularity and acceptance in the corporate world, and there is a national organization that can be accessed at www.theworldcafe.com for further information. Reading was fortunate to have a resident, coauthor Deborah Gilburg, who is a consultant in her private sector life and has used the World Café model.

We believe that this kind of community-wide conversation offers valuable benefits to localities that wish to increase civic engagement and qualitative community input in planning for the future, particularly during a time of stagnant budgets, escalating costs, competing special interests, contentious public discourse, and dwindling public participation.

We offer the story of our process, including how the Reading World Café came together and the outcomes that resulted, to illuminate the practical role of inclusive conversation as a means of identifying priorities and building systemic support in community governance.

WHY A WORLD CAFÉ

It started in a kitchen in Reading in June 2007, where a handful of people decided to meet and talk about the possibility of hosting a community-wide conversation to discuss the future of Reading. The group was drawn to this idea for a number of reasons.

The community has a strong history of community involvement. In addition to local governance boards, committees, and representative town meeting government (which is an elected legislative body numbering 192 members), Reading boasts dozens of volunteer organizations dedicated to schools, environmental activism, social services, charity, arts and culture, religious pursuits, and neighborly networking.

These groups usually operate independent of one another though, focusing only on their perceived sphere of influence, and as a result they often know little of what others are up to. The folks around the kitchen table were attracted to the potential in all that divergent volunteer energy: How can we as a community align ourselves to define the collective future of Reading?

The idea greatly interested Pat Schettini, superintendent of Reading Public Schools, who had come to this initial meeting excited to consider that question. "Given the strong community involvement we've seen in the past, hosting an open, expansive community conversation about the future sounded doable," commented Schettini. "Yet I have seen many public discussions deteriorate and polarize in the face of controversy and strong opinions—to the point where folks were no longer listening to or learning from each other. I am interested in encouraging more inclusive and courteous discussions to determine what is important to this town."

During past several years, the Reading community had experienced its share of conflict over a number of local issues, including commercial development proposals, interstate highway projects, redistricting for elementary and middle schools, budget allocations, tax overrides, and the future of the town's local water supply. Passions over these issues tended to run high, and the discussions often led to debates and even shouting matches; dialogue was hard to find. A recent rezoning controversy concerning a retail development had become heated.

"The retail project would have ultimately impacted the character of Reading's future," observed Priscilla Hollenbeck, one of the original conversation organizers. "I think the debate became so volatile because as a community we hadn't really explored what our future could be. We had to take a step back and consider, if not this, then what do we want as a community? We needed to heal the divisiveness and focus on a common vision." The people gathered around the kitchen table thought the World Café might be a way to do so.

The challenge in doing so was not small. Earlier efforts to engage community members in broader thinking had met with limited success. For example, Reading had recently finalized its 10-year master plan update, a document that identifies more than 150 projects and actions for the town to undertake. Despite the best efforts of the master plan committee to draw out the community to any number of public meetings, this process drew little community interest. As a result, the town manager and board of selectmen had only limited data on community interests to consider as they developed priorities.

In addition, the school district had completed its district Improvement Plan, which also contained many recommendations and objectives that reflected the best efforts of a relatively small number of dedicated Reading residents.

It became clear to those who met that morning in June that hosting a World Café conversation could be of tremendous benefit to the community, not only because of the potential for collecting *qualitative* data about what people cared about and wanted for the future, but also through the positive, collaborative experience the community could have by talking about the future together. “The hope was that we would get a sense of what the community valued most as part of the World Café conversation process,” reflected school committee member Elaine Webb. “The data generated will be valuable in helping those of us charged with implementing these plans prioritize our next steps.”

This was the hope, and as with all things new, the approach was not without risk. The World Café process is not for the faint of heart. Whether real or perceived, the possibility that the event could fail and make matters even worse was an early concern. Luckily, one of the initial organizers was an experienced facilitator. Because she has used similar processes in her consulting work, she was able to bring her experience to the group of eager enthusiasts.

HOW IT ALL CAME TOGETHER



A sectioned-off portion of the Reading Massachusetts Memorial High School Hawkes Field House was the venue for the World Café.

While the idea to host this event began with just a few people, over the course of the eight months it took to implement the World Café, the concept captured the interest and curiosity of many others.

The first step for the organizers was to attract hosts (or “supporters” as they were eventually called) to draw participants to the Café. Once engaged, these supporters, a comprehensive group of individuals and organizations, helped promote the event and include as diverse a representation of perspectives as possible.

Armed with a date, a venue, and a list of resources needed, the planning team organized an informational meeting in October 2007, and invited representatives from every group and organization they could think of. The team chose to use the introductory meeting to run a mini-version of the World Café so those in attendance could experience the conversation process for themselves.

During this recruitment workshop, the participants were asked to share their perspectives on the following questions: What do I value about this community? What would make this community stronger and more connected?

“I was pleasantly surprised,” remarked Selectman James Bonazoli of the conversation experience. “I had anticipated there being some kind of hidden agenda or ulterior motive involved, but the conversations were authentic and energizing. I really enjoyed hearing what people had to say.”

Curiosity was now sparked among a broader group for what might come of a Reading World Café. During the next several months, the planning team worked to build the list of supporters and met with many different organizations to gain formal and informal sponsorship for this watershed event.

Early on, the team discovered it was important to list the essential questions and trajectory for the Café conversation on all marketing materials in order to clarify intentions and keep the process transparent. Accordingly, team members developed a logo, a list of FAQs, press releases, and promotional flyers for supporters to use.

With the help of early supporters, the Reading World Café developed a website and an online RSVP system and enlisted a number volunteers to manage communications, to set up and break down the venue, to supply refreshments and entertainment during the reception hour, and to arrange for child

care. They recruited a person experienced in visual recording who was willing to capture the event graphically, and they received regular publicity from local newspapers and community television.



How do you “map” a conversation? Just like this.

“Many people are asking, what will happen at the World Café? What will come of it?” noted school committee member David Michaud during an interview on Reading Community Television. “The fact I, no one really knows. Its all part of the mystique and excitement of expansive, collaborative conversation. In the end, however, I believe it will be the experience we have together that matters most.”

READING’S WORLD CAFÉ EVENT

The evening of February 27, 2008 began with a half hour reception in the entrance hall to the high school field house. It didn’t snow until 11:00 that evening—a blessing in New England! Inside the field house itself, 45 round tables, each with five chairs, were covered with large sheets of plain paper and cups of colored markers. A projection screen was positioned so that people seated at all the tables could see the questions on slides.

People arrived curious about what exactly they had signed up for. Then, over the course of two and a half hours, the crowd participated in four rounds of conversation. Participants were invited to be “courteous and curious” during their conversations, and a “recorder” for each table was asked to use the table paper covers to note what was being said.

The questions used that night allowed participants to explore what they valued most about Reading and what possibilities they hoped would be a part of Reading’s future. Between rounds, all participants (except the recorders) were asked to move individually to other tables. The movement encouraged mixing up the groups and infused each table with new perspectives at each round.

At the end of the evening, the participants were asked to capture on large sticky notes (one idea per note) their ideas about dreams, opportunities, dilemmas, and next steps for the town. Notes were collected and posted on large templates located in the front of the room



“Desires, Opportunities, Dilemmas, and Next Steps.” Clearly from this group there were more “desires” than any other category.

for all to see. The four templates were overflowing with sticky notes—119 dreams, 86 opportunities, 79 dilemmas, and 52 next steps—that were later transcribed and published on the Reading World Café website.

Closing comments shared in the plenary revealed that people felt energized, connected, and inspired. “I loved being included in this process,” offered a teenaged girl. “It felt really good to have the adults in this town listen to what we kids have to say.” “I felt so respected by the people here,” added a young parent. “I am proud to be a member of this community.”

The energy level of individuals that night was positive and uplifting. The town administrators collected an armload of forms with names, contact information, and stated interest in following up on outcomes. People left reluctantly, after two and a half hours of hard work, asking when they could do it again.

OUTCOMES

Members of the planning team organized and summarized the results of the World Café conversation. The sticky notes indicated that residents and businesspeople of Reading wanted a richer community experience overall. They wanted:

- Increased community diversity
- Multigenerational spaces; in the words of one high school student, “We don’t want a youth center, we want a community center.”
- Ways and places to come together as community to learn and celebrate
- A downtown area as a focal point for community connection through social gathering spots, a community or cultural arts center, and more restaurants
- Accessible outdoor space, ranging from sidewalks and walking paths to more usable open spaces and parks
- Public efforts to go “green” and seek ways to become more environmentally friendly as a community
- A community calendar available on the town’s Web site in order for groups to coordinate and keep informed
- Increased communication and better use of the town website

These thoughts and suggestions were sprinkled throughout the four templates, taking the form of dreams, opportunities, dilemmas, or next steps that encompassed broad hopes, concrete suggestions for capitalizing on community strengths, practical challenges such as funding and low public participation, and actual steps that could be taken to increase communication and idea implementation.

“It is clear to me that people want more information about what is happening in the community,” acknowledged school committee member Lisa Gibbs. “And they definitely want the results of this conversation acknowledged and used by the governing bodies.”

WHY THE WORLD CAFÉ PROCESS CAN WORK

When the planning team first entertained the idea of hosting a community conversation, one member observed that methods for soliciting community input fall on a continuum. At one end are traditional methods like surveys and focus groups, while way on the other end is the World Café. Why would a community deviate from traditional methods? What makes a World Café worthwhile?

As governance pressures increase for local governments, the need for positive and proactive community involvement is becoming more pronounced. Community participation fuels local governance and successful community initiatives. Residents who participate in their community gain a better understanding of the challenges of creating a rich, inclusive community.

At the same time, special interest organizations within a community compete over limited resources and make conflicting demands on local government. In addition, a busy, high-

stress competitive culture affects the sentiments and behavior of many people who feel overscheduled, overwhelmed, disconnected, or distrustful of public process.

Those same special interest group members as well as a great number of overscheduled, mistrustful individuals participated in the Reading World Café. And a common theme in their feedback on the event was that it was a worthwhile expenditure of scarce time and limited resources—and *it was fun!*

BENEFITS TO TOWN GOVERNANCE

Having 220 residents together in a single space, all talking positively and respectfully about the future of their community was a wonderful experience. Much of the data collected that evening was not a surprise to local decision makers. They had heard these perspectives before, and several were action items that the community was working on.

The Café, however, helped to reinforce and validate those issues and provided great assistance in prioritizing them. Now, no proposal to the board of selectmen (city council) or to town meeting is stronger than one that was seen as a community priority among the 220 participants in the World Café.

The Café gave town officials collective data from a significant number of people, and the data were of a higher quality than what might come from focus groups or surveys because this information was the result of an explorative conversation among people interested in the community. People had time to listen to each other as well as express their ideas before they converged on concrete suggestions. As a result, the suggestions spoke to a deeper need for a strong community and a quality of life that might not be as evident in results from anonymous surveys or small focus groups.

Finally, the town officials responsible for setting community goals and program initiatives can establish priorities confident of the level of support from a broad cross-section of the community. The ability to proceed with the wind at one's back versus anticipating public inertia or resistance can be a highly motivating experience for the volunteers who hold these important positions. In addition, support for community initiatives and community management can strengthen because of the potential increase in the quality and quantity of local volunteerism resulting from an expanded list of interested and engaged community members.

BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

The World Café process is not only thoroughly enjoyable but highly productive as well. In the course of three hours—a finite and focused amount of time—participants and supporters alike received many lasting benefits. Participants met new people from their community who shared an interest in the community's future, and they were able to influence the shape of that future in one evening. Perspectives were altered; new insights received. "I have always felt I needed to advocate passionately for the environment," commented one participant after the Reading event. "I was really struck at how easily the

idea of ‘going green’ took hold without my expending all that energy. It helped me to really listen to others in a new way.”

Town officials are not the only ones who benefit from the data; other community organizations are also privy to the collective perspectives, desires and concerns of the participants. This information can inform direction, mission, and collaborative efforts. The numbers and variety of local organizations within the Reading community that became official supporters of the World Café revealed a vast landscape of volunteer opportunities previously unknown to many participants. In addition, the supporting organizations shared an experience of working together for a communitywide purpose, setting a precedent for such cooperation in the future.

Participants and community organizations can learn a new way of communicating or perhaps discovered the lost art of communication. In Reading, the World Café has become a catchphrase for inclusive, respectful dialogue. It has spread throughout the community—cropping up in church meetings, committee meetings, and the substance abuse prevention program—and has become the methodology of choice for community conversation.

The World Café process offers a valuable layer between community involvement and formal decision-making. These are conversations about important questions in which everyone has a stake—questions about the future—held in a productive manner that expands creative thinking, increases personal interaction, offers a safe, inquisitive environment, and helps to amass qualitative data for decision makers. In addition, these conversations also invite a more collaborative and inclusive form of civic engagement.

Taking time to explore ideas as a community and to discover collective perspectives and desires without the pressure of an imminent decision allows for the emergence of greater possibility, reduces resistance, and creates a collective experience that can fuel the courage needed to face an uncertain future.

In the words of 10-year-old Madeline Hollenbeck, who observed the event, “I liked Reading World Café because it was important. It was a chance for all of Reading to get together and speak about what was on their mind. It was helpful to the community because it made people think about things that they may have never thought about before. If more people work together on something they agree needs work, it will get done quicker. And afterwards everybody can admire what they’ve accomplished together.”

As with any large public event, there are challenges and considerations that must be addressed to ensure a successful outcome. And because the process was new and unusual, many were unsure and even suspicious about its capabilities. The planning committee had to deal with the following questions to ensure a high-quality event.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

What if people have a difficult time understanding what the World Café is? How do you get them to participate? Although many were skeptical about the process at first, surprisingly few resisted the concept. What's not to like about a community conversation? It was important, however, to distinguish the World Café process from the kinds of public forums that people had attended in the past, and make the information about the process transparent and accessible. The planning team created a website, drafted a list of FAQs, spoke at dozens of meetings, made a good number of personal calls, ran a half hour panel discussion on community access TV, sent out press releases, and used the connections and networks of the event Supporters to disseminate information.

How does this differ from formal decision-making processes? Or, isn't this the job of the town officials? This was perhaps the most difficult objection to overcome and required active support from the board of selectmen, school committee, the town manager, and the superintendent of schools. It was important to convey that this process was not in lieu of official decisions but rather a complement to them, and this message had to be reinforced on a regular basis.

How does this differ from a municipal master planning process? The World Café process would be a great way to generate public input and involvement for developing a master plan; however, Reading had just gone through a master plan update, and in spite of a great deal of outreach and effort, Reading had managed to involve only 50 people in the master plan process. With more than 150 recommendations, the data generated by the World Café will still inform priorities and help the town focus its efforts.

Who needs to be involved? Members of the planning team sought as many local organizations, leaders and businesses as they could to support the event. To accommodate various levels of interest and commitment, the team created categories of support that made it easy for groups to sign on.

How difficult is it to organize a World Café conversation? The World Café organization is a great resource for groups that want to host a community conversation. The Web site—www.theworldcafe.com—lists instructions, supplies, and case studies and practitioners. Although the intent of the site is that any group can implement a World Café process, it is helpful to have the aid of a person experienced in this method of communication. It might be useful to bring in someone experienced in the World Café (or find a volunteer in the community who knows how to facilitate events such as this) to lead the efforts.

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