



THE *LET'S TALK AMERICA* CAFÉ:

Hosting a Large Group Dialogue

The *Let's Talk America (LTA)*: A Design for Hosting Large Group Let's Talk America Dialogues

Conversation Café and the *World Café* teamed up with other dialogue groups to host *Let's Talk America*, a project designed to facilitate dialogue across the political divides in the United States in 2004.

The *World Café's* principles are aligned with *Conversation Café*, though the form is different. Instead of being random people at a café, the *World Café* is an event hosted by a group that wants to think and learn together, often to aid their work. Instead of staying in one conversation for 60 to 90 minutes, at a *World Café* people move to different tables to stimulate new thoughts. Instead of "no committees will be formed", the *World Café* conversations lead to a whole group discussion that surfaces group insights and learnings and new commitments.

For *Let's Talk America* we created a blend of the *Conversation Café* and *World Cafe*. A detailed description follows.

Unlike the simple *Conversation Café* process outlined in the *Complete Hosting Manual* (available on the *Conversation Café* website), this process does require the guidance of an experienced facilitator; so we offer this design based on the assumption that you have previous experience facilitating large groups. Ideally you will have facilitated or at least attended a *World Café* in the past.

You can find additional resources and suggestions for hosting *Conversation Cafes* at www.conversationcafe.org and for hosting *World Café* gatherings at www.theworldcafe.com.

(1) There are *Conversation Cafes* in over 26 cities in the U.S. plus Canada, Hong Kong and Europe. *Conversation Cafés* are hosted, drop-in conversations, in public places and among diverse people, about our feelings, thoughts and actions in this complex and changing world. The aim is to promote community, democracy and wisdom worldwide through generating millions of open, respectful public conversations. The host participates fully in the conversation, following a simple process. Learn more at www.conversationcafe.org.

(2) The *World Café* is a process for large-scale gatherings enabling up to 1,000 people at a time to learn together in lively dialogue about questions that matter. The *World Cafe* is being used widely in community, corporate, government and educational settings around the globe to engage collaborative



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inquiry across traditional boundaries. Their innovative "rounds of conversation" process enables members to enjoy intimate conversations at small Cafe tables while simultaneously enriching the entire group's discoveries as insights from multiple dialogues link and connect. Visit the World Cafe website at www.theworldcafe.com.

The Process:

This *Let's Talk America* process combines features of *Conversation Café* and *World Café*, which have been used to engage creative dialogue on many aspects of our personal, social, spiritual, civic, organizational, business or recreational life.

Group Size:

This approach can be used effectively with groups from twelve to hundreds of people. If the group is smaller than twelve, it will be more effective to use the typical Conversation/LTA Café process as described in the *Let's Talk America Host Training Guide* (available on the *Conversation Café* website) or some other small group dialogue or "circle" approach.

Time Needed:

Allow 2 to 2 1/2 hours to ensure quality time for introduction, small group dialogue, whole group conversation and wrap-up. Create a timeline for the process, to help track the stop and start times for each phase, noting that you often need to give the group a "heads up" a few minutes before the end of a round.

Choosing the theme and questions:

Study the carefully framed *Questions and Conversation Starters*. You need to consider who you are hoping to attract to your session and what will draw them in. While you may want to choose something not on this list, study the language carefully so you can frame your question in a similar spirit: the spirit and tone and intention of the question is fateful. The *Conversation Café* website has question banks and articles about how to craft questions to avoid assumptions and move towards dialogue and understanding rather than polarization, as well as many sample questions and topics. We find it best to begin with a personal question that elicits stories and deep values, such as: *What was the America of your youth?* or *Where would you place yourself on the political spectrum and what experience, person or value places you there?*. Or simply: *What about this invitation to a Let's Talk America conversation moved and inspired you? What led you to come?* The second home round question could expand on



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these or move to a topic such as: *What is the America you want for your children?* or *Tell the story of an experience when you felt, "THIS is what democracy looks like."*

Physical Set Up:

Host the dialogue in a physical space that will allow those coming to feel comfortable. If possible choose a room with windows and natural light. Set up the Café with small tables (36"- 42" rounds or card tables) that seat four. Avoid the 8-10 person banquet tables or other large tables since they serve as barriers and create distance between people. [If it's impossible to locate small tables then conversation circles of 4 or 5 chairs or cushions without tables will also work]

Materials and Supplies:

At the tables or circles:

- 4 x 6 index cards at each circle or table – 4 for each participant
- Pens or pencils for participants
- Cards printed with the question at each circle
- With Tables:
 - Café-style tablecloths with paper covering to draw on (blank flipchart sheets or butcher paper work well)
 - Colored markers with narrow pointed tips (4 per group)
- Talking object for each table or circle (could be stones, pinecones, any small object)
- Wallet cards for each participant (download and print from the LTA website)

For the Overall Café Host:

- Name tags
- Flipchart or butcher paper (or overheads) for all to see
- Posters or flipchart with theme and question as well as principles, agreements and closing reflection questions ready to post for all to see at the appropriate time during the Café.
- Markers
- Masking tape
- Hand held mikes, preferably cordless (depending on size of group)
- Optional amenities: table cloths, flowers or candles; CD Player/Music (mellow upbeat music as people enter creates a welcoming feeling); snacks and non-alcoholic beverages to create a spirit

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of hospitality.

Note: If you have a very large group (i.e. over 200 people) be sure to consider logistics for dealing with sound, visuals etc. that are needed in a normal meeting of that size. (See www.theworldcafe.com - "Café To Go" for ideas.)

Getting Started

Arrival and Registration:

- Music playing in background *[optional]*
- Self-serve drinks and snacks set up as people arrive *[optional]*
- Room set up completed
- Volunteer hosts at door welcome guests.
- Guests register and get name tags. Print sign-in forms to gather names, emails, zip code etc.
- After people get nametags, volunteers encourage people to sit with folks they haven't met before, and ask them to welcome others who may join their circle.

Overview of the process:

10 minutes	Welcome and Context Setting
	Optional ice breaker
5 minutes	Introduction of Dialogue Guidelines
	Home Rounds Phase 1
30 minutes	Part A: two opening rounds, open dialogue
10 minutes	Part B: reflect what to bring to travel round
25 minutes	Traveling Round Phase 2
20 minutes	Return to Home Phase 3
20 minutes	Whole Group Conversation Final Phase: Town Meeting Style
5 minutes	Next Steps



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Welcome and Context Setting (10 minutes)

- Welcome everyone to the conversation and state the theme or topic for the Café. Explain how their participation embodies the goals of Lets' Talk America:
 1. Experience living democracy where all voices matter
 2. Ignite the voices of "We the People" by building networks of conversations across the country
 3. Thereby restore faith in our democracy, build trust between us, and give us a sense, once again, that the voices of "We the People" matter

- Share purpose and principles of LTA, and the great opportunity we have to be on this special "meeting ground" together.
 - o Inclusive – all people and all perspectives are welcome
 - o Non-partisan – there is no lobbying for causes, candidates, movements or parties
 - o Respectful – having a host and "ground rules" ensures that everyone has a chance to be heard
 - o Open – new people, new ideas, new information open up new insights and possibilities for action

- Clarify the intent of the gathering
 - i.e. we're not here to convince each other, lobby or persuade, but to listen and gain an understanding of one another: listen with curiosity, be heard with respect

 - this is an unusual and hopeful opportunity for our common future—it's about learning together, not about changing each other

- Share the flow of the gathering
 - it's a like a progressive dinner party where each course is at a different place
 - participants will be primarily at a "home table" for the first phase.
 - towards the end, all will travel in a mixing round to listen and learn from others as well as share
 - then they will come back home to share the news of their travels to enrich the conversation the home table started.



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Optional Ice Breaker—As Café host, ask everyone to get up and simply spend 3 minutes greeting others who you don't know; mutually welcome each other to the conversation.

Introduction of Dialogue Guidelines (5 minutes)

- Overall Café host : Introduce the wallet cards placed at each table which contain the Agreements
- Next, read the Agreements out loud. You may want to elaborate on each one, as shown in italics:

§ **Open-mindedness**: listen to and respect all points of view. Conversation isn't just talking. It's talking and listening. In fact, in a group of 4, you'll be listening more than you are talking! By focusing on listening, you may also benefit from the variety of ideas around the table

§ **Acceptance**: suspend judgment as best you can. We all judge one another, but do your best. It means you will be able to hear new things from others. It also helps everyone feel safer if they think others are trying to not judge them!

§ **Curiosity**: seek to understand rather than persuade. We're not here to convince others that we are right and they are wrong. If someone expresses a point of view that seems different from yours, see if you can ask some questions to gain clarity or understanding.

§ **Discovery**: question old assumptions, look for new insights. We aren't seeking mere 'polite conversation' – but a process designed to expose us to new ideas and to possibly even grasp something new. Make such discoveries common by watching for them.

§ **Sincerity**: speak for yourself about what has personal heart and meaning. We want to hear what's important to you, not just your opinions or data you've collected – and not campaigning for a certain cause or candidate. Relate your ideas or reports to your personal experience.

§ **Brevity**: go for honesty and depth but don't go on and on. Honesty and depth are important to a good conversation, but so is giving everyone a chance to speak. People are polite. They may not stop you if you go on and on. But you can stop yourself. Try to stay under a couple of minutes.

- Encourage people to use these as references and support whenever they find themselves getting “hot” or “stuck” in their positions—and to help each other with reminders if it feels like folks are getting polarized.
- Ask everyone to take mutual responsibility for this becoming a true “meeting ground” rather than either a “battleground” or being forced to find “common ground,” since there are no formal facilitators...we're in this together!!

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- Introduce the structures that will help focus and support the flow of the dialogue and thus enhance our learning together:
 - o **Talking piece:** this is a powerful tool of democracy and empowerment. As a listener in the circle, we know our task is to listen deeply for the meaning and intention of the speaker who is holding the talking object, without interjecting or commenting at all. When we are holding the talking object, we know we have the floor, without interruptions. We can pause and reflect silently without fear of losing our turn. We can pass if we don't want to speak. We begin to speak from a more thoughtful and deeper place because we realize – everyone is listening carefully. The quality of the conversation is profoundly affected.
 - o **Process:** there will be several phases: much of the time in the home circle you are now in, then we'll mix up the circles for one traveling round, and finally come back to the home circle. In the initial home circle, ending with a chance to share as whole, getting a sense from all of the tables what they have learned and noticed. In the initial home phase, there will be two rounds with the talking object, then open conversation, and then, after my signal, a closing home round with the talking object.
 - o **Pens and cards:** these are available on the table to help you stay focused and more capable of listening and being present to the speaker: if a thought comes to mind, jot it down so you won't be preoccupied trying to hold on to your thought.
 - o **Raising of hands to signal to wind down** the conversation and get ready for another phase (demonstrate: you raise your hand and ask everyone to follow suit, falling quiet at the same moment)
 - o **Time keeping:** ask everybody to pitch in to help keep the time and flow moving.

Designated circle hosts: ask one person at each table to serve as the designated host and another as time keeper) (elicit volunteers at all tables). We call you a host not a facilitator – as you are a full participant as well as a person aiming to insure everyone is comfortable, gets to speak, and the agreements are followed. You don't need special skills to 'facilitate', just a welcoming presence and attention to how the group is doing. Indeed, everyone in the circle is welcomed and responsible to help with this as 'co-hosts' and 'co-timekeepers'

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- Additional Café “etiquette”: Ask everyone to
 - Encourage everyone’s contribution
 - Link and connect ideas, whenever possible
 - Note down insights, or deeper questions

CONVERSATION ROUNDS

Home Rounds Phase 1: (40 minutes total)

Part A: (30 minutes)

- Introduce the LTA question(s) (and have it on an overhead or flip chart as well as on a card they now turn up at each table) Let people know if you want them to consider a different question for the second round or suggest people begin to deepen the conversation – either continue with their own thoughts or begin to weave what they’ve heard and the themes that are arising. Begin the LTA/Conversation Cafe process: Reiterate that there will be two rounds with the talking object and then a period of open dialogue- Point out that responses in the first round should be brief – a minute or two each—and including self-introduction. The second round is a deepening but still needs to be kept brief, perhaps 2-3 minutes. After the second round, they may place the talking object in the center of the circle/table -- available if anyone feels the need in order to get a turn or to slow the conversation down – otherwise not in use till the final closing round: Point out that you will give them a one minute warning before ending the open dialogue. The designated host can begin each round. Explain that you will signal when it is time to end the open dialogue by using the raised hand method. .

Part B: (10 minutes)

- After 30 minutes of Part A the Overall Café host gives a heads up that this portion will end in a minute... and then after a minute raises a hand to signal group to bring this phase to a close. Invite everyone to be silent for a moment to quiet their minds and collect their thoughts around their deepest intention and highest purpose for the conversation

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- Introduce the final round with a focus on these reflection questions (posted on the wall):
 - § What is the key thing that touched, surprised, inspired, or challenged me?
 - § As a result of this conversation, what question am I carrying with me that I'd like to explore?
- Host asks members to take 1 minute of silent reflection to make notes on these two questions on their own cards. These are the 'seeds' they will take in a traveling round to other groups.

Host lets group know that in 10 minutes s/he'll be signaling them again—but this time to travel as a listener and “ambassador” from their table to others. - Participants do this last round (with talking object) of sharing whatever of their notes they'd like with their tablemates. They may want to draw and/or write key ideas on the table cloths if they are at tables --if not, note key insights on their cards.

§ Explore and enjoy your learning together!

- Take few minutes after each person shares to reflect: what has come up ‘in the middle:’ focus a shared sense of this and note it down by drawing or writing key words to reflect the essence of what arose for the visitors to see.

Traveling Round Phase 2: (25 minutes including moving tables)

- Host raises hand to signal the end of the closing home group round.

Explain the process: Ask one person to remain at each table or circle as the host of that circle and explain how the other people will travel as ambassadors, each to a different new group, where they will stay for 20 minutes. Remind people to take their note cards with them.

- Now announce, “Ambassadors please travel to another table somewhere in your “neighborhood.” Seek a table with completely new people!

- Instructions for the newly formed circles:

§ There will be one round with the talking object and then open dialogue.

§ Using the talking object, beginning with each table host, share briefly (not more than 2-3 minutes) what s/he or others in their original group appreciated most about their Home Round conversation—

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what was most challenging and what deeper questions emerged by the end of their conversation.

§ Complete the round with the new members each briefly linking and connecting (not more than 2 minutes each) their own appreciations, challenges, learnings and questions to what's been said in whatever ways are appropriate.

§ Group spends remainder of the time in open dialogue, exploring whatever question(s) are on the table that have real life and energy for them together.

§ Encourage (again) group members to a) write or draw on the paper tablecloths [or large notepads if there are no tablecloths] and to b) write on their cards thoughts they'd like to take back as insights to their home group. Have fun!

Return to Home Group-- Round Phase 3: (20 minutes including returning to home table/group)

- *Overall Café Host* raises hand, signaling end of the round.
- Explain they will soon return to their home circles and have one round with the talking object
- *Overall Host* says, *From this conversation, what learning, insight or discovery about others or about our democracy would you like to take back to your home group that could help us learn even more together?* Give the group a minute or two of silence for members to take a couple of notes regarding this question. You may refer again to posted the reflection questions:
 - § What is the key thing that touched, surprised, challenged or inspired me?
 - § As a result of this conversation, what question am I carrying with me that I'd like to explore?
- People return to home group.
- Members do a round with the talking object and then have open conversation about what learnings, insights, or discoveries struck them as important from their travels -- either learnings about themselves or about our democracy or whatever else struck them as important.
- Overall Café host ends the round raising hand to signal groups to wind down
- Prior to beginning whole group conversation—Café host again encourages two minutes of reflection for each person to write on a separate card (that's already at each table or on each chair as people return or that was given out at the beginning) their response to the reflection questions:



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- § What is the key thing that touched, surprised, challenged or inspired me today?
- § As a result of this conversation what question am I carrying with me that I'd like to explore with others as these LTA conversations People can continue to draw or write on the tablecloths for co-creative inspiration
- § Each person will want to write their question or inspiration to share on a note card.

Final Phase: Whole Group Conversation—Town Meeting Style (15-20 minutes)

- Overall Café host welcomes everyone back to the whole group and reminds them that the whole LTA process is about discovering the most powerful questions we can be asking ourselves and each other as we renew the spirit of our democracy.
- Let people know they will be welcomed to turn in their cards so that LTA can see nationally what questions people are wanting to explore more deeply—whatever their political persuasion—it's our questions that connect us...not only our answers! And they will receive an email inviting them to complete a questionnaire about their experience.
- Have people listen deeply to each other—and then have as many as possible in the time we have please simply stand and read their question twice (or they can just read it once, but slowly) so that others can really take it in. (we've found this amazingly powerful). If someone has a question connected to yours, in another part of the room, then you know it's time for you to stand and ask yours. Just listen and you'll recognize the right time to share your question.
- Optional: Café host or helper records the essence of what people share – graphically or in words – on flipchart, butcher paper, overhead or computer projector to provide the group a shared expression of their questions.

Next Steps (5 minutes)

- Collect the question cards (you could send baskets around or gather at the door). Let them know you will use the question cards to sense themes, patterns, and discover the most powerful and important questions we need to be asking ourselves as a nation, no matter what our political persuasion. You will include these in your report, which will be integrated into the conversations posted on the web*.



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- If enthusiasm is high, consider meeting again. Ask, *Who wasn't here? What new points of view would we like to invite to our next Let's Talk America conversation?* Ask everyone to bring at least one person they suspect is different from them. Keep expanding. You can keep this process going as long as you like: have an LTA conversation, ask at the end: *Who isn't here?* Bring new people and perspectives into the circle and have an LTA conversation. How many new voices can you bring in? How will the *Agreements* serve you as more and more diverse points of view come to the table?
- Thank people and encourage them to consider hosting their own event. Encourage them to go the Lets Talk America website* where they will find materials and support to become a host—there are free telephone trainings and a host manual for LTA/Conversation Café as well as other resources listed on the web. (Check the website ahead of time so you can announce the next date to everyone at the meeting: post the details on the wall!)
- Remind people they can check back on the LTA website* periodically to find out when and where future conversations are being held. Ask them to spread the word to their networks all around the country.
- Encourage them to visit LTA website* to give their own feedback on this gathering. Make sure you everyone is signed up on the website or get their e-mail address so each will receive an email with a link to the questionnaire to complete, including an ID no. for this session.
- Register to Vote!! -- and encourage others to do so online on the LTA website*
- Consider attending the Convention in Springfield, IL, August 19-22, 2004; and participating in the National Day of Deliberation on September 11 – details are all on the web. (*Note: LTA website no longer available.)

After the Event... for the Overall Host:

- Celebrate! Congratulations on your learning journey of exploration.
- PLEASE be sure to fill out the questionnaire on the LTA website (*Note: Site no longer available.*)
- Please send an email to all participants who signed up –adding in walk-ins from the day of the event who may not have signed up on the website-- with the request, meeting ID no. and link to fill out the web based questionnaire. (*Note: LTA website no longer available.*)