KNOWLEDGE CAFÉ / ROUND TABLE SESSIONS
Informal knowledge sharing around the table

What it is
- An activity designed to spread ideas and expand insights through sharing knowledge and experience.
- Open and creative dialogue is encouraged through an informal café-type environment. Groups rotate from one table/topic to the other, while a host at each table facilitates discussions.
- Each round of table changes allows participants to create a web of collective knowledge around the chosen subject matter.
- The method assumes that people themselves are sources of wisdom, and that creating a constructive context around a table can bring valuable ideas and lessons to the surface.

When to use it
- To share tacit knowledge among a group of at least 12 participants
- To discover fresher insights than through traditional panel presentations, due to its participatory nature
- To engage in collaborative problem-solving that cuts across standard constraints
- To generate meaningful interaction by limiting hierarchical distinctions.

How it is applied
1. Identify the purpose, establish the parameters and prepare the room before the session, so that the Knowledge Café will foster creative discourse while remaining focused on the subject. Cover the tables with flip-chart paper or brown paper.

2. Design questions that are thought-provoking. A good question may have many answers and will allow the participants to examine the issue in all its complexity. See “How to adapt it” below for ideas on dealing with the questions.

3. The ideal number of participants per table is four to six. More tend to limit the opportunities to contribute, and fewer tend to reduce the amount of experience shared.

4. Each table should nominate a host, who will stay at the table throughout the exercise to provide an overview for the next group and steer them towards complementary thought processes in order to avoid repetition.

5. Encourage participants to take notes, doodle or create diagrams directly on the table.

6. Ask the participants to focus on key points and to contribute their own thoughts and ideas. They should listen actively for interesting connections, patterns or additional questions.

7. Each round of conversation should last 15 to 30 minutes. As “ambassadors of meaning”, all the participants (except for the host) then move to the next table. It is not necessary for all participants to spend time at each table, because after a few rounds (typically two or three, depending on the time allocated) the session closes with a debriefing.

8. The host of each table presents a synthesis and key reflection points to the entire group of participants either from the table itself, or in a plenary: the choice depends on the room set-up and size.

9. Allow time for participants to add interesting points or lessons learned after the debriefing by table hosts.

10. Capture key learning points on a flip-chart, a supporting note and/or an online record for future reference.
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What to consider
- Be sure to provide a minimum of 60 minutes for the Knowledge Café to ensure that the questions are thoroughly examined, with a maximum of three hours to avoid boredom and repetition.
- Further questions that deepen the analysis of the subject can be posed to the tables during the last round of conversation. Make sure that the questions are complementary and relevant.

How to adapt it
- How the questions are assigned to tables depends on the objectives of the exercise. Asking each table to deal with different aspects of a problem or giving each table different case studies to discuss are just two approaches.
- The exercise can be re-named "strategy café", "discovery café", "world café" or any name that is relevant and will connect participants. A more formal name could be "rotating round table sessions".
- If there is diversity in language, opinion, interest, geographic or demographic situations, or other factors that may hinder the exchange process, the tables can be arranged to be homogeneous.

Timing (Approximately 1 hour 30 minutes)
- Introduction to method and objectives (15 minutes)
- Round 1 of discussion (20 minutes)
- Round 2 of discussion (20 minutes)
- Round 3 of discussion (20 minutes)
- Collective debriefing (15 minutes).

What you will need
- Large pieces of blank brown paper to cover the tables
- Markers for each table
- Visual instructions of the method (on PowerPoint or printed out)
- Music or a bell to indicate when to rotate tables.

Where to learn more
- More information about the design of a World Café: http://www.theworldcafe.com/principles.htm
- World Café images and examples from the World Bank: http://www.theworldcafe.com/ibank.html
- Video about the World Café from its creators: http://tinyurl.com/26jglvm

"The world café allowed us to go to the heart of the subject within a limited amount of time. Another good feature was that the moderator briefed the subsequent group so that there would be no repetition. This allowed us to provide new ideas and insights on the subject, building on the previous ones."

(Darka Topali, OHCHR)