

The Knowledge Café Concept

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One of best ways to make sense of an issue or challenge and ultimately make better decisions is to bring a diversity of people together for a conversation in a Knowledge Café.

The world is changing rapidly, today managers often know less about an issue than their staff. They are too far away from the coal face and the world is changing too rapidly for them to keep up.

The best way to make sense of an issue or challenge and ultimately make better decisions is to bring a diversity of people together in open conversation, in dialogue.

One of the best conversational methods for addressing complex issues and challenges is the Knowledge Café.

Knowledge Cafés are best convened where there are many stakeholders and opinions and there are no right or wrong answers. Examples include:

- To achieve a breakthrough in a tough dilemma or problem
- To deal with the interaction between people or departments, focusing on attitude or behavior
- To explore or brainstorm issues, challenges, opportunities, possibilities or risks

The Café can also be used to surface a group's collective knowledge; to learn from each other; share ideas and insights and gain a deeper understanding of a topic and the issues involved,

In addition, it helps connect people, improves inter-personal relationships, breaks down organisational silos, and improves trust and engagement.

One central tenet of the Café is that anything which gets in the way of the free flow the conversation is considered a bad thing.

At its best, a Knowledge Café adheres to a number of conversational principles that help create a relaxed, informal environment conducive to open dialogue and to learning.

- Driven by a powerful question
- Dialogue not debate
- Preserve conversational flow
- Everyone is equal
- Eliminate fear
- No preconceived outcomes
- No coercion

Now watch this video for a few minutes:

Or this one:

What strikes you?

Yes, it's the energy and engagement in the room.

And now see this short talk of mine from 2007 where I explain some of the background to the Café process:

And here where I describe the process in a little more detail

“It sounds such a simple idea, but until you have experienced a knowledge cafe you won't understand just how powerful they can be in connecting people, generating new ideas and tackling issues.

David in particular brings a special kind of energy to the room that really helps, but when you stop and think about it, we are given very little time in our working lives to engage honestly and authentically with one another in that uniquely human activity, that fundamental building block of trust and understanding; conversation.”

James Brown
Head of Performance and Knowledge Management
Surrey County Council

