


How to Facilitate a Creative Conversation

The Coffeehouse Challenge is a great opportunity to do things differently; to transform an ordinary meeting into a place of exploration, support, new ideas, encouragement, and enjoyment. Facilitating a Coffeehouse Challenge conversation shouldn't be a time-consuming job, but it is a very important one. As a facilitator, you can help create a spirit of respect, curiosity and welcome, which will in turn allow participants the freedom and spontaneity to come up with new insights and ingenious solutions. The only pre-requisites for a creative conversation are respect for others, an open mind, warmth and good humor, and a focus on practical action for change. However, we've also put together some practical suggestions to keep things on track throughout, including Ben Franklin's own secrets to successful coffeehouse conversations!

At the start of the Coffeehouse Challenge: practicalities


1. First of all, it is important that you are at the coffeehouse at the appointed time – people will be counting on you to be there. If you can't make it, please let the Starbucks Store Manager know, and then try to find a replacement facilitator.
2. Display the Coffeehouse Challenge **Welcome** sign on your table, to make sure people who don't necessarily know you or each other can find and join in the Coffeehouse Challenge without any difficulty.
3. Introduce yourself; welcome people and thank them in advance for their input; and set an end time for the meeting.
4. Explain what a Coffeehouse Challenge is: a chance to come together and make a difference in your community. Remind the group that you want to discuss your shared concerns in order to come up with creative and practical solutions to them. Make sure people are aware that proposals can be submitted to win \$3000.
5. Consider dividing the time you have available into two sections, in order to first outline your shared concern, and then suggest possible solutions to it.
6. Break the ice: invite everyone to introduce themselves. You could suggest everyone include an extra detail, such as something about themselves that is not immediately apparent, or the role that coffee usually plays in their lives.
7. Starbucks will host a brief coffee-tasting, and will supply all Coffeehouse Challenge participants with complimentary tea and coffee at this first meeting.



Hello, I'm ...

During the Coffeehouse Challenge conversation: tips and techniques

Some hints from Ben Franklin himself ...



Offer your thoughts as opinions rather than facts.

– and ask for the group's feedback. Ben Franklin made a habit of, “never using ... the words certainly, undoubtedly, or any others that give the air of positiveness to an opinion; but rather ..., I conceive or apprehend a thing to be so and so; it appears to me, or I should think it so or so, for such and such reasons; or I imagine it to be so; or it is so, if I am not mistaken.” As he noted, positive statements “tend to create opposition,” whereas his tentative suggestions were much more easily digested by the group. In addition, talking in terms of opinions rather than certainties made it easier for everyone to shift position – including him: “The modest way in which I propos'd my opinions procur'd them a readier reception and less contradiction; I had less mortification when I was found to be in the wrong, and I more easily prevail'd with others to give up their mistakes and join with me when I happened to be in the right.”



Respect the views of others.

When Franklin disagreed with someone, he tried to be polite and diplomatic in his response: “When another asserted something that I thought an error, I deny'd myself the pleasure of contradicting him abruptly, and of showing immediately some

absurdity in his proposition; and in answering I began by observing that in certain cases or circumstances his opinion would be right, but in the present case there appear'd or seem'd to me difference, etc.”

Spend more time listening than talking.

Be curious about the opinions and experiences of others, and ask questions to draw them out. Franklin described himself as “a bad speaker, never eloquent, subject to much hesitation in my choice of words, hardly correct in language” – but he made this weakness into a strength, by listening carefully, and learning from others.

Again and again, Franklin found that people were much more willing to help him with a project if he played down his own role in coming up with the idea: “I ... put myself as much as I could out of sight, and stated it as a scheme of a number of friends (...) The present little sacrifice of your vanity will afterwards be amply repaid.”

Put aside your ego.

Offer specifics rather than generalizations.

Franklin brought people of all political and religious convictions together on specific issues, by keeping the focus at the practical level. For example, it is a lot easier to get a group to do something to clean up a river or pond than to reach agreement on the abstract concept of environmental regulation!

Pair-work

Ask participants to work in pairs and note down their initial thoughts about a topic (or topics) on index cards or Post-It notes. These can then be collected, grouped, and used as a way of setting the agenda, or establishing priorities. (They also provide a useful record of ideas.)

Brainstorming

Put forward the problem you have identified, and then ask people to try and come up with approaches or solutions to it. You should explain the rules of brainstorming (no judging of ideas or analysis of them – at least not immediately) and encourage people not to be afraid of putting forward unconventional approaches. Ask someone to note everyone’s ideas down on a sheet of paper, or give people Post-It notes and ask them to write one idea down per note and then read it to the group. Once all the ideas/Post-It notes are gathered, you can arrange them into common themes.

Fishbowl Discussion

With groups of 8 or more you can temporarily split participants into two discussion groups - an 'inner' and 'outer' circle. Give the inner group a topic to explore and some time to discuss it (say 15 minutes). The outer group remains silent, but performs one or two of a variety of activities. They can listen to the discussion and, for example: note down useful ideas; prepare their own responses; think of questions that need to be asked, or of perspectives that remain ignored.

If the conversation falters...:

Some useful phrases:

Does anyone have any ideas for what we can collectively do to fix this?

I would be interested to hear your thoughts on this.

What I meant to say was actually ...

Is there another way you can explain that?

I think what you're saying is this ... Is that right?

If we did ..., what would happen next?

I'd like to put another point of view/idea out there for us to think about...

Try a Time Out:

Take a 1-2 minute pause. In that time ask each person to reflect on the following questions:

- a) How am I feeling at this moment?
- b) Is there anything that I wish I had said or done, but didn't? If so, why?
- c) What would I like more of...and less of from the others in the room?

At the end of the pause, people are asked to say how they responded to questions b. & c. Resume the discussion once everyone has been heard.

The Speaking Stone (or other object):

If conversation is getting too heated, and people are interrupting each other, you may find it useful to implement the “speaking stone” rule: only the person holding this particular object (which can be anything) is allowed to speak.

At the end of the Coffeehouse Challenge: summing up and moving forward

Five or ten minutes before the Coffeehouse Challenge conversation is scheduled to end, remind people that time is nearly up. Stop the conversation, and ask something like, “What is the most useful or important thing that you think came out of this conversation?” Allow each person to make a last comment or suggestion.

Your Coffeehouse Challenge group may well want to meet again to take elements from the discussion forward and begin work on a project proposal. Don't feel you need to be the person who organizes this. Set a provisional time and date, and ask someone to volunteer to be in touch and confirm these with the group. Make sure you gather the contact details of everyone who wants to continue to be involved.

Close by thanking each other, and the Starbucks store team for hosting you.

