

Cake, Climate Change and a nice cup of tea¹

Penny Walker has discovered a very different way of engaging people on the subject of climate change.

On a windy but warm February day earlier this year, I braved the traffic to cycle to a room above a bank in central London, where a very special café had been set up for one afternoon only. A cup of tea and a Danish pastry later I was happily ensconced, ready to spend an afternoon in the company of management and learning Guru Peter Senge, and an assortment of around thirty-five civil servants, campaigners, consultants and researchers. The event which was organised by the Climate Outreach Information Network (COIN) and The Environment Council brought us together so that we could talk about climate change using an innovative approach to meetings which is gathering momentum across the globe - the World Café.

You'd expect a meeting about climate change to cover technologies, policy interventions, and a generous helping of 'what you can do' advice. But when cutting-edge US management guru and systems thinker Peter Senge was in London this Spring, he wanted us to dig a little deeper.

On the faculty at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Senge has been named by *The Journal of Business Strategy* as one of the 24 people who had the greatest influence on business strategy over the last 100 years. Peter's book "The Fifth Discipline" introduced managers and organisational leaders across the world to the idea of the learning organisation - the organisation that knows how to tap into people's commitment and capacity to learn from the most senior leaders to the most junior new starter. Fortune Magazine said of it "Forget your old, tired ideas about leadership. The most successful corporation of the 1990s will be something called a learning organisation." The Fifth Discipline also brought systems thinking - impossibly complex, unruly and frightening though it seemed - to the top table of management. Senge's latest book explores 'presence', the act or state of being attentive and open, of listening to or observing excellently - including observing or noticing your own assumptions, mental models and thought processes.

But isn't climate change about science, technological innovation, policy and politicians, hard choices and fights between vested interests? How can soft, unfocussed and very personal acts like listening, thinking and learning help?

Senge is passionate about the part that can be played by dialogue and networking in understanding emerging realities and our responses to them. And for him, this applies in spades to the phenomenon of climate change.

He puts it like this.

"I think it's very important for people working on climate change and issues of this level of complexity to build larger networks of individuals and organizations who can think and work effectively together.

"First, the issues *are* complex, and no one has a complete picture or a fully adequate strategy for addressing the issues. Second, it's important to hold multiple points of view about such problems, to protect all of us from insularity and overly simplistic ideas that we have the one key to solving the problem. Third, coordination or coherence amongst multiple networks will prove crucial over the long haul. Because problems like climate change need to be addressed with so many different points of view and action focuses, there's always a significant danger of inadvertent competition or actions in one camp that in effect undermine actions in another. It is not that everyone must agree. But to the extent people

¹ This is a longer version of an article which first appeared in 'the environmentalist' magazine, April 2007 issue 46, www.iema.net

are thinking about the problems in similar ways, and to the extent they are respectful and supportive of one another's efforts, the possibility for synergy are much greater. Lastly, the range of actors who must be mobilized to deal with climate change is immense, far beyond the number that are engaged today. By fostering a sense of commonality and cooperation you create more "space" that can draw in more different people."

Climate change and dialogue

Why does Senge think a dialogue-based approach is needed for topics like climate change?

"We've been working with dialogue and various approaches to organizing meetings that promote dialogue for over fifteen years. At one level, I believe all of these approaches are essential because learning how to "think together" is more important than any particular initiative or objective. The problems we have in today's world, of which climate change is hardly the only exemplar but in many ways the most visible and dramatic, arise from "cultural imbalances".

"What I mean by this, are webs of interdependence that we have woven around the world, largely to the lifestyles of "the rich", the half a billion or so of people around the world who sit at the top of the pyramid in terms of wealth and disposable income. The food we eat, the products we buy, and the energy we use have all evolved global systems that are profoundly out of balance with the larger requirements of nature and social harmony. For example, the average pound of food travels 2000 miles from where it is produced to where it is purchased by an American consumer. The amount of waste generated per person to support a typical American's lifestyle is over a ton (2000 pounds or about 1000 kilograms) *per day*. Almost all of this material extracted from the earth's surface ends up as waste. Obviously the energy systems we have today, both in terms of material waste and gaseous by-products like CO2 are totally inconsistent with the way all other living systems on earth achieve and meet their energy requirements. These imbalances have grown and grown throughout the industrial era, and the bubble is starting to burst.

"Because the roots of these problems are so deep, mere technical or technological solutions will never suffice. We could be driving 200 mile per gallon cars today had there been the combination of consumer demand and willingness to invest on the part of automobile companies over the last two decades. It is not a technological limitation, it's a limitation of will, understanding, and imagination. We are locked in a box of mental models that have developed over the last two hundred years, and we have to find our way out of this box.

"There are many ways to think about dialogue, but in many ways the most important is how we think *more deeply* together. How we think and reflect in ways that draw out our underlying deepest and unquestioned assumptions. How we learn to see our own "blind spots" from being in conversation with different people who see the world differently. We all have blind spots, but it is very difficult to see them when we are only in communication with people like ourselves or we avoid all reflection altogether. So, I see dialogue as both a way of building networks that support practical action and simultaneously creating "a container" for deep and ongoing reflection. The short answer to what will be needed to avoid climate disaster is, "we don't know." I see no substitute for continuing to inquire together.

Liz Goold, a facilitator working with COIN and one of the organisers of this world café event, echoes this. "Climate change presents an extraordinary, complex challenge and it demands ways of thinking and working that are commensurate with the problem. Offering spaces and processes, like this event, for people from different sectors and interest groups to cross traditional boundaries and listen and think *together* around the issues and questions that matter to them most about climate change is one small taste of that."

Liz's years of experience as a consultant and facilitator in international development have helped to shape her views about approaches to change and the assumptions that inform these- and she sees these as relevant to the climate change debate. "I hear people making a lot of assumptions about how change happens in relation to attitudes and behaviour around climate change. People say things like "if only we could make people change..." and ask "how can we get them to change?". Or 'why don't they get it?' The use of language here conveys a certain mechanical view of change where people, organisations and society can be broken down into component parts and 'fixed'. It also fits a more hierarchical view of change which assumes the bigger , more daunting the change, the more top-down it has to be."

"My work with groups and organisations is informed more by an alternative view of change which draws from the new sciences and complexity theory. This stresses the importance of relationships and processes and the inter-connectedness and inter-dependence of things - rather than breaking them down to component parts. It also sees change as non-linear and unpredictable, where you cannot predict a response or whether small changes may lead to big changes or vice-versa. It would emphasise the importance of inquiring into 'resistance' or denial rather than trying to overcome it. Rather than 'rolling out a programme of 'awareness-raising or local action on climate change ' for example, this approach would seek to nurture what works, going where there is energy, experimenting and seeing which fires light and supporting these.

"In a way, this event we organised with Peter Senge, was a small example of that - it started organically through existing relationships and took on an energy which was nurtured and supported by the individuals and organisations involved - and in turn was matched by the energy and common commitment of those who responded to the invitation. The processes we used in the workshop encouraged connections and opportunities to inquire and think together across boundaries, out of which new insights and possible actions may emerge, which could not be planned for.

Simple questions, uneasy answers

The world café event was structured around simple open questions, which we all provided our personal answers to. Senge's questions were designed to allow a very wide range of answers. He said "what question lies at the heart of your work this area?". He stressed that it should indeed be an authentic question, not an issue or a problem to solve. And it should definitely not be a question that we already know the answer to - a statement disguised as a question, like "didn't we already try that?".

Speaking openly about questions that we do not already know that answer to is something that we find troubling, and do not often do. Much more common is the 'quiz' question, where you ask a question primarily to demonstrate your own knowledge. (A close friend is a genius at this, and it's usually about obscure punk records or sporting achievements, where I don't stand a chance of collecting points.) A related use, also very common, is the rhetorical question - setting up a lengthy explanation which the questioner has already prepared. It's much less common for us - at least as adults - to ask questions because we genuinely want to gain new information or insights. Unlike six-year-olds, we're afraid of showing that we don't already know the answer. We may even be afraid that there isn't an answer, especially if we feel we don't even have a methodological approach to finding the answer. Or we may secretly assume that the answer is so complicated or troubling, and implies so much hard work, that we dare not ask the question. Yet it is these questions - unasked and yet present in our minds - which are on the cutting edge and have the potential to lead to breakthroughs.

This is a theme explored in Senge's co-authored book "Presence", where he says "most change initiatives that end up going nowhere don't fail because they lack grand visions and noble intentions. They fail because people can't see the reality they face."

The world café approach, and other dialogue techniques, aim to provide an opportunity - a 'safe space' - for people to open themselves up to hearing other people's unasked and unanswered questions, and to give voice to their own. Hearing other people's questions can be a relief and a liberation - especially when, as is so often the case, the questions are very similar. When many people recognise what it is that is causing them to be 'stuck', they can find the courage to engage in dialogue with each other which addresses that emerging reality, rather than its superficial manifestations.

For example, one question which arose was "how is it that the trends are still in the wrong direction, when so many individuals and organisations say that they want to do something about carbon emissions?" This is a deeply troubling question, because it carries within it the possibility that we may never - whatever we say about our intentions - be able to reverse the trends. A frightening prospect indeed.

When people are truly open to that emerging reality, rather than staying with what they think they already know, then they can begin to decide how to respond to and work with it.

Scary story

For me, in this workshop, the 'question-at-the-heart-of-my-work' turned out to be around my own fear about climate change. To what extent should I share this emotion with people who I work with? There was a range of views about whether - as people who are trying to create change in society - we should 'tell the truth' about our own fears about climate change (if we are afraid). And if we choose not to disclose this to the people who we are working with, what should we do with these emotions? What might happen if we do - deliberately or accidentally - let it out?

I was interested to see that I was not alone in grappling with this - especially given the advice to keep communications upbeat and empowering, which I have described and shared in previous articles².

So how did we get to the point of sharing these very personal things with each other, after only an hour or so of conversation in small groups? The World Café technique is carefully designed to allow really comfortable conversations, the kind that might take place around the kitchen table or at a local café.

Senge says that the physical space is crucial. "To integrate dialogue into work such as in the diverse networks dealing with climate change you need first the space, a place where people can gather to reflect and talk with one another seriously. There is nothing special about space, and there's everything special. There should be natural light. There should be a sense of connection to the larger world. In some sense it can be any sort of room, but the simpler the better and the more people feel relaxed and at home the better."

He likes the simplicity of the world café technique. "You need a simple approach or methodology. We use the "World Cafe" method in settings literally around the world, because it seems to travel well and immediately connect with deep cultural norms of relaxed conversation. I have seen the World Cafe method used with groups from twenty five to fifteen hundred. It's extremely flexible in its ability to scale up or down and inevitably creates the sense of truly being in a conversation together. There are many other methods for dialogue, and no one solves all the problems, but there does need to be a methodology that encourages slowing down, reflection, and especially challenging one's own thinking. "

² E.g. Nasty or nice? The Environmentalist issue 38, Behave! The Environmentalist issue 44.

The Principles of the World Café

- Clarify the context - be clear about the purpose of the event and the boundaries of the discussion.
- Create hospitable space - the room should be inviting and feel comfortable. Consider small tables with colourful cloths, flowers and even tea lights. Paper table cloths or flip chart pages can be laid over the cloths, to record the conversation. Music, fruit or cake, and of course some tea or coffee.
- Explore questions that matter - and pay attention to coming up with questions which enable deeper conversations. Consider whether you want a series of questions with a logical progression, or one question which people explore for a longer time. Questions should be open ended - not closed questions which imply yes / no answers. They can promote exploration and enquiry, rather than immediate action or problem solving.
- Connect diverse perspectives - invite a wide range of people to the conversation - from different organisations and teams, of different ages and backgrounds, and with different views. Between each round of conversation, people move between tables, linking up with a new group. People carry key ideas and themes to their new tables, enabling a very rich cross-fertilisation of perspectives and enabling surprising and new insights.
- Encourage each person's contribution - by listening without interruption, and by sticking to a simple rule of giving everyone, in turn, the opportunity to 'check in' at the start of the conversation.
- Listen together for patterns, insights and deeper questions - by listening really well, and paying attention to the patterns and themes which are emerging, people begin to feel a connection to the wider system. After some rounds of café table conversation, it is useful to have a whole group conversation to see the bigger connections.

Practicalities

- People sit in small groups of four or five, at café style tables or in small circles.
- Plan for three rounds of conversation of 20 - 30 minutes each.
- Clarify and confirm the questions.
- At each table, one person is the 'host'. They can write, doodle or draw key ideas on paper table cloths, with coloured pens.
- They introduce the next people to the ideas from the previous conversation.
- When people move tables, they 'scatter', each joining a different new conversation.

Source: Café to Go!, World Café Community www.theworldcafe.com

Senge recommends some useful books for people who would like to learn more about dialogue in general and the world café in particular.

"As for resources, a recently published book on the World Cafe by Juanita Brown and David Isaacs³, gives an excellent start. For a method like the World Cafe there are logistics, such as how big the tables are and the number of people in a "cafe circle", and how frequently they move from one group to another. But there is also encouragement to reflect and "suspend" one's own assumptions - that is to say to treat

³ Brown, J., and Isaacs, D., "The World Cafe: Shaping Our Futures Through Conversations That Matter", Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2005

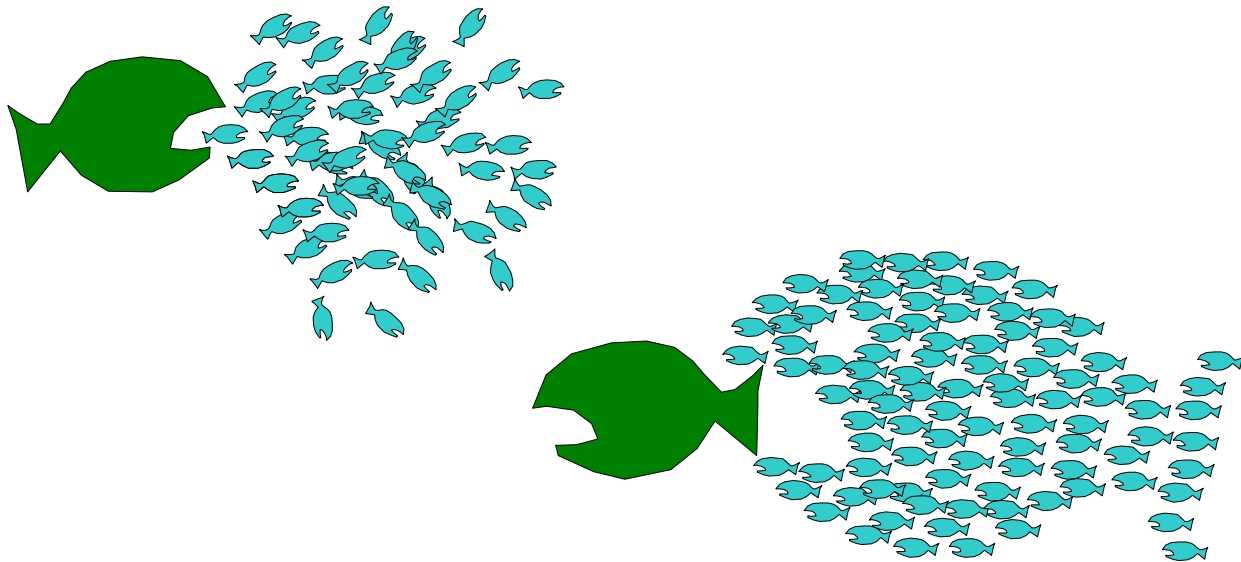
one's views not as rigid or "true", but as conclusions one has derived from your own life experience. None are perfect and all have something to contribute. But it is truly the spirit of each of us challenging our own thinking that matters. There are many other resources on dialogue, including William Isaacs original book on the subject, "Dialogue: And the Art of Thinking Together"⁴, as well as material on this in the Fifth Discipline⁵.

"Above all, there is the intent. The conveners of a dialogue create a space where reflection and inquiry can occur if that is truly their intent. In my experience, the quality of this space, or what we sometimes call the "container" is of vital importance and there is no substitute for the spirit and intention of the conveners in this."

Personal take-aways

Towards the end of the World Café, we shared some of the personal insights that had arisen or resurfaced.

Steve Hill, of The Environment Council, helped to organise the event and took part in the conversations. He said "What was clear for me was that although the majority of the public is not engaged with climate change, there are an awful lot of organisations which are. And yet these organisation are not well linked - many of them don't know that the others exist or that they are active on this issue. This came through strongly, and I saw it as that image of all the little fish swimming away from a big fish - then they get in formation as one giant fish, and swim towards the big fish. I am wondering how we can get in formation."



Goold says "I realised that I need to integrate more of my experience and understanding of how change happens, into my work on climate change. I feel more confident to engage with those who may know a lot about the subject matter but may need support in experimenting with alternative processes and methods that can support the conditions for meaningful engagement and change to take place."

Senge was pleased with the quality of discussion. "For me personally, the meeting was an excellent opportunity to get a feeling for where different people working on different facets of the climate change

⁴ Isaacs, W., "Dialogue: And the Art of Thinking Together", Doubleday 1999

⁵ Senge, P., "The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization", Doubleday, 2006

challenge are at. I'm specifically interested in the extent to which there is a shared sense of the scale and speed of changes needed in order to stabilize carbon in the atmosphere, as well as the different types of changes this implies. While the meeting was short, and I would like to have more time to talk with some of the people who were there, it was also very helpful to see the willingness of people to engage in this sort of dialogue."

What next?

The Environment Council and COIN are looking at further collaborations in using this methodology to open up dialogue around climate change. Senge would be 'more than happy' to be involved, and for the ripples to spread further through including other people. He said "this meeting was an initial experiment. I would be more than happy to have further meetings of this sort, but it will depend upon organizers in the UK. The people who were involved in organizing this meeting from The Environment Council and the Climate Outreach Information Network were the keys to making it happen. For example, I believe some of the people involved in COIN might be interested in doing more meetings of this sort, as might The Environment Council, but it will really depend upon them to think through what's going to be most useful.

"As far as opening the meetings further, I think that is quite possible. The type of process we use, the World Cafe, can be done for groups of up to even 1,000 people. I have seen many large meetings organized in this format, so I have no qualms about having groups quite a bit larger. But, this depends upon the aims and purpose of the organizing group.

"Having said that, I think there is no greater need than to build large and very diverse networks of people who can feel a sense of commonality and mutual support in tackling the many different aspects of this work, from policy change, to shifts in public understanding, to specific initiatives from businesses and NGOs, to education in our schools. All of the above are important and people working on all of these sorts of issues could benefit from periodic large gatherings to foster alignment."

So watch this space!

www.theworldcafe.com

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Peter Senge and the Society for Organisational Learning www.solonline.org

The Environment Council www.the-environment-council.org.uk

Climate Outreach Information Network www.coinet.org.uk

"Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future" by Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski and Flowers
www.presence.net

"The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organisation", Senge, Random House
www.fieldbook.com