

# Conversational Leadership: Thinking Together for a Change

Thomas J. Hurley and Juanita Brown

**THOMAS J. HURLEY** serves as a senior advisor and executive coach for leaders seeking innovative approaches to strategy development and large-scale systems change. He was co-founder of the [Chaordic Commons](#), a nonprofit consulting organization in which he partnered with VISA founder Dee Hock, and served for 17 years with the Institute of Noetic Sciences, a leading global organization on expanded human capacities and positive futures. He is currently guiding the global evolution of the World Café.

**JUANITA BROWN**, PhD, is the co-originator of the World Café. She collaborates as a thinking partner and design advisor with senior leaders across sectors to create innovative forums for strategic dialogue and multi-generational collaboration on critical business and societal issues. Her award-winning book, *The World Café: Shaping Our Futures Through Conversations that Matter*, co-authored with David Isaacs and the World Café Community, has been translated into ten languages.

*“Conversations are the way workers discover what they know, share it with their colleagues, and in the process create new knowledge for the organization. In the new economy, conversations are the most important form of work ... so much so that the conversation is the organization.”*

—ALAN WEBBER,  
“WHAT’S SO NEW ABOUT THE NEW ECONOMY”  
HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW

AFTER EXPERIENCING HIS FIRST WORLD CAFÉ DIALOGUE at a program on self-organizing systems, Bob Veazie had an uncomfortable epiphany. At the time, he was a senior engineer and manufacturing manager at a Hewlett Packard plant in Oregon. In that World Café,

Bob experienced how the collective intelligence of a group can become visible as people move from one table to another over several rounds of conversation, cross-pollinating ideas, making unexpected connections, developing new knowledge, and creating action opportunities. Afterward he said:

“Something profound but disturbing happened to me during those Café conversations. I realized that the boxes on my organization chart might more accurately be depicted as webs of conversations. Each day, we are engaged in conversations about different questions, just like in those table conversations, and we move between the ‘tables’ as we do our work in the company. It hit me with laser-beam clarity: This is how life actually works! So I began to wonder: If our conversations and personal relations are at the heart of our work,

how am I, as a leader, contributing to or taking energy away from this natural process? Are we using the intelligence of just a few people when we could gain the intelligence of hundreds or thousands by focusing on key questions and including people more intentionally in the conversation?”



Shortly thereafter, Bob was charged with co-leading a corporation-wide safety initiative that eventually engaged more than 50,000 people in manufacturing plants around the world in conversations about safety risks and how to address them. Meeting people at every level of the company in the settings where they normally gathered, he went in with questions rather than answers and hosted conversations aimed at tapping each group’s own experience, relationships, and mutual intelligence in coming up with better ways to reduce accident rates. His core team took good ideas from one plant to another, shared stories, and brought key people from different levels and parts of the company together to learn from one another. “Each of the employee meetings I attended was like a table in this large, ongoing safety Café—this network of conversations,” Veazie explained. “The ‘tables’ all over the company were connected by the key questions.”

The outcomes were impressive. In Puerto Rico, the accident rate plummeted from 4.2 percent to 0.2 percent. In Oregon, it fell from 6.2 percent to 1.2 percent. The overall company accident rate was reduced by 33 percent, and these gains were maintained in plants where the safety conversations continued.

The shift in how Bob Veazie viewed his organization prompted a new approach to leadership that dramatically increased HP employees’ collective capacity to achieve their shared aims. He had discovered the power of conversational leadership in action.

## The World Café

In a World Café conversation, participants are seated in groups of four or five around small tables or in conversation clusters. Tables are set up to resemble those found in a coffeehouse, often with red-checked tablecloths, vases with flowers, and newsprint and markers for taking notes. Participants explore “questions that matter” where collaborative thinking can really make a difference. At regular intervals, a host stays to share highlights from the previous conversation as others move to new tables or clusters, cross-pollinating ideas and insights. As the conversations connect, they spark new discoveries. Innovative opportunities begin to appear. Collective knowledge grows and evolves. After several rounds of conversation on one or more questions, participants offer their insights, learnings, and opportunities for action through a “harvest” of the conversations in the whole group.

See [www.theworldcafe.com](http://www.theworldcafe.com) for more information.

## Seeing conversation as a core process

*“An organization’s results are determined through webs of human commitments, born in webs of human conversations.”*

—FERNANDO FLORES,  
FORMER CHILEAN MINISTER OF FINANCE

As defined by educator Carolyn Baldwin, conversational leadership is “the leader’s intentional use of conversation as a core process to cultivate the collective intelligence needed to create business and social value.” It encompasses a way of seeing, a pattern of thinking, and a set of practices that are particularly important today, when the most important questions we face are complex ones that require us to develop new ways of thinking together to foster positive change.

Spurred by financial crisis and the prospect of an increasingly uncertain future, leaders in all sectors are seeking new ways to leverage organizational and community resources to produce greater strategic impact. Efforts to cut costs, be more efficient, compete

more effectively, or innovate have all intensified. Yet many such initiatives fall short of achieving their intended aims or create unintended consequences that require additional interventions.

What if increasing the success of these efforts depended on our intentionally focusing on a deeper process—the core process of conversation and meaning-making through which we as human beings have always co-evolved new realities? As evolutionary biologist Humberto Maturana points out, we live in language and the sophisticated coordination of actions that language makes possible. Since our earliest ancestors gathered in circles around the warmth of a fire, talking together has been our primary means for discovering common interests, sharing knowledge, imagining the future, and cooperating to survive and thrive. The natural cross-pollination of relationships, ideas, and meaning as people move from one conversation to others enables us to learn, explore possibilities, and co-create together.

From this perspective, conversations are action—the very heartbeat and lifeblood of social systems like organizations, communities, and cultures. In all these settings, to use Maturana’s phrase, we “bring forth a world” through the networks of conversation in which we participate. Analytical tools such as social network analysis can help us visualize those networks, while emerging digital technologies and social media such as blogs, wikis, and online communities of practice let us extend, enrich, and deepen conversations and collaboration among an ever-expanding number of

participants. As new possibilities and the coordinated actions based on them start in small groups and then spread through wider networks, we bring the future into being.

Conversational leadership takes root when leaders see their organizations as dynamic webs of conversation and consider conversation as a core process for effecting positive systemic change. Taking a strategic approach to this core process can not only grow intellectual and social capital, but also provide a collaborative advantage in our increasingly networked world.

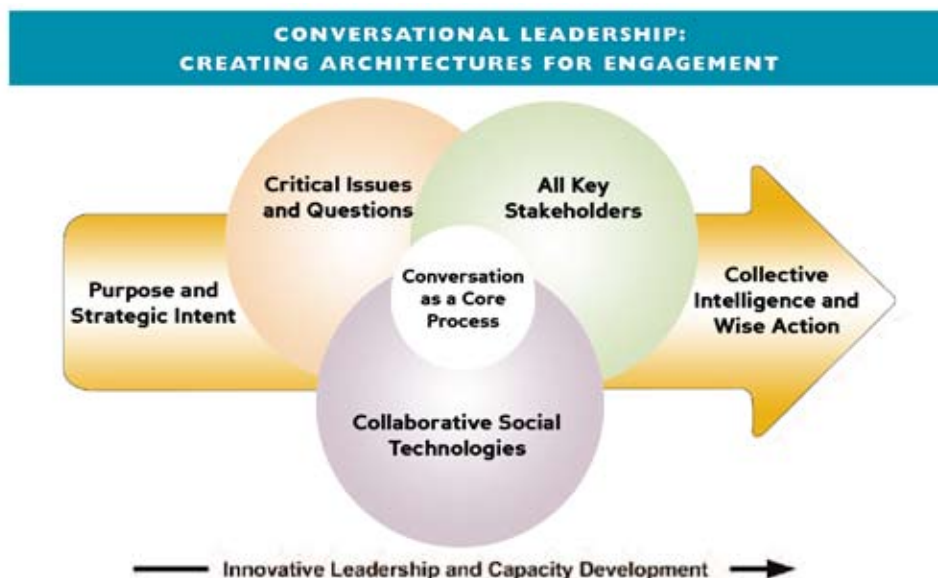
How we come together to address critical challenges and opportunities, and the collaborative social technologies we use to think together about key issues, may mean the difference between “business as usual” and the breakthrough thinking and action we need today. By designing, convening, and hosting conversations about questions that matter—and linking those conversations in disciplined ways—leaders have unprecedented opportunities to tap collective intelligence and guide committed action toward the fulfillment of shared purposes.

So, instead of admonishing our children at school and employees in organizations to “Stop talking and get to work,” we might be better served to encourage them to “Start talking and create together!”

## A framework for exercising conversational leadership

What does it mean to take a strategic approach to the development of conversation as a core process, or for an organization to begin “thinking together for a change?” If conversation is the medium through which the art of leadership is practiced—the vehicle through which social and business value are created—how do we get good at it?

We’d like to offer a simple framework for understanding the practice of conversational leadership. It can be applied at several levels, from the design of single meetings to the development of multi-faceted programs or long-term, large-scale strategic change initiatives.



To design effective architectures for engagement, a conversational leader will:

- Clarify purpose and strategic intent
- Explore critical issues and questions
- Engage all key stakeholders
- Skillfully use collaborative social technologies
- Guide collective intelligence toward effective action
- Foster innovative; capacity development

These six processes are represented in “Conversational Leadership: Creating Architectures for Engagement” (see page 3). We will explore them briefly in turn. As you read, reflect on what happens when you consciously use them as part of your leadership. Also, consider the impact when any one of them is missing or used ineffectively.

### Clarify Purpose and Strategic Intent

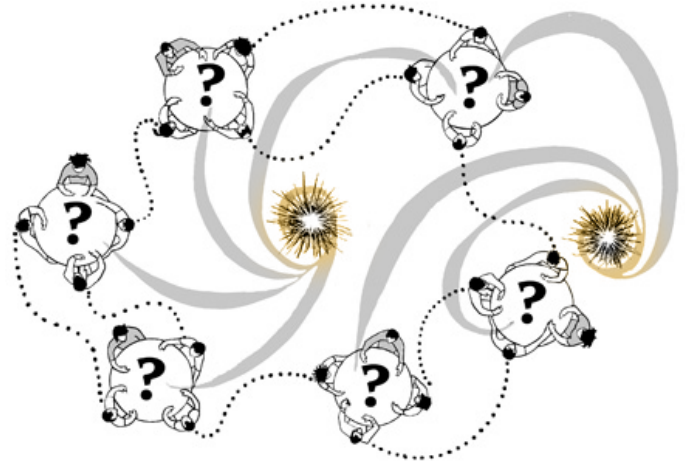
*“The goal of strategic intent is to fold the future back into the present ...While strategic intent is clear about ends, it is flexible as to means—it leaves room for improvisation. Achieving strategic intent requires enormous creativity with respect to means.”*

—GARY HAMEL AND C.K. PRAHALAD,  
“STRATEGIC INTENT,” HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW

Clarifying purpose or strategic intent is the first step in designing ways to engage. Purpose determines which issues or opportunities are important and which questions matter. It helps leaders discover who the relevant stakeholders are and select which social technologies will support the types of collaboration needed to fulfill that purpose. It guides the development of strategy, and enables all participants to decide both what to do and what not to do as they are called upon to make real-time decisions in rapidly changing circumstances.

When Dr. Phil Cass agreed to serve as CEO of the Columbus Medical Association and Foundation in Ohio, he was well versed in “command and control” leadership but knew another way forward was needed. “I started my new job with the express purpose of creating stakeholder involvement in a way that liberated both the staff and the board’s intelligence,” he said. “I had no idea how to do it and told my staff that we were going to need every bit of ‘grey matter’ we had in order to be successful. But I held the clear intention of

creating a ‘leaderful’ system and haven’t wavered from that all this time.”



As people share insights between tables, the “magic in the middle” and a sense of the whole become more accessible.

To fulfill this purpose, Phil introduced first his own organization and then the broader community to innovative ways of engaging key stakeholders in dialogue on critical issues. His initial experiments with conversational leadership later led to the creation of Our Optimal Health, a county-wide multi-stakeholder initiative aimed at creating a fundamental shift in individual and community well-being while simultaneously enabling the current health system to function more effectively. Over time, a sense of collective purpose has evolved, and many are engaged in renewing and realizing it. “The early stages of work with community leaders began with the short-term intent of seeding conversations that matter in our public spaces,” he said, “but the longer-term intent was to shift the quality of dialogue throughout our community.” Ten community assemblies and new public-private partnerships have begun to embody that opportunity.

Bound by clear intent and supported by social technologies like the World Café, U Process, and Art of Hosting, Phil and a growing network of leaders from throughout the community are pioneering ways to transcend entrenched positions in healthcare and forge collective solutions together. Their efforts demonstrate how purpose and strategic intent serve as a potent “attractors” around which emergent action can organize in today’s complex systems.

*Without clarity of purpose and strategic intent, no one knows where they are headed or why.*

## Explore Critical Issues and Questions

*“Something fundamental changes when people begin to ask questions together. The questions create more of a learning conversation than the normal stale debate about problems.”*

—MIKE SZYMANCZYK, CHAIRMAN AND CEO,  
THE ALTIRA GROUP

Leaders at every level of an organization are typically judged on how well they address the issues and strategic questions that define their domains of responsibility. For leaders as for the rest of us, issues focus attention, evoke our passion, and galvanize our energy. We are motivated to learn and to act by the questions we care most about. Yet we often quarrel about or act on an issue without taking time to thoughtfully define it or to articulate the deeper, underlying questions that can stimulate fresh thinking. A conversational leader develops the capacity for evoking and articulating those core questions—and fosters that capacity in others throughout the organization or community.

Under the leadership of Paul Borawski, for example, the American Society for Quality (ASQ) began a “living strategy” process to determine the future direction of the association. The goal of the initial session with the board’s Strategic Planning Committee was not to produce a traditional one-page plan based solely on the obvious critical issues but rather to discover the key strategic questions that called for further exploration. Paul recalls that the first session “turned ASQ strategically inside out. The committee began to ask questions they discovered weren’t theirs to answer. Some needed to go to the full board; others needed the input of the full membership. The whole thing started to blossom into a realization that many more voices were needed to discover the answers to the key strategic questions raised at that initial session.”

Phil Cass also discovered the power of refraining issues during the initial community dialogues on healthcare he sponsored in Columbus. One powerful shift took place at a conversational leadership learning program with key community leaders when a physician asked, “How can the community create affordable and sustainable healthcare for all?” A second shift occurred when participants in later assemblies realized that a fundamental change in focus was needed from the traditional concern for treating disease to promot-

ing optimal well-being. Together, these breakthroughs inspired the pioneering initiative Our Optimal Health.

*Without a focus on critical issues and the questions they evoke, there’s no reason to act and no context for collaborative learning.*

## Engage All Key Stakeholders

*“The task of leadership is to be intentional about the way we group people and the questions that we engage them in.”*

—PETER BLOCK,  
THE ANSWER TO HOW IS YES

As the ASQ experience suggests, the process of identifying critical questions may also illuminate the need to have diverse voices representing key parts of a system or multiple perspectives on an issue present for innovative solutions to reveal themselves. Gary Haniel highlighted this when he noted that “effective strategy evolution depends on creating a rich web of conversations that cuts across previously isolated knowledge sets and creates unexpected combinations of collective thought and insight.” The emergence of cross-functional teams, multi-stakeholder dialogues, and large-scale processes that emphasize getting the whole system in the room all reflect growing awareness that a more robust “ecology of thought” is needed to fully understand any truly important issue, develop viable systemic solutions, and catalyze widespread engagement and support for organizational or community change.

Conversational leadership starts with a belief in the possibility of collective intelligence—the recognition that we can be smarter, more creative, and more capable together than we can alone. In practice, this leads to asking, “Who needs to be at the table because they have perspectives or information that’s needed? Because they play key roles in decision making? Because they will be involved in implementation? Because they are affected by decisions made and actions taken?”

Engaging all key stakeholders and cross-pollinating diverse perspectives was a guiding principle in Nokia Corporation’s 2007 global initiative to renew its core values. Nokia staff and World Café Community Foundation associates co-hosted sixteen separate “Nokia Way Cafés” in nine countries, involving more

than 3,000 employees from every level of the organization. Factory workers, product designers, sales people, software developers, senior executives, and others participated in face-to-face conversations about the values that would best serve Nokia as an internet company, and how to link core values to business success. Highlights were harvested and shared online with everyone in the company through a video blog. The process culminated with a “Nokia Jam” that engaged all employees worldwide in a 72-hour strategy dialogue. While discovering the common themes in this far-flung global enterprise was challenging, the four new values that emerged were fresh and energizing. They were also widely embraced, because the process had included people from all parts of the company, across functional, cultural, and hierarchical boundaries.

*Without engaging all key stakeholders, there is little chance of breakthrough thinking or finding innovative paths forward on critical issues.*

**Skillfully Use Collaborative Social Technologies**  
*“If you can design the physical space, the social space, and the information space together to enhance collaborative learning, then that whole milieu turns into a learning technology.”*

—JOHN SEELY BROWN, FORMER CHIEF SCIENTIST,  
XEROX CORPORATION

Discovering shared purpose, evoking collective intelligence, and crafting effective strategies for action don’t happen by accident. To address critical issues and questions with diverse stakeholders effectively, we must be intentional about choosing processes for engagement that allow the contributions of all to coalesce in ways that foster “coherence without control.” Otherwise, bringing key stakeholders with diverse perspectives together can lead to polarized debate, chaos, or a proliferation of ideas without the ability to choose and act.

Since the 1980s, we have witnessed the development and increasingly creative use of highly effective social technologies for thinking and acting together in purposeful ways, including the World Café, Appreciative Inquiry, Open Space, Scenario Planning, and Future Search, among many others. The second

edition of *The Change Handbook*, edited by Peggy Holman, Tom Devane, and Steven Cady, features more than 60 methods for whole systems change. Today these face-to-face technologies have powerful complements in the virtual world. Web-based videoconferencing, online collaboration tools, virtual communities of practice, social media, Second Life, “crowdsourcing,” and other rapidly evolving digital tools are now available to support community building, knowledge development, and complex, coordinated action.



Conversational leadership involves understanding these and other collaborative social technologies, wisely choosing those appropriate for a given purpose, and integrating them in skillful architectures of networked inquiry and cascading action. Mike Szymanczyk, chairman and CEO of the Altria Group, has used these principles and practices of conversational leadership to lead his company in reinventing its future. He told us that:

“If you want to use conversation as a core process, then you have to be intentional about designing the infrastructures that will evoke people’s capacity for thinking together in new ways... We’ve done a number of things over the years to create infrastructures for dialogue and engagement. Some of our choices may seem ‘outside the box,’ but we’ve found they’ve made a real difference. For example, very early on we invented a strategy process, the Game Plan, based on collaborative dialogue and inquiry that is used organization-wide. It focuses on discovering the big questions at the heart of shaping the future and on creating initiatives that respond to those critical strategic questions.

We regularly utilize a variety of conversational

## Design Principles for Hosting Conversations that Matter

- Clarify the context
- Create hospitable space
- Explore questions that matter
- Encourage everyone's contribution
- Cross-pollinate and connect diverse perspectives
- Listen together for patterns, insights, and deeper questions
- Harvest and share collective discoveries

architectures and creative meeting formats that foster collaborating thinking and innovative solutions. As part of our large-scale change effort, we've introduced World Café conversations, dialogue circles, Open Space sessions, scenario planning, outdoor experiential learning, and even dramatic theater presentations to stimulate dialogue and breakthrough thinking around critical issues. We use graphic recording and visual language as a key resource to help people think more systemically, connect ideas, and surface difficult concerns.

We've also created special meeting places with double-screen technology to support conversations at a distance in ways that allow us both to see our colleagues from different sites and to work with visual materials related to questions or projects we're exploring."

As the Altria and other stories show, a growing number of leaders recognize that diverse methodologies and their underlying design principles can be used to develop new capacities and create architectures of engagement in and across all levels of an organization (see "Design Principles for Hosting Conversations That Matter"). While Bob Veazie of Hewlett Packard never actually hosted a formal World Café, he said that "throughout the whole safety effort, I held the principles and pattern of the World Café as a guiding image for what was happening in the organization." Understanding the deeper principles involved also enables leaders to integrate different methodologies effectively and to improvise with confidence and skill.

*Without the skilled use of collaborative social technologies, dialogue often devolves into diatribe, and solutions are owned by those with the loudest voices or the most power.*

## Guiding Collective Intelligence Toward Wise Action

*"A leader these days needs to be a host— one who convenes diversity; who convenes all viewpoints in creative processes where our mutual intelligence can come forth."*

—MARGARET WHEATLEY,  
THE BERKANA INSTITUTE

The outcome of all this activity is wise, effective action in service of purpose and strategic intent. Once leaders begin to view the organization or community as a living network of conversations, they can focus that network on questions that truly matter. In addition, they can design infrastructures, like the Altria Game Plan process, that enable the "harvests" from those conversations to connect and complement each other at every level of system.

Research and best practices in every sector are demonstrating that successful outcomes and measurable results are more likely when we bring the voices of all key stakeholders to bear on critical issues using face-to-face and online technologies carefully chosen to foster effective engagement. This is true whether we aim to strategize, foster innovation, improve organizational processes, or nurture community connections.

Conversely, the potential for collective intelligence or wise action is compromised when any ingredient of

## Personal Capacities of a Conversational Leader

- Creates a climate for discovery and emergence
- Evokes and honors diverse perspectives
- Asks powerful questions
- Suspends premature judgment
- Explores assumptions and beliefs
- Embraces ambiguity and not-knowing
- Listens for connections between ideas
- Captures key insights and articulates shared understanding

the framework is missing or poorly executed. We've all experienced meetings that are "all process," dialogues in which polarized positions lead to paralyzing debate, narrow consensus among a small group that doesn't represent the whole, and well-designed meetings that go awry when a leader is unclear about intent, loses trust, or decides to exert inappropriate control.

*Without collective intelligence and wise, effective action, the future of our organizations, our communities, and our planet remain imperiled.*

### **Innovative Leadership and Capacity Development**

*"How can we begin to cultivate both the organizational infrastructures and the personal leadership capabilities that are needed to access and act on the wisdom that already exists in our organizations and communities?"*

—DAVID ISAACS, CO-FOUNDER,  
THE WORLD CAFÉ

In today's environment, developing the capacity for conversational leadership and fostering "process intelligence" at every level of the system may be one of the most productive investments that organizations can make. Yet our formal school systems, executive leadership programs, and on-the-job experience poorly equip present or future leaders with the mental models, personal capacities, or process skills needed to respond creatively to the complexity of today's challenges (see "Personal Capacities of a Conversational Leader").

We need an expanded concept of leadership development—one that encompasses the skills, knowledge, and personal qualities required to create and guide collaborative networks and inquiring systems that continually renew their capacity to learn, adapt, and create long-term business and social value (see "Developing Conversational Leadership"). The pioneering work being done by Phil Cass and his colleagues to transform healthcare in Ohio exemplifies such an approach. After participating in programs at the Shambhala Institute for Authentic Leadership on hosting strategic conversations and leadership in networked systems, Phil introduced new capacity-building opportunities for his staff. He helped them learn how to host World Café conversations, began learning circles to explore

## **Developing Conversational Leadership**

- Do leaders in your organization see it as a living network of conversation in which the "real work" is accomplished?
- How are you leveraging the power of conversation as a core process for thinking together in designing strategic change initiatives?
- How much time do you and your colleagues spend discovering and framing the right questions in relation to time spent finding the right answers?
- How knowledgeable are you and other organizational leaders about the use of both face-to-face and virtual technologies for collaborative learning, collective intelligence, and coordinated action?
- Are your physical work spaces and meeting areas designed to encourage the informal interactions that support good conversation and collaborative learning?
- How much of your leadership and capacity development budget is geared toward helping leaders think systemically, see inter-dependencies, and master conversational approaches that foster thinking together about critical issues?
- Is crafting architectures for effective engagement among key internal and external stakeholders an essential role and capacity for leaders?
- How does your organization help leaders cultivate the personal capacities required for success in all these ventures?

key authors' ideas, and redesigned staff meetings and planning retreats to encourage knowledge sharing and whole systems thinking across organizational boundaries. He then cosponsored workshops in the community for leaders from associated organizations and youth to learn and practice the capacities for hosting that lie at the heart of conversational leadership.



*Without leadership capacities that rise to today's complex systemic challenges, we rely on perspectives and approaches from an earlier era that are no longer adequate and undermine our best intentions.*

## Shaping positive futures

Conversational leadership uses conversation as a core process to create tipping points for change. It invites us to complement our traditional focus on methods for business process improvement with a focus on methods for talking and thinking together effectively to simultaneously create the social process improvement needed to maximize business and social value. At the heart of this work is an understanding of organizations as networks of conversations and a belief in the power of collective intelligence. This knowledge invites leaders to host diverse voices in addressing critical issues using the most powerful face-to-face and online process technologies now available. Our individual and collective power is amplified as we “think together” in disciplined ways and then connect our conversations to create possibilities for large-scale systemic change. “True learning organizations are a space for generative conversations and concerted action, which creates a field of alignment that produces tremendous power to invent new realities in conversation and to bring about these new realities in action,” wrote Peter Senge and Fred Kofman.

It is through conversational leadership that we can bring such organizations into being. In an era in which all of us are called to step forward with courage, it has the potential to transform how leaders understand the organizations they serve, how companies and communities can employ the collective intelligence of all stakeholders in service of shared aims, and how all of us participate in “thinking together, for a change.” ■

*The authors welcome your insights, questions, and perspectives. Please contact them at [conversationatleadership@theworldcafe.com](mailto:conversationatleadership@theworldcafe.com).*

CONVERSATIONAL LEADERSHIP FIRST APPEARED IN THE NOVEMBER 2009 ISSUE OF *THE SYSTEMS THINKER*, PUBLISHED BY PEGASUS COMMUNICATIONS ([HTTP://WWW.PEGASUS.COM](http://www.pegasus.com); [BLOG.PEGASUS.COM](http://blog.pegasus.com)).



## For further reading

- Juanita Brown and David Isaacs, “Conversation as a Core Business Process,” *The Systems Thinker*, December 1996/January 1997
- Juanita Brown, David Isaacs, Eric Vogt, and Nancy Margulies, “Strategic Questioning: Engaging People’s Best Thinking,” *The Systems Thinker*, November 2002
- Eric E. Vogt, Juanita Brown, and David Isaacs, *The Art of Powerful Questions* (Pegasus Communications, 2003)
- Juanita Brown, David Isaacs, and the World Café Community, *The World Café: Shaping Our Futures through Conversations that Matter* (Berrett-Koehler, 2005)

**AUTHORS’ NOTE:** We’d like to thank and honor Carolyn Baldwin, a pioneering educator and World Café host, for coining the phrase “conversational leadership”; strategic illustrator Susan Kelly for her collaboration in development the visual framework for this article; and David Isaacs for his on-going partnership in the development of these ideas.