Innovation at the Kitchen Table

A safe haven for inspiring change

Lisa Francis-Jennings & Rick Wolfe

In today's environment of often chaotic and complex change, the Kitchen Table Conversation process creates a comfortable and safe environment for open communication and information sharing. It supports both ongoing and frequent change initiatives and, as rapid innovation becomes the rule not the exception, this unique approach mobilizes target markets and discrete populations to engage with and become accountable for innovation.

The Kitchen Table Conversation allows participants to reside in a state of heightened cooperation where it is easy and safe to disagree, air differences of opinion, quickly confirm or repudiate assumptions and organizational dogma, and to generate new and innovative ways to look at or resolve a problem. It gives voice to the under-represented, and energy to the organization. Metaphor and story-telling ensure that each example lives on in the hearts and minds of the participants.

The roots of Kitchen Table Conversations

Every conference veteran and round-table doyen has probably taken part in far too many working sessions that were dull or too long, and all too often not conclusive or productive.

> *'We thought that there must be a better way to empower, engage and enliven people charged with solving business problems. We were convinced that the answer was in using simple vocabulary and associating it with a 'social technology' already being used by virtually every adult on the planet. I also thought that this simple approach could be valid and useful across a range of problem types, including "wicked problems" first coined by C. West Churchman in 1967 [1] being talked about so much in the 90s and 00s.' Rick Wolfe*

The Kitchen Table Conversation concept started from 2 converging ideas:

- that the best information sharing is and should be generally fun and lively, and
- with the ever increasing complexity of the business world and the stress of information overload [2] and changing process management, people did not have the time or the energy to learn yet another 'new' method for brainstorming or innovating, or the 'new' vocabulary associated with it.

Rick had noticed that once in a while there would be a lively debate, a memorable story or a well-told joke but all of these seem to be unpredictable, not something that seemed to be easily planned into the formal components of the event. That got him thinking… what if lively debate, just like he and his colleagues were seeing at meals and during coffee breaks at a conference, could be programmed into **any** discussion?

As a trained theatrical Director, Rick was convinced that invigorating, thought-provoking sessions could be designed in advance and guided. That they could be repeatable, and produce robust results that enliven participants and engage their organization. He had always held the belief that the ability to participate in thoughtful, skilled discussion in a social setting, such as a dining room or kitchen table, is hardwired into almost everyone's DNA and so, 1993 the great project began. He called his methodology Kitchen Table Conversations (KTCs).

The process was systematized using simple vocabulary and metaphors. This was central to finding the key that would unlock both the spontaneous and structured side of the equation so that we could use it in a business setting. Vocabulary associated with conversations that were naturally passionate, free flowing, and contentious while at the same time, cool, reasoned and considerate produced the most enjoyable and fruitful conversations. This convergence of lively chatter with interruption, disagreement, heartfelt stories and bad jokes, is the normal state for the typical dinner party or a meal around the kitchen table and helps KTC moderators set the tone and atmosphere for the session.

The challenge for every organizer is to achieve, in a formal setting, this rambunctious, yet contained discussion, which emerges naturally in a social setting. It is an even greater challenge to do this consistently and predictably. The interesting thing is that it can be done. Time and time again, we see the Kitchen Table appear as our moderators guide groups with a very specific set of verbal activators.' Rick Wolfe

Innovating with Kitchen Table Conversations

Rick and our small group of associates have now led over 1,000 Kitchen Table Conversations and have seen amazing results in community engagement, opportunity optimization and solution development. Grounded solidly in Appreciative Inquiry [3], the Kitchen Table Conversation methodology grew organically out of the belief that innate social interaction structures could be scaled up and leveraged for facilitating honest and frank fact-finding, feedback, discussion and problem-solving within organizations. After decades of action research, his theory and practice has been refined and has proven to be even more effective than we could have anticipated.

'Even today, we continue to build-out, refine and codify that original premise and the system being used by Rick's moderators' Lisa Francis-Jennings

What we've discovered

An interesting thing happens when you try to systematize a social convention… people become engrossed in the content no matter what the setting! Conducted on three continents, and across many different cultures, Kitchen Table Conversations have included lawyers, engineers, bankers, actuaries, scientists, business executives, customers and groups of disadvantaged citizens.

'Whether it is a single 2-hour session or a large group intervention over several days, Kitchen Table Conversations can be used to innovate, conduct brand research, inform strategic planning, assist in transformational change, and catalyse business planning and development. KTCs can be the driving force when designing project plans and in creating and delivering project vision.' Rick Wolfe

The methodology uses a specific, repeatable process that can be scaled up or down and applied with groups of 6 to 600. KTC have been used to address a wide range of business challenges:

1. Generate ground-breaking discoveries
2. Brainstorm mutual opportunities
3. Assess product mix effectiveness
4. Identify program development opportunities
5. Clarify value-add
6. Design/assess sustainable business practices
7. Create or develop themes for action plans
8. Pinpoint/create understanding of industry trends
9. Identify significant trends
10. Pinpoint differentiators
11. Share/identify issues, challenges & concerns
12. Drill down into important topics
13. Develop performance metrics
14. Engage stakeholder groups
15. Conduct stakeholder research
16. Define or improve the customer experience
17. Gather feedback on the customer experience
18. Improve customer service

Underlying Principles

This intervention style, modelled on a conversation people would have at their own kitchen table, acknowledges that conversation is a system for clarifying misunderstanding and accommodating comfortable disagreement. It aims to take advantage of those conversational elements in sparking new ideas that bring new depth and breadth to the scope of discussion.

The underlying principles and advantages of KTC are elegant in their simplicity:

1. Virtually everyone can engage in a kitchen table conversation
2. Setting the ground rules for the conversation allows all members of the group to participate fully, to the best of their ability, **and** beyond what anyone would have expected
3. Creativity is normal. It's going to happen unless restrained, and KTC fosters creativity
4. Focusing conversation around a good question engages curiosity and mobilizes energy
5. Even misunderstandings in a supportive context can lead to fruitful discussion
6. Disagreement is integral to growth and idea expansion
7. Interruption makes the conversation stronger. It adds verve and thickness, and quickly culls non-relevant and non-contributing ideas
8. As in a social setting, participants become so engrossed in the conversation that the discussion and outcomes are often surprisingly honest and robust

Interestingly, although a KTC moderator may be addressing different individuals during the Kitchen Table Conversation, at some point, all the participants connect in mind and spirit and from then on, the moderator negotiates with the group, not any one individual.

The Kitchen Table Process

For a Kitchen Table Conversation, as with any good organizational change management process, preparation is key to ensuring success. Preparation ensures that all participants who come to the table know the question(s) and have had time to get ready for the discussion. Participants are also generally aware of who else will be at the table. The formalized opening is used to set ground rules for behaviour and parameters for the conversation, as well as to verbalize tacit knowledge about the participants.

The Conversation always seems to follow the same arc:

- **Come Together;** 'Who are these people? Can I trust them enough to speak my mind? Do I have something of value to contribute?'
- **Acquaint**: 'I like the group and this discussion, I hope they like me.'
- **Trust**: 'They like me, and I like them.'
- **Engage Fully**: 'And I like this lively conversation!!'

Discussion

The standard session runs exactly 2 hours which, deducting the time taken for the Introduction at the beginning and action planning / wrap-up remarks at the end, allows approximately 90 minutes for discussion. The moderator guides the conversation gently when required, working towards the critical success factors set in the contracting phase of the project. As promised in the opening, s/he will

also tease various bits of knowledge or information from participants to enrich the conversation and to ensure that everyone has a voice at the table.

The rhythm and rules of kitchen table conversations greatly expand the tools available to generate a productive dialogue.

> *'In a market research conversation, one participant made a thin statement we'd heard from others. It was a negative about the brand, but as expressed, it wasn't big enough to drive action. He had barely finished his point when I gently snapped, "You can't expect me to believe that." He shot back with a detailed explanation of why he'd made the statement. Finally, we had the thick description we needed to make a persuasive argument to our client.'*
> *Rick Wolfe*

In sessions for large groups, a panel of experts can be positioned in the centre or at the front of the room and, after welcoming and introductory remarks; the moderator asks each panellist to take a few minutes to give their views on the topic / question before moving to a more unstructured discussion. If the session starts out too tame, the moderator reminds the panel that the goal is to have a good, rambunctious conversation. This permission-giving behaviour sets the room at ease. Although high-jacking or changing the topic is a rare occurrence, the moderator is vigilant to ensure that the group stays on topic.

> *'Although I haven't been involved with as many Kitchen Table Conversations as some of the others from our group, it is apparent that a large part of the success is due to the well-developed questioning techniques. The skilled moderator, while guiding participants through a series of lively and interesting conversation topics, picks up threads and teases out information as required, without disturbing the flow of interaction. Although interruptions and some 'talking over' other participants is expected, s/he ensures that disagreement stays healthy and doesn't devolve into unproductive argument.' Lisa Francis-Jennings*

The Wrap-Up

Over the years, we have discovered that unlike in the social setting, where the people in dialogue understand the signs that the conversation is coming to a natural close, the Kitchen Table Conversation needs something a bit more formal to conclude a session. We use specific mechanisms to generate and sustain follow-through. **Formal wrap up** and **action planning** ensures comfortable closure for all participants. This typically includes asking the advisor/ambassadors to assist in this segment of the session.

> *'When members of a work team step away from their regular working day to have a formal conversation about change, they need to see and feel the links between the conversation and their work. When we started using Kitchen Table Conversations for Change, we knew from the beginning that*

follow up was critical. Then one day it occurred to us, we could go a big step further than follow up by asking people to follow through. We wanted participants to take personal responsibility to finish what they started. We needed people to work out how they would take a step that they could be sure to complete and then weave it together with business as usual. The vocabulary of 'follow through' helped us do that.' Rick Wolfe

Preparing Key Stakeholders to Support the Conversation

There are no hard and fast rules for participant selection but decision-makers (either Board members or senior executives) responsible for or concerned with the outcome of the sessions, should attend. To ensure that the project achieves substantial and far-reaching results, special attention is placed on selecting the correct mix of participants. The choice is influenced by who is:

1) needed in the room to provide the right mix of feedback and information, and
2) most likely to benefit more from participating.

'Preparing the key stakeholders for their role in the KTC process is integral to the success of the intervention. Story-telling and specific metaphors are used frequently to prime key behaviours that may be required during the session so that everyone is on the same page and any action can take place quickly. With one short sentence such as, 'Folks, it's Brazilian football time,' the moderator transmits volumes of preparation conversations and everyone knows exactly what to do next, or what decision must be made on the fly.' Lisa Francis-Jennings

Key Role	Description
Sponsor	Owns the topic Declares commitment to the process publically (including follow-up) Provides air cover for process take off
Project Owner	Leads the process Ensures diplomacy between the project & its stakeholders
Core Team	Evaluates & approves KTC process design Recommends research to be done & stakeholders to be included Participates fully in the research process
Kitchen Table Consultant	Provides preliminary process design Facilitates research at each stage Counsels as requested or required at each stage Synthesizes, summarizes & simplifies findings Facilitates definition statement drafting

Moderator (frequently the Consultant)	Participates in the conversation with the panellists Steers the conversation towards all the key dimensions of the topics, build controversy, stir the conversational pot If panellists are lost for words, finishes their sentences for them If panellists are shy, takes the floor & ask them a question
Extended Team / Process Ambassadors	Acts as a key contributor to the research Is a voice in defining the elements of the question definition / statement Advocates for and disseminates information about the process

Crafting the question

Crafting the question can take on a life of its own. The involvement of key stakeholders and influencers is critical to ensure that the question is robust and worded in a way that enhances discussion and idea sharing. Questions can run the gamut from queries about business performance and concerns, to key implications of industry trends & controversy. This important element can take quite a bit of time to get right, but it is worth it. Crafting the question engages and energizes not only the core team but key stakeholders in every group.

Dissent and miscommunication

Unlike many other interventions and approaches, the Kitchen Table Conversation thrives on positive and productive disagreement and miscommunications.

'We believe strongly, based upon what all my moderators have seen in the field, that one miscommunication has the potential to unlock a whole separate streams of thought. Discussion always follows.' Rick Wolfe

'Friendly disagreement is embraced and encouraged. As at any kitchen table, disagreement takes place politely and with grace.' Lisa Francis-Jennings

Tools and technology

The process of designing the Kitchen Table Conversation is an interesting mix of vigorous project management blended subtly with standard Organizational Development practice & principles. Above all, the KTC consultant is guided by the principles of respectful inclusion, collaboration, authenticity, self-awareness and empowerment. They follow meticulous project and/or event design and management principles.

Our experience shows that the initial project charter acts as a compass pointing the team in the right direction and providing a broad-brush perspective on the overall objectives and event flow. Once we get underway, consulting with participants and debating the emerging themes, the charter becomes progressively clearer. The objectives come into sharper detail. The specific flow of the event takes shape. The requirements for the key messages are established.

A number of different tools and techniques are used to guide the Kitchen Table Conversation and to keep the participants engaged. Brainstorming rules are followed – diverging and converging are used to spark or moderate the conversation. Categorization, map- and sense-making form a large part of the design and implementation process.

'You see some of what Bruce Tuckman described as Development Sequence ⁴ happening; participants may be excited to be included, or they may start out politely and somewhat reserved (Forming). They begin to find interest in the other members, and their views. They begin to feel interest from the others in their opinions. Quickly, at least some individuals in the group will begin to challenge statements made by other participants or assert their views strongly (Storming). As the discussion progresses, individuals begin to understand and appreciate the value of comments from around the table and a safe space is held for different views and opinions (Norming). Eventually the group glides smoothly into a lively and fruitful discussion as trust is built by those around the table (Performing).' Lisa Francis-Jennings

The tools and technology come together so seamlessly that participants become completely engrossed in the Kitchen Table experience – and what is being developed within it – that they lose track of the 'exterior factors'.

'We once held public sessions for a large corporation. When the president realized there might be press in the room, he cautioned everyone to be careful about what they said. After the session, we had to really edit the report because the president had become so engrossed in the conversation that he had made statements during the session that were not appropriate for public disclosure at that time.' Rick Wolfe

In fact, the participants become so engaged in the process that the moderator almost disappears behind it!!

'Our experience has been that the vast majority of people who participate in Kitchen Table Conversations don't realize there is a process. They are paying attention to each other and the content, not watching the flow that keeps the conversation on track or the moderator!' Lisa Francis-Jennings

Innovating at the Kitchen Table

The question was simple, 'how do we step back and give people a platform for rapid development and innovation that is safe and understandable?' The original assumption was sound; when people come together around a table, they are curious, creative and open to sharing ideas. The answer was elegant; invite your guests to a dinner party where lively conversation is the norm.

The recipe at the table is artfully ingenuous: bring the right people to the table, remove inhibitors like new jargon and models; create a mental model that allows

a heightened sense of cooperation, then stand back and watch with wonder as the magic unfolds.

References

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