

SLAM-IT, Ennis

Cafe Seminar as a innovation method

The cafe seminar method is first and foremost based on dialogue. It is an informal forum in which participants through common dialogue test views and opinions, exchange experiences and develop visions and ideas. On the one hand, it is a purposeful, focused and effective process, and on the other, a process that takes place in a pleasant atmosphere that promotes open and free dialogue about an important and often complex technological issue. Participants work in small groups in a joint forum and share knowledge across the tables.

As far as possible, the cafe seminar should take place in an authentic cafe environment. The guests (participants) should sit at small cafe tables with room for 5 people at each table. The atmosphere should be friendly and relaxed in order to facilitate dialogue. This creates room for people to listen to one another, room to find questions before seeking the answers and room for closer study of the problem. Cafe seminars are rooted in the assumption that innovation and insight are cultivated through human relationships. Guests are presumed to possess all the necessary seminar resources, and for a cafe seminar to be successful, all participants are therefore required to take active part in the dialogue process.

The purpose of the method

The purpose of the cafe seminar is to achieve a more profound and common understanding of a problem. On the basis of experience exchange, the cafe seminar must generate new knowledge and understanding about the subject.

In simple terms, the goal is to solve 80% of the problem in 20% of the time – and the rest is not dealt with at the cafe seminar itself. It is all about listening, understanding one another and thus gaining greater insight and common understanding of the problem. Even though cafe seminars rarely result in actual action proposals, they often provide common assessments and recommendations.

Who participates in the various roles

Participants

Cafe seminar participants are referred to as guests in order to support the method's goal and promote relaxed dialogue. Between 25 and 100 guests can take part in a cafe seminar. Guests are invited because they have knowledge about and interest in the problem in question, and guests participate by personal invitation.

Seminar host

The person responsible for conducting the cafe seminar process is the seminar host. The host must help guests understand the form and the purpose of the seminar and take them through each phase of the process. At the same time, the host is responsible for the physical and practical cafe amenities.

Procedure description

A cafe seminar can last anything from a couple of hours to a whole day. The seminar must, wherever possible, take place in a real cafe. Small tables, tablecloths, flowers and candles create a good, relaxed cafe atmosphere. There must also be paper and

coloured pens on the tables and refreshments are limited to such items as fruit, coffee and water. The cafe atmosphere can be further enhanced by playing quiet music when guests arrive at the cafe.

The seminar can get underway with a presentation that inspires guests in the work ahead and creates a common starting point for discussion. Following a possible presentation, guests begin working in groups. The work takes place over several rounds, with guests discussing the host's questions at the small tables in each round. Guests must document the debates, ideas and visions that arise in the groups. This can be done in several ways, for example, on postcards or large sheets of paper.

After each round, guests change places, so that one guest from each group remains seated, while the rest of the group seat themselves at other tables. The guest who has remained at each of the tables presents the group's ideas and visions for the guests from the other groups who have joined the table.

Following this experience exchange, the original groups are reformed and the work continues on to the next round with a new question or debate topic from the host. Questions and debate topics are linked so that the debate continues to develop in accordance with the overall seminar topic.

In conclusion, all the results are placed on the cafe walls and all the guests mingle and view the other groups' results.

Direct results

The direct result of a cafe seminar is first and foremost the dialogue generated by the seminar itself. The common, more profound understanding of the problem, together with the new knowledge, ideas and visions that are generated, are the seminar's most important results. These may prove difficult to document but it is nonetheless important to try. Guests are responsible for ongoing documentation in the form of postcards or boards. These results must subsequently be typed up and published in a report or as part of a report. If the cafe seminar is to produce concrete assessments or recommendations, these can be asked for at the end of the seminar.

In addition, one or more persons can provide an ongoing description of the seminar in words and pictures. This can take the form of a cafe magazine which can either be sent to the guests shortly after the end of the seminar or handed out at the end of the seminar. A cafe seminar magazine can help guests to remember thoughts, ideas and insights they had during the seminar.

Suitability

The method is well suited to sensitive subjects as it provides a relaxed forum where "the cat can be let out of the bag". The method is well suited to any number of scenarios, especially where experience exchange is the goal. Types of questions that are well suited to cafe seminars are:

- Open questions – where the answers are not given in advance
- Specific and well-defined – not general or abstract
- Relevant – it has to be about "us", not "them"