



The impact of World Café on entrepreneurial strategic planning capability



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ABSTRACT

The World Café has been used to develop business and organizational strategies, to enhance safety performance, to support executive education, to foster community development, and for a host of other specific applications. However, is the World Café superior to traditional strategy workshop techniques in terms of increases in participant knowledge and understanding? Up to now there has been no absolute no answer to this question. This study examines and compares how the World Café and Strategy Workshops influence the development of entrepreneurs in the writing of business plans and as a means to model learning behavior. This study also investigates which kinds of leadership styles (transactional leadership or transformational leadership) can simultaneously benefit learning performance. A quasi-experimental design is utilized which includes pre–post tests. 120 participants attending an entrepreneurial program held by the government are observed. The results indicate that the World Café strategy has a significantly higher positive effect on their strategic planning capability than with traditional Strategy Workshops. Second, the leadership style of the focus leader can significantly increase the entrepreneur's strategic planning capability. Finally, in the discussion of World Café, the effects of transactional leadership on the entrepreneur's strategic planning capability is found to be greater than the effects of transformational leadership.

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1. Introduction

Good strategic planning can assist in the startup of an organization and improve organizational performance (Balabanis & Spyropoulou, 2007). Strategic planning instruments can be categorized into three types: the first involves general internal and external analysis and includes SWOT, BCG, PESTLE (Armstrong & Brodie, 1994; Hill & Westbrook, 1997; Jarratt & Stiles, 2010). The second relies on technology, such as simulations performed by computer (Drozdow & Carroll, 1997), to assist in personal or organizational development. The last utilizes group discussion, work-shops, and brainstorming to encourage different kinds of thinking for the planning of strategies (Dyson, 2004; Hodgkinson, Whittington, Johnson, & Schwarz, 2006; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2009). In the last few years, the “group wisdom” discussion mode has attracted considerable attention. This can include various activities for further analysis and exploration related to the topic at hand, designed to assist participants in developing a macro-perspective viewpoint. Thus, numerous organizations have adopted this discussion mode.

The World Café is a typical example of the group wisdom discussion mode, an expansion of the traditional workshop modes outlined by Brown and Isaacs (1998). It is a discussion strategy comprising small flexible group discussions and conversation in a relaxed atmosphere aimed at uncovering group wisdom. Discussion can bring out synchronized dialogue, aid in reflection on issues, encourage the sharing of knowledge, and even uncover new opportunities for action. An increasing number of enterprises now use the World Café to explore operational strategies. The difference between ordinary strategy workshops and the World Café is that, in the World Café, group members are changed or rotated out and assistance is needed to transform ongoing thinking into a systematized outline, as a reference for discussion. This type of outline thinking is a utilization of what academics often refer to as a mind map, which can help to focus the discussion while enabling team members to use logical thinking and pay more attention to the details of strategic planning. The World Café is used widely as an instrument for strategy workshops (Carter & Swedeen, 2012; Fouche & Light, 2011; Hodgkinson et al., 2006; Johnson, Prashantham, Floyd, & Bourque, 2010; Schieffer, Isaacs, & Gyllenpalm, 2004); however, the question remains: Is this instrument effective in assisting strategic organization development? No previous studies have been performed to determine whether this is the case. An instrument must be implemented and verified to confirm its validity. The host (table leader) in the World Café plays an important role as facilitator. The host is expected to create a welcoming atmosphere and listen to the real meaning behind different comments, then transform those comments into a discourse that

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creates resonance. In other words, the host must find a balance between dynamic participation and mutual reflection. Thus, the leadership style of the host can determine whether the activity succeeds or fails.

Shonk (1982) discovered that, to create a successful group, leaders have to provide clear prospects and participate positively. Many studies have shown that leaders have a crucial influence on group performance and effectiveness (Morgeson, 2005; Zaccaro & Klimoski, 2002). Katzenbach and Smith (1993) investigated the importance of group leaders through two dimensions. Internally: Group leaders must improve the procedures used in group activities while teaching and supporting group members in the development of creative options for the resolution of problems. Externally: Group leaders must deal with the problems of group boundaries, such as coordinating with other groups or senior members of the organization as well as searching for information and resources required by the group. Leadership style is clearly a key factor affecting the effectiveness of any type of group discussion.

Leadership style has been widely discussed by researchers of organizational and operational performance. Various types of leadership style have been identified, including charismatic leadership (House, 1996), the full range of leadership (Sivasubramaniam, Murry, Avolio, & Jung, 2002), transformational leadership (Bass, 1985), counseling style leadership, guided leadership, authorized style leadership and teaching-leadership. However, transformational and transactional leadership are the most important and broadly utilized methods in current studies (Dvir, Eden, Avolio, & Shamir, 2002).

Transformational leadership increases member confidence and value through excitation, in which members are motivated to work harder and contribute more to the organization. Excitation includes ideological influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized considerations. Transactional leadership focuses on expedient rewards or punishment, through role definition and task distribution, to encourage members to achieve goals. The focus is on contingent rewards, active management by exception and passive management by exception.

This study focused on participants in government-funded business planning classes in Taiwan, to determine the effectiveness of the World Café when applied to processes associated with entrepreneurial strategic planning. We also investigated the role played by table leaders. The objectives of this research are as follows:

1. To investigate the effects of various types of discussion mode on entrepreneurial strategic planning;
2. To observe how the leadership style of the facilitator affects entrepreneurial strategic planning;
3. To determine whether the relationships among various modes of discussion and leadership style influence entrepreneurial strategic planning.

According to the results, we provide suggestions for World Café users to further develop discussion modes, and outline means to increase the effectiveness of this method for strategic planning.

2. Literature review

2.1. Relevance of World Café to strategic planning

World conversations are based on seven core design principles and the assumption that people already have within them the wisdom and creativity to confront even the most difficult challenges. These seven principles include: 1. setting the context, 2. creating a hospitable space, 3. exploring questions that matter, 4. encouraging contribution from everyone involved, 5. connecting diverse perspectives, 6. listening together for patterns and insights, and 7. sharing collective discoveries. When used in combination, these principles provide useful guidance for anyone seeking creative ways to foster authentic dialogue in which the goals are thinking together, accessing collective intelligence, and creating actionable knowledge (Brown, 2001).

World Café dialog focuses on group discussion and rotation, the adoption of new perspectives to maximize the effects of brainstorming, and finally the creation of collective wisdom. The style of discussion is appreciative inquiry, which draws on discussing issues more than once, encouraging members to share their personal perspectives, and listening to others to discover the context and deep problem of multiple perspectives.

In the second half of such discussions, participants devise plans for group activities based upon collective wisdom. Groups exchange ideas by changing their seats and using different directions to discuss questions. This method can expand small ideas to a big organization, elicit new conversations, and initiate collective activities.

Brown (2005) reflected on the World Café, remarking that it has spread and now includes supporters ranging from CEOs to government ministers, senior managers, academics, journalists, and the founders of think-tanks. The World Café has expanded this way because its use has been shown to assist in solving problems quickly and easily. Fullarton and Palermo (2008) compared two workshop techniques: one based on the World Café and the other using large group facilitation (LGF). Their results indicate that the World Café is superior to LGF in terms of enhancing the knowledge and understanding of participants. Participants in the World Café were also far more likely to express the belief that this approach was beneficial to their learning, compared to those who took part in the LGF.

The World Café approach facilitates a series of small- and large-group conversations intended to spur asset-based thinking, generate local solutions, and identify new partners associated with an issue of importance to a particular community. It has been used in a wide range of corporate and community contexts including the development of strategies (Bertotti, Adams-Eaton, Sheridan, & Renton, 2009; Fullarton & Palermo, 2008; Latham, 2008), the enhancement of safety performance, as a support for education, as a means to foster community development, and for a host of other applications (Ritch & Brennan, 2010; Schieffer et al., 2004).

The World Café is particularly effective in dealing with strategy-related issues that require collective wisdom and discussion. This approach enables access to the thoughts of masses of people, and expands marginal ideas to larger groups. This study compares the World Café with conventional strategy workshops with regard to the enhancement of strategic planning capability.

2.2. Relevance of strategy workshops in strategic planning

Strategy workshops are another tool used to develop operational strategies within an organization (Bourque & Johnson, 2008; Hendry & Seidl, 2003; Hodgkinson et al., 2006). The strategy workshops are designed to foster discussion and analysis of a topic in a profound way through various activities, to help participants develop a macro-perspective related to the topic at hand (Bourque & Johnson, 2008).

Strategy workshops focus on facilitating individual growth by improving understanding through work with small groups. In this scenario, the leader sets aside immediate work-related concerns and gathers subordinates for one or two days to discuss topics related to strategy (Johnson et al., 2010). Strategy workshops encourage members to escape the framework and structure of the organization and brainstorm with others to discover alternative ways of achieving goals and resolving difficulties. One survey revealed that 77% of enterprises conduct strategic planning through strategy workshops (Jarzabkowski & David, 2008). Traditional strategy workshops are an integrated concept, collecting participants' opinions and inspiring resonance towards the discussion topic through discussion, speech and lectures. Moreover, participatory group discussion is often applied in strategy workshops, which is regarded as an important means affecting the effectiveness of hosting strategy workshops.

Entrepreneurial proposals were used as instruments to measure the strategic planning capability of the participants. The role played by the table leader in strategy workshop discussions differs from that of the

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