

Community Action through... ...Community Conversations

By Laura A. Owens

The winds of change are blowing our field in a new and exciting direction. Change requires meaningful conversations — to help us understand what is happening, to learn from each other, and to find ways to move forward using the insight and knowledge of those interested in the issues facing our field. Working together toward change engages everyone in exploring the issues, how these issues impact us, and how we must respond. As an organization, APSE is experiencing a renewed commitment to advancing integrated employment for citizens with disabilities. We have begun to engage APSE members in this commitment through *Community Conversations*.

At the 20th Annual APSE Conference June 30-July 2 in Milwaukee, we hosted three *Community Conversations* facilitated by myself and APSE Board members Cecilee Coulson and Wendy Quarles. Two breakout sessions that lasted approximately 60 minutes each focused on three questions:

- 1) What time is it?
- 2) What do you need to learn, re-learn, or unlearn?
- 3) What is your first BOLD move?

The conference concluded with a larger conversation of approximately 200 participants. (Earlier sessions consisted of about 30 people in each.) Participants left feeling a sense of renewal and urgency to move to action with their bold move. Our goal was for participants to take the Community Conversation Tool-Kits provided and host their own *Community Conversation* in their home states.

What are Community Conversations?

Community Conversations are based on the World Café process, which is a structured discussion format designed to build conversations around a meaningful question or questions in order to discover and build

on the collective voice and knowledge of participants. The World Café approach has been used in numerous formats worldwide, as a way to “intentionally harness the power of conversation for business or social value.”

The World Café process is based on seven principles:

- 1) Setting the context;
- 2) Creating a hospitable space;
- 3) Exploring questions that matter;
- 4) Encouraging everyone’s contributions;
- 5) Connecting diverse perspectives;
- 6) Listening together for insights; and
- 7) Sharing collective discoveries.

A *Community Conversation* is a natural way to bring together stakeholders in a relaxed, yet meaningful manner. Enabling participants to contribute and find common ideas as well as diverse perspectives is a natural outcome of the World Café process.

❖ **Setting the context** — This is the first step to holding a *Community Conversation*. In order to move the process forward, it is important to begin by identifying the “what,” “why,” and “who” of the conversation. *What* are the key issues to be explored through the conversation? *Why* is this issue important to the community? *Who* can provide traditional and alternative views of the issue? It is helpful to look beyond the “usual suspects” and engage individuals from the broader community. Invite community members with a variety of perspectives — employers, community leaders, educators, government officials, etc.

❖ **Creating a hospitable space** — It is essential that locations for *Community Conversations* are accessible, affordable, and inviting. Locations can include local businesses, community centers, hotel banquet rooms, country clubs, college dining rooms, or public libraries. To generate a relaxed atmosphere,

round tables should be arranged randomly (rather than in rows) with paper tablecloths and placemats (for documenting ideas and doodling) and markers/pens. Each table should have between 5-8 place settings. To add to the sense of intimacy, candy, flowers, or candles may be added to the tables. Homemade treats and drinks (coffee, hot chocolate or tea) also enhance the sense of a safe place where people feel comfortable sharing their thoughts.

❖ **Exploring questions that matter** — Each table has a host whose role is to encourage participation (of everyone) and record themes during each conversation. After a brief introduction about the purpose of the conversation, one or two questions are posed. Participants begin exploring these “*questions that matter*” through 15-20 minute discussions. Questions should be simple, thought provoking, and have the ability to engage participants in exposing new possibilities. Questions that focus on “*what is useful?*” are more effective at generating active discussion and tend to provoke less defensive reactions than questions that focus on “*what is true?*”

❖ **Encouraging contributions, connecting diverse perspectives, and listening together for insights** — These principles are at the heart of the *Community Conversations*. Participants doodle on the tablecloths and placemats as they discuss the current reality, ideas for change, and suggestions to address the issue posed (through the key question). After 15-20 minutes, participants move to other tables. Table hosts welcome the new participants and provide a quick overview of the previous conversation. Participants continue the discussion and identify the most creative ideas heard from their previous tables and expand upon those ideas. Mixing up attendees multiple times allows for greater collaboration of ideas and opportunities to meet new people, hear new opinions, and create new connections. At the end of the evening — having sat at three different tables — each participant has opportunities to discuss key issues with at least 12-15 other people from their community.

❖ **Sharing collective discoveries** — This is the final phase of the *Community Conversation*. After the final small-group conversation, a “harvest” of ideas with the whole group is facilitated. Participants dis-

cuss what they felt were important and promising ideas, identify emerging patterns, and outline the next steps or bold moves. Ideas can be recorded on flip charts or large post-it notes at each table to serve as the “group memory.” Findings can be written up in a *Community Conversation* summary for participants to use for future conversations, and to share with those who couldn’t attend.

Benefits of Community Conversations

Community Conversations allow participants to generate local solutions to address the challenges and opportunities around integrated employment for persons with disabilities. Engaging employers and other community members in these conversations creates an awareness that people with disabilities want to work and participate in their communities.

Community Conversations also create a venue for a diverse group of individuals with a shared interest to come together. Too often, the voices of people with disabilities are not heard. The World Café format allows these individuals to participate in conversations about their futures and contributions as valued members of their communities.

Community Conversations can elevate overall community awareness about the importance, value, and potential of people with disabilities as contributors to their community (through integrated employment). Conversations generate new ideas, connections, and partnerships that have traditionally gone untapped. *Community Conversations* also serve as a catalyst to jump-start larger community efforts related to employment for citizens with disabilities.

Summary

Community Conversations offer great potential for expanding integrated employment opportunities for persons with disabilities by:

- Drawing in new partners and critical allies;
- Identifying untapped opportunities and community assets;
- Energizing a community around an important issue;
- Thinking outside of systems; and
- Launching new efforts to advance integrated employment for citizens with disabilities. ■

For more information or to obtain a Community Conversation Tool-Kit, contact APSE at (804) 278-9187 or email jenny@apse.org. Laura A. Owens, Ph.D., is the executive director of APSE. For a list of references used in this article, contact the author at lowens@apse.org.