

Conversations that Lead to Change: The 21st Century “Design Salon”



Quick, what’s a salon? Someplace for spiffy nails or a fresh trim?

Nope. A salon is a social gathering, popular in the 19th and early 20th centuries, bringing together people from all walks of life -- thinkers, writers, builders, planners, artists, funders, inventors and more -- in evenings that often included food, drink and the fine art of conversation.

That kind of salon is on the rise again, in Washington DC, where the Global Co Lab organizes gatherings called “Design Salons” that connect multiple generations to explore important issues – and generate real, concrete action.

“My goal is to empower others,” says Co Lab founder Linda Staheli, in order to create action and generate change. Salons are “two-way wisdom bridges,” built on multiple generations’ assets and collective strengths, with the goal of empowering the next generation to be change-makers.

And in an environment where so many connect in digital communities, design salons serve a powerful social purpose: They bring different people together, to talk, listen and make abstract ideas concrete.

Co Lab’s Staheli dreams of “intergenerational design salons across the globe,” created by ordinary people, galvanized by passion and driven to create solutions and generate change.

Here’s how you can host a salon in your home or community

PLAN AHEAD. The most successful salons have a clear and narrow “problem set,” Staheli says. Getting to that clarity can take time. The first step is identifying a concrete question or issue that resonates with people of different generations.

LOCAL AND HYPER-LOCAL IDEAS ARE BEST. Big, broad questions yield more talk than action. Salons that ask specific questions – for example, can a group of teens refurbish computers for people who lack technology? – benefit from a clear issue (technology access) and local impact.

COLLABORATE. Once you have that idea, look for a natural collaborator who might co-host the salon. Maybe you bring passion but lack experience; working with a co-host who has more experience (and passion of their own) can make the salon an intentional and effective collaboration, in line with the Co Lab’s focus.

BUILD YOUR GUEST LIST. Identify the issue you'll address 6 or 8 weeks before the salon and then, "curate" the right mix of people. Old and young, expert and curious – ideally, as diverse a group as you can muster. About eight people is the sweet spot – small enough that everyone can be heard, but not too small. Invite a few extra guests to allow for no-thanks and last-minute no-shows.

SIMILARITIES + DIFFERENCES = SUCCESS. Look for similarities and differences: Similarities include a shared passion and the ability to listen and collaborate. (The latter quality is essential, or a salon can quickly devolve into a lecture.) At the same time, seek differences: Different ages – teens, millennials, experienced adults – and varied levels of expertise and access. Young people need the experience that millennials and older adults contribute – as well as their networks, when offered, and hard-earned guidance.

Send out salon invitations by email 2 weeks ahead; allot two hours for the salon, from the opening "hellos" to the closing words of thanks. Evenings and Sunday afternoons are often good times to meet.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION. "You could have a salon around a campfire – it's small, intimate, warm," says Staheli. "You don't need a fancy house, a fancy living room – it's about getting together and building trust. Create a space of warmth, with food and drink, in a circle. The focus is on listening, brainstorming and collaboration – respecting other voices and other generations, valuing our young people and honoring older folks' experience." Choose a low-key, neutral space – a local library, a school, a living room, a quiet coffee bar – where people can meet. Make sure the location you choose is accessible, by public transport, whenever possible, and with physical features that permit everyone to participate (ramps for people who need them, good lighting, comfortable seating). Provide directions and advice on parking.

IN SALON FARE, LESS IS MORE. It's always good to have something for people to share – snacks say "you're welcome here" without the words. But simpler is better: Cheese and crackers, chips and salsa, soft drinks and wine (when everyone's 21+), some easy sweets. The point is not the food or the host's hospitality, but to create a space of comfort and creative collaboration – and then, to get to work.

STRUCTURE IS YOUR FRIEND. Two hours can seem like a long time. Break it up into bite-sized, 15-minute segments, for a good, productive pace. All Co Lab salons have one facilitator, a volunteer photographer (phone photos fine, nothing formal) and a note-taker or scribe, to document the conversation.

Here's the sequence Co Lab leaders follow; use what makes sense to you.

Welcome/introductions/instructions. Begin with a message of welcome that outlines the salon's purpose. Introduce the co-hosts and the topic: This group has an idea/project/proposal. We're here to help them learn more, by suggesting ideas and resources, offering networks and feedback, and potentially getting involved.

Next, take a few minutes to review and refine the agenda, with input from the group. Tell them there are simple, basic guidelines for the conversation (see the Box below for some ground rules). Establish the expectation of participation (not performance) and mutual respect. "We all check our egos at the door," Linda says. Tell folks you want to make sure that everyone gets heard, and that you need their help. Let them know that notes and photos will be taken

for a short write-up on the Co Lab website. Make sure everyone's settled with snacks and drinks, ready to work.

Finally, do brief, round-robin introductions – one or two minutes when people share their names and why they think they were invited OR what they hope to learn at the salon.

Lay of the land. Using an easel or whiteboard and big sticky-notes, invite the group to brainstorm responses to open-ended questions: What does this issue look like now? What do we know? Who's doing similar work? The facilitator can capture ideas on the sticky notes – or people can write their thoughts on small sticky notes and place them on the larger paper, sharing their ideas with the group. “The idea is to create a quick-pic of that problem set, a visual map of what exists in the area under discussion,” Linda says. It's best accomplished with multiple voices. “It won't be perfect and that is entirely ok.”

Visioning. Next, ask participants what they imagine for the project in 5 years' time, or in an ideal world. Again, use sticky-notes and open brainstorms to gather ideas. Encourage specifics – there are no good or bad ideas – and ask for details: How will they measure success? What are the concrete benchmarks? This is where the conversation shifts from talk to planning for action.

Obstacles and challenges. Ok, you have the idea, and some visioning. Where's the roadblock? As Linda says, “What's between now and the dream?” This is the moment to push back on the idealized vision, and ask, what's standing in our way? Ask everyone to think about the resources they may be able to share: A teen with a knack for coding may need an expert guide to business development; a teacher with 20 years' experience can feel his passion rekindle when faced with enthusiastic, eager kids. Everyone can bring something of value to the conversation.

What now? Building on the prior segments, ask the group, what makes sense right now, as a realistic next step? Is there anything that stands out as an opportunity for collaborative action that folks in the room could make happen? It's important to focus on actions that are small, concrete, realistic and achievable, and build from success to success. Some salons opt for a second round of conversation, to “go deeper into the agenda”; others generate actual plans and assignments. “The ideal is that after one or two salons, you understand the issue and have actions to take, and then start to build some fun, collaborative action that takes on a life of its own,” Linda advises.

Assignments are made; photos are taken; the note-taker agrees to send the notes and photos to the group, everyone is connected by email as well as to the Co Lab, where the salon is documented on their blog. Conversations conclude with thanks, hugs and two hours well-spent.

“The goal is to bring people in and energize them around an issue, and find like-minded collaborators,” Linda says, “to spin out initiatives that run on their own,” without the Co Lab's infrastructure support. (They do request that groups that adopt their model acknowledge Global Co Lab and “send us results” – generally, a few photos and a blog post.)

Global Co Lab's salon template can help you host productive, concrete community conversations that link the generations and aim to create positive change. For more information, visit [GlobalCoLab](#) – take the plunge, host a salon – and be a part of the change you seek.

“The whole idea is for people across the planet to host their own gatherings and to empower intergenerational engagement. Don't wait for a big corporation or a university's Design Lab to invite you. You can make change happen on your own time, in your own way, and in your own space. Be the Change!”

Talking and Listening Across Differences

Global Co Lab uses **guidelines** developed by **Living Room Conversations** to guide salon discussions. As a baseline, it's good to remember that conversation is as much about listening as speaking. The impulse to judge is universal; resist it. Learn more at [LivingRoomConversations](#).

- Be curious and open to learning.
- Show respect, suspend judgement.
- Seek common ground. Look for areas of agreement (and recognize that differences persist).
- Seek to be authentic, encourage authenticity in others.
- Be purposeful and to the point.
- Own the conversation – and guide it.