



# Table of Four

How can we have conversations  
in which each person in turn  
feels listened to and enriched  
by the other people?

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# Introduction

## What is a Table of Four (ToF)?

The ToF is a way to explore in some depth a question or dilemma with a few other people in order to discover new ways to deal with your issue.

You meet with a group of four people. Everyone has already considered in advance which issue they want to deal with. You toss a coin to decide who starts. Suppose Anna starts. She tells the other three her story behind her dilemma. At the moment only Anna is speaking and the other three are listening.

As soon as Anna indicates that she has finished her story, the other three persons take turns responding to her dilemma. For example, when Dirk starts to respond, the other three people keep listening. Nobody interrupts anyone else. When Dirk says that he has finished, it is the next person's turn to respond to Anna.

So at the end, three people have made suggestions and Anna can let their responses take effect on her and choose which suggestions, if any, to take with her or perhaps to act on. That's the handy thing about this process. Anna decides for herself what to do with these responses and often this decision process requires time beyond the ToF or even produces new ideas.

In other words, the "Table of Four" is a way:

1. for you **to feel listened to and seen** by other people in the issue that is important to you, and your story behind it.
2. for you to **hear suggestions** from the listeners on how you could refine your question, on how you could deal differently with your issue, or how you could look at your story differently.

That is why the following roles exist within the ToF:

- one person is central, determines the subject and is therefore the "**speaker**";
- the others have the role of "**active listener**" and are present with open, accepting attention.

After this, the next person is the "speaker". Then the next, etc. To ensure that each participant has the opportunity to discuss his or her issue, a ToF ideally consists of a maximum of four people. See page 5 "How many people may participate in a single ToF?".

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## What is the difference between a "Table of Four" and a conversation in everyday life?

People often experience everyday conversations as an important and fun contribution to their lives. It also often gives a feeling of togetherness. Sometimes an everyday conversation can have similarities to a ToF, but there are often important differences which are explained below.

### **During a ToF, each participant is given the time and opportunity to present his or her topic.**

This is the basis of the ToF.

*In everyday conversations people often tune in to each other as to what they are talking about. Then the topic of conversation is often about an (implicitly) agreed common denominator: the weather, friendships, family, work or the latest news. It may also happen that someone uses a part of your story as a link into telling their own story. That can sometimes be about something completely different from what is important to you.*

### **The ToF process is primarily about "Active Listening": the speaker feels heard and understood by the others.**

With Active Listening, the listener checks whether he/she has understood the speaker's story in terms of content and feeling. After you feel heard and understood as a speaker, you often experience more space to listen to what others have to say. Because of that understanding, it is likely that the suggestions of others are more in line with what you said as a speaker.

*In an everyday conversation, it often happens that people spend time thinking about how they plan to respond to what is being said, rather than paying attention and listening. Others just wait for the chance to hear themselves speak.*

### **A ToF increases the possibility of getting ideas that you can use to make progress with your issue.**

If the speaker feels heard, and especially if he or she also asks questions along the lines of "How can I ...?", the chance of new, relevant suggestions is much higher.

*In an everyday conversation it can happen that people give you advice, albeit well-intentioned, too early and without being asked. You will notice from their advice if they have not understood you properly, so that this advice may not be helpful to you.*

### **In a ToF it is about Both-And instead of Either-Or thinking**

A ToF is set up in such a way that different opinions can stand side by side: BOTH "the speaker has his vision", AND "you can also see it differently". This is necessary to allow creative thinking. In the past, two physics theories contradicted each other: "Light consists exclusively of particles." and "Light consists only of waves." According to the Either-Or logic, light must be either waves or particles. Although neither theory fully explains the nature of light, together still they do. Hence Einstein accepted the dual nature of light as "both a particle and a wave." His Both-And

approach led to much creative research into how this ambiguity could be solved. *In an everyday conversation, one person can state an opinion very firmly, with the attitude "My idea is better than yours" or "You're wrong; I am right" (Either-Or thinking). Often, no one else will dare to argue with them. This silencing is strengthened if some members of the group go along with the person with strongly stated views, and others feel there is no point saying what they really think, or simply cannot be bothered. As a result, there is a good chance that important Both-And insights will be lost and the possibility of creative innovation will disappear.*

### **Confidentiality**

When setting up a ToF, agreements can be made about confidentiality. Sometimes it can be important to you as a "speaker" that the listeners do not refer to your story outside the group. You can also request there should be no discussion after the ToF session without your agreement.

Confidentiality allows you as a speaker to feel safer to speak more freely. *In an everyday conversation there is usually no mention of confidentiality.*

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## **What could you achieve with a Table of Four (ToF)?**

With friends:

- Support each other with everyone's (life) questions.
- Make common issues discussable.
- Promote ~~mutual~~ equality: everyone gets the chance to share his or her issue.
- Increase mutual involvement and connection.
- Increase social safety.
- Breaking through Covid virus isolation
  - via zoom, skype, small groups at home, if permitted.

For yourself:

- When you get stuck with a dilemma or issue in your head, it can be inspiring to hear someone else's perspective and suggestions. In this way your brain makes new connections and you have the chance that you will break out of "thinking in circles".
- To experience what it is like to feel heard and seen with your story.

In organizations and education:

- Teams helping each other to support their issues.
- Supporting students who work individually or together on an assignment to inspire one another, especially when they are at risk of getting stuck or in need of inspiration.
- Learning to deal creatively with differences by promoting Both-And thinking and Active Listening.

# Inviting people

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## How many people may participate in a single ToF?

**Four** is the ideal number of participants for a ToF.

- It is possible with more than four, but it will take much more **time**.
- Compared to a foursome, five or more people must muster much more **mental energy** to process what is taking place. Not only because there are more topics, but also there are proportionally many more interactions to monitor:
  - with 2 people there would only be **1** verbal and non-verbal interaction between them;
  - with 3 people there are **3** interactions between them,
  - with 4 people already **6**,
  - with 5 people **10** !
- **Spatially**, it is important that each participant in a ToF can see each all the others clearly. The usual square or rectangular tables can be used with four participants. With five participants you need five chairs and preferably a round table ....
- Having fewer than four participants reduces the range of input ideas.

**A larger group or team** can be divided into groups of four, who later share with the whole group what their ToF has brought them.

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## Inviting people for a single table ToF

### Whom would you like to invite?

Sometimes it just goes without saying, for example a few friends, neighbours, classmates or colleagues.

Here are a few more considerations:

- Do you want each participant to contribute his or her own issue?  
Or would you prefer to explore a common issue or a group of related issues?
- Is your question about a sensitive, personal topic?  
Then ask people who you know are comfortable about accepting you with this topic.

### How much time do you want to spend on this ToF meeting?

In a ToF it is important that every participant can share what is important to them. That is why it is important to plan at the outset how much time is available and how it will be used.

**Scenario 1: Each person is allotted the same amount of time for his or her topic.**

In order to determine this, it must first be clear how much time is available for the entire ToF meeting. You agree on the exact time distribution at the start of the meeting.

*The advantage of this is that the ToF ends on time and everyone gets an equal chance. A possible disadvantage of this is that not everyone may get the attention his or her subject needs to do justice to it.*

**Scenario 2: Each topic is given the time it needs.**

Bear in mind that not everyone may be able to have their turn at a single meeting. Then it is useful to keep the option open to schedule one or more follow-up ToF sessions.

**How can you invite people?**

If people want more information, you can email them this pdf document or refer to the co-coping website (<https://co-coping.info/en/intro/table-four-tof-introduction>).

**Scenario 1: "from 1 to 2, from 2 to 3, from 3 to 4."**

- Ask the person you would most like to have in your group.  
Also discuss time expectations with this person.
- Then agree together on a third person to invite.
- The three of you then invite the fourth person.

Because everyone is familiar with each other with this setup, this gives a good starting basis for your ToF.

**Scenario 2: just approach people and invite them until you have four.**

Then it becomes very important to agree clear manners at the start of the meeting to ensure sufficient safety for people to stay involved. See also page 7 "[3. Culture setting: Agree on manners.](#)"

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## **Inviting a bigger team or group**

ToF can also be used for bigger teams or groups. Then it is important to give a presentation to the group about the ToF working method at the start.

In some circumstances a larger group might work on related topics within an umbrella theme, each ToF taking one topic or group of topics. In that case it may be useful for each table to give feedback to the whole group after the ToF sessions.

**How to allocate this number of people to ToFs.**

**Option 1:** Make a list of themes that are interesting and relevant for the participants. This can be done in advance by the facilitator, or by agreement at the beginning of the meeting.

*The participants may then choose from the themes on offer. If more than four people wish to work within the same theme, it may be possible to set up a second table ToF to allow that.*

*If there is no umbrella theme, people can also set up their own ToF or join another ToF group if there is still space.*

**Option 2:** When there are no themes on offer, let people draw lots to decide who should go into which ToF.

# Meeting recipe

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## Starting a ToF meeting

### 1. Can everyone see each other clearly?

- Is the arrangement of chairs (and table) comfortable?

### 2. Make time agreements

What have you agreed so far?

- One meeting? Or more?  
*How much time does each person get for his or her topic?*
- Each topic is given the time it needs.  
*If so, then keep open the option to hold follow-up meetings.*

### 3. Culture setting: Agree on manners

Draw up a list together of what everyone needs to participate safely and engaged in the ToF.

The following questions can be asked:

1. What do you need from the others to be able to share what is important to you of your topic?
2. What can we do to make the speaker feel heard and understood?
3. What can we do if someone does interrupt, criticise or talk out of turn?

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## When it is your turn as speaker to present your topic

### **Step 1: You share your question or dilemma and / or you tell your story**

You present your question or dilemma, preferably in the form of "How can I ...?", "How can we ...?". *E.g., How could I we find more information? Whom could I contact about this? How could I interpret or handle this incident differently?*

### **Step 2 (optional, but desirable): ask for a summary**

It is important that you as speaker, **feel** heard and understood:

1. You ask if someone would like to give a summary:  
*"Would anyone like to summarise in their own way what I have said?  
**Tell them also "It doesn't matter if the summary doesn't give a complete picture!  
Because it may be that only after hearing it I will notice that I have missed something out or not said something clearly enough!"***
2. The summariser can ask questions for clarification and then gives his / her summary.
3. Then you ask yourself:  
*"On a scale of 0-10, how much do I **feel** heard with my story?"*

You then tell the summariser the extent to which you feel heard by him/her.

*This is important because it shows appreciation of the effort the summariser has made. It also helps you to recognise what aspects of your of story have come across.*

4. Then you ask yourself "What do I still feel is missing?" You tell the others.

**Step 3: The others take turns at responding to your topic or questions from their perspective**

It is important NOT to discuss what is, or is not, an appropriate response, because a ToF is about a Both-And approach.

After the ToF, you decide for yourself which answers best fit your question. The answers may even trigger a new creative process, resulting in an approach that no one has thought of before.

If the responder seems to disappear a bit into their own story, you might ask "How does your response address my question".... "?"

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**Optional: At the end of a ToF, prepare an overview of what it has yielded**

This can be important when there are **several ToFs**.

Each ToF will choose a person to report afterwards to the whole group.