



Café Culture Discussion Toolkit

Wellcome - funding discovery research into life, health and wellbeing

Fostering a Positive Research Culture: Wellcome's Café Culture Kit sparks honest and open conversations for change

"As a hundred PhD researchers opened the folders I'd put on their tables, I hovered for their reaction. A boardgame? About research culture? They were holding the first prototype of Café Culture, our new discussion toolkit designed to kickstart the often-difficult conversations about research culture."

- Julia Heckenast, Science Policy Adviser, Wellcome

Wellcome wants everyone to benefit from science's potential to improve health and save lives. The people at Wellcome recognised that solving the most pressing global health challenges depends upon thriving research environments that are open, engaged, equitable, ethical and efficient. By taking an innovative approach to promote a research culture of more openness, Wellcome is encouraging researchers to work together to improve research integrity within their organisations using their Café Culture Toolkits.

Why is research culture important?

Research integrity principles of honesty, transparency and open communication, and care and respect may be often mentioned or discussed, drawing on hypothetical examples of what happens when people don't apply these things, but how do we address actual challenges within our own research communities to enact positive change?

Wellcome recognises that direct conversations about the research culture within our institutions can lead to improvements in our research environments for all researchers, and influence the quality of our research, but that these conversations can be difficult.

Wellcome conducted Reimagine Research, a two-year campaign aimed at improving research culture by incorporating greater creativity, inclusivity and honesty. By conducting 94 interviews with UK researchers; holding workshops in nine locations, including London, Manchester, and Glasgow; and creating an online survey completed by 4,267 researchers, the team found that researchers are "proud of their vocation but are worn down by high levels of unhealthy competition, poor mental health and even bullying and harassment". Prompting the question:

'How do we start the conversation about fostering a more positive research culture?'

What is Café Culture?

The Wellcome team created Café Culture to kickstart positive conversations by focusing on what a better culture would look like and inviting ideas for change from those directly working in the research environment.

The Café Culture toolkit, available for free as both a physical and virtual kit for a group of 10, contains counters, cards with various prompts and several blank cards for each participant titled:

Challenge: what should be addressed?

Good Practice: what is already happening?

Idea for Change

What is the thing YOU could do tomorrow to support this idea no matter how small?



Working together, participants are invited to share their experience of research culture and partake in constructive, open and honest discussions in a respectful environment where meaningful solutions to identified challenges could be unearthed.

Some of the topics discussed in these sessions include:

- Job insecurity
- Work-life balance
- Effective management
- Pressure to produce results (individualistic focus)
- Complaint mechanisms
- Continuity of research

Café Culture is an opportunity for you and your colleagues to talk about the challenges you face in research culture, reflect on what a better culture would look like, and propose solutions for how Wellcome and other parts of the system could change.*

Why carry out Café Culture discussions?

Organisations carry out café culture sessions to promote:

- An increase in **open, honest and transparent communication** from researchers when discussing their personal experiences within the research environment.
- **Improved communication and action** between those within research environments and those working at a higher level to **implement wider practices and policies to target challenges. Improved rates of staff well-being** due to the kit's solution-focused approach, placing individual actions and needs at the heart of any proposed actions for change. For example, one participant, when asked to reflect on what they could do to improve upon their own experiences of the research environment, stated: *"Be honest about my workload and what is sensible - so that younger staff do not adopt my tendency to overcommit, as it is unhealthy"*.

The University of Bath began using the Café Culture Sessions to establish a baseline for their research culture work, following the December 2021 Research England announcement of the Enhancing Research Culture (ERC) Fund.

"We conducted a series of seven online Café Culture Workshops with 129 academic and professional services staff. The aim of the workshops was to facilitate conversations about research culture and gather insights on opportunities for positive cultural and practical change. The workshop themes we identified have informed the content of our action plan and will be embedded in the business of the Research Culture Working Group as we plan our next actions and activities."

- Julie Barnett, University of Bath

Wellcome has now shared over 500 physical kits, with many more digital downloads. To encourage that next step, and to review engagement, the team used an online 'Ideas Forum' where groups and individuals could share ideas for improving research culture developed during workshops. 121 ideas were posted to the Forum while it was live, attracting hundreds of likes and dozens of comments.