

# Learning & Encounter Format Round Tables

## Hinterzarten (Black Forest)

### Target Group: Engaged Citizens

#### General Information and Context

The first Round Table (RT) in Hinterzarten was initiated by a resident who had previously experienced one in Freiburg and is a member of IFIS. The goal was to bring this format to Hinterzarten – a request for financial support from the municipality to build the Round Table was submitted and approved. The RT Initiative started about a year ago (2024), initially meeting every 2–3 months, now meeting monthly. Hinterzarten has 2,500 inhabitants; occasionally people from neighboring communities also take part. Around 30 people are regularly involved – between Round Table sessions and volunteer projects. The Round Table is a sub-activity of the “Initiative Future Hinterzarten” (Initiative Zukunft Hinterzarten). Communication also happens through articles in the municipal newsletter (Amtsblatt).

Facilitation and format design was provided by IFIS, that was informed by the findings of the Cohere+ project, and in particular of the polarisation dialogues and the coherence based taxonomy of skills. Each meeting starts with an artistic impulse (music, museum, etc.), encouraging associative thinking and creating a sense of **resonance, coherence, flow, and openness to outcomes**. The round table is open to anyone and while there are many people, participating every time, many people also join once or twice.

The RT approach uses an oblique approach to skill building. The intention in these round table conversations not to “learn” new skills explicitly, but have engaged citizens experience a different type of relating that led to building skills implicitly, as well as [create very tangible outcomes in a light and efficient way.](#)

As the organisers guaranteed confidentiality of the individual contribution, the actual feedback data cannot be disclosed. (The quotes further in the text were collected after obtaining explicit consent.) In any case it was interesting to note that the personal effect of the round table conversations showed up usually after several weeks after the event in different ways.

#### Projects Implemented in 1 year

1. Construction of the Round Table itself.
2. Train station underpass: previously dirty, cleaned up by RT volunteers with an article in the newspaper and positive community response.
3. Boules court: restored and promoted; now open weekly to everyone
4. Public wood-fired oven in the Kurpark: built with help from the municipal maintenance department; a volunteer group hosts a monthly baking day.
5. Herb spiral in the spa park: realized with a lot of volunteer labor, despite initial objections (“doesn’t fit the park’s concept”).

#### Future project ideas:

- A working group on youth engagement.
- The Story Café (currently under review by the municipal council).

## Support from the Municipal Council

- The municipality provided financial support for the construction of the Round Table.
- Hinterzarten offers ideational support to RT, but financial resources only approved drafts within a yearly budget for citizens projects (10.000 Euro) - RT evenings run on a donation basis.
- The municipal newsletter immediately publishes RT updates, showing clear support from the mayor.
- The mayor of Breitnau has expressed interest in setting up a similar Round Table.
- Projects such as the herb spiral were presented to and approved by the municipal council (despite two opposing votes).
- A current proposal before the council concerns an “Story Café” (“How it was then and how it is today”).

## Key Patterns from the RT experiences at Personal and Collective Level

### Personal Level

- Participants describe the meetings as *“inspiring and enriching”*, *“surprisingly creative”*, and some even said, *“I now feel excited about living in Hinterzarten again!”*
- People experience **more openness** and curiosity toward others, including those with different views or backgrounds. A participant that is dealing with many private and public stakeholders in the municipality said “I have never experienced such an open exchange of ideas”
- New residents find the Round Table an **easy entry point** to meet people and learn how the community works.
- The experience of **being listened to** and contributing ideas strengthens self-confidence and a **sense of agency**.
- The experience of increased agency is supported by the creative ideas that emerge through the quality of dialogue and the implementation of practical projects
- However, there were also **ambivalences** expressed as some participants find the conversations “too personal” or fear self-disclosure and a certain group pressure.
- **Effects often appear weeks later** – especially relatively freshly arrived participants but also others see more personal relation to places and feel more at home (“When I walk through the village, I feel more connected”).

Some participants described their experiences in even more vivid and personal terms: one woman shared, *“I had hidden myself for 40 years – now I have no more excuses not to do what I’ve always wanted. I feel seen and encouraged to show myself.”* Another said she left the session *“electrified and full of energy,”* while another noted that *“there was no pressure – just space and time to express myself.”* Several participants highlighted that “it was pleasant and round,” that “the atmosphere was relaxed,” and that “the exchange was surprisingly deep yet easy.” Such feedback confirms that the Round Tables create both safety and vitality — a space where self-expression and mutual regard naturally grow.

## Collective Level

- The gatherings increased **trust and cohesion** in the local network. Participants discover shared values and begin to act together.
- Commitment to the common good and strengthened confidence (“We can make a difference”).
- Several community projects have already emerged — such as restoring the **village boules court**, building a **public bread oven**, and creating a **herb spiral** in the park.
- The process supports **constructive collaboration** between citizens and local government: the municipality has shown symbolic and practical support, including media visibility
- The respectful dialogue format helps reduce polarization, helps aging or disadvantaged individuals to be seen with their needs and thus creates a **culture of inclusion and cooperation**. As one participant put it “Religious or many social gatherings (e.g., church services) usually don’t create the same depth of connectedness in such a short time, even though I meet the same people every other sunday.”
- **Systemic awareness grows** through the diversity of perspectives, “the system starts seeing itself. and questions are being asked differently with more awareness of the underlying complexity of the social/economic/environmental constraints.

## Insights Around Skill Building (General and Coherence-Related)

The Round Tables are not just about discussion, they are a living learning environment where **participants strengthen practical and interpersonal skills essential for modern community life**. Using more everyday language, these skills can be grouped as follows:

### Personal and Interpersonal Capacities

- Constructive communication – learning to express opinions clearly while listening respectfully to others.
- Empathy and emotional awareness – noticing what others feel and finding common ground even in disagreement.
- Self-reflection – recognizing one’s own role, biases, and contributions in the group process.

### Practical and Organizational Skills

- Teamwork and coordination – organizing small projects, distributing roles, and seeing ideas through to action.
- Initiative and responsibility – moving from talk to doing, and taking ownership for shared outcomes.
- Community leadership – motivating others and communicating ideas in ways that attract support.

### Coherence-Related Competencies

- Staying grounded under tension and when encountering not-knowing – holding different viewpoints without losing connection.

- Seeing the bigger picture – understanding how local issues link together (e.g. environment, tourism, economy, youth work)
- Creating flow and resonance – through the artistic openings and mindful communication, participants learn to co-create a sense of presence and collective “flow.”

## Impact

### Practical Impact on the community

The RT acts as a mediation platform between residents and the municipality, reducing the energy gradient towards wanting to come into action as citizens and seeing actual projects being implemented.

This includes

- Greater transparency in local affairs – connections and interdependencies become clearer.
- The RT serves as a forum for integrating polarizing opinions – different perspectives are voiced and held together.
- Cautious approach to initiatives: e.g., a proposed shopping bus for elderly residents to a nearby village sparked discussion, as it could harm the only local grocery store.
- Through RT discussions, participants realized that administrative barriers (e.g., environmental regulations) are often the real source of problems – thus creating broader perspectives and understanding of systemic causes.

Participants also highlighted smaller but highly symbolic shifts — such as noticing more friendliness and connection in daily life. Others mentioned that “we have begun to see our environment differently — even a clean underpass or a shared baking day feels like progress.” These micro-level changes indicate the Round Table’s role in strengthening social trust and civic culture.

### Expected long-term effects and vector goals

- Greater sense of belonging and civic pride — participants feel part of something meaningful in their town.
- Enhanced confidence and initiative — people discover they can shape their community, not just comment on it.
- More constructive communication culture — leading to better collaboration in associations, local politics, and everyday life.
- Increased well-being and connection — participants describe more energy, optimism, and mutual appreciation.
- A regional ripple effect — other municipalities (such as nearby Breitnau) have expressed interest in adopting the format.

Over time, these effects may deepen social trust, **strengthen local democracy**, and make communities more adaptive and resilient.

Several newer participants describe concrete personal transformations — feeling “motivated to take action,” “reconnected with nature,” or “encouraged to take responsibility again after disappointment with politics.” Some mentioned that the RTs have restored their hope that civic dialogue can be meaningful, while others felt “*beseelt*” (*deeply moved and inspired*) after the meetings. This points toward sustained psychological and social wellbeing, not only in participants but also in the broader relational field of the community.]

### Impact in relation to the goals of our Cohere+ project

1) Field knows/sees itself	Strengthening local coherence: The Round Tables help the community to “see itself” — making invisible dynamics visible and fostering shared understanding.
2) Field coherence has increased in the networks we engage with.	Building civic capacity: Participants learn collaborative skills and develop confidence to act for the common good.
3) Process and tools developing to welcome and train new people and exchange knowledge among experienced players.	Increasing inclusiveness: The open format allows participation beyond formal organizations, attracting new residents and diverse voices.
4) Field reaches out and engages mainstream leaders and attracts citizens to learn and collaborate	Demonstrating practical outcomes: Visible projects (e.g., public oven, herb spiral) make the process credible and motivating.

### Suggestions for Future Iterations for Round Table Dialogues

- Introduce simple reflection tools — e.g., short follow-up surveys to track changes in participants’ perspectives over time.
- Deepen peer learning — connect Hinterzarten’s experience with other communities hosting dialogue-based initiatives.
- Maintain the artistic opening — it remains a powerful entry point into presence and creativity.
- Ensure long-term support — combine voluntary energy with institutional backing from the municipality or local foundations.

## Conclusion

The Hinterzarten Round Tables show how dialogue, creativity, and civic engagement can come together to generate both inner and outer coherence.

They are more than meetings — they are living systems of community learning, where people rediscover their capacity to relate wisely, act purposefully, and co-create the kind of place they want to live in.



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