



6th International Congress on Congress Organization Meeting Failure and Participant Frustration

Technical facilitation of meeting dynamics and participant interaction : 1

- from conference organization for well-behaved participants to conference organization for the satisfaction of participants

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This is the first of three articles based on a presentation to the session on Technical Equipment at the 6th International Congress on Congress Organization. The second article will be concerned with the types of meeting for which these remarks are particularly relevant. The third article will be concerned with specific possibilities for the technical support of improved conference dynamics.

Introduction

A significant number of conferences, whether national or international, may be judged a failure or a waste of resources despite the fact that

- (1) all conventional physical technical, and administrative facilities and services are used competently with the guidance of experienced personnel;
 - (2) the programme of the conference is well-planned and conforms to the interests and priorities of the different groups of participants;
 - (3) the meeting sessions and the social sessions are well-organized and efficiently run.
- A frequent source of participant frustration within a well-organized meeting is the lack of adequate contact between participants in terms of their professional interests and commitments (namely other than purely social contact).

Little attention has been devoted to the technical support of contact formation and the facilitation of the associated meeting dynamics, and specifically to :

- 1) facilitating contact between participants within the conference as a whole who do not realize that they have commitments or professional interests in common;
 - (2) increasing the quantity and the quality of communication between individual participants and / or with the chairman or speaker during a particular meeting session.
- This is particularly serious when the objective of the conference is primarily the clarification of issues and the formation of consensus rather than the reporting of substantive information or the satisfaction of protocol requirements.

Conference dynamics summarized

A conference is a dynamic communication environment. It is a concentration and intensification of the pattern of ongoing interaction between participants prior to and following any particular conference. Both the organizers and participants may well meet together frequently in other conference settings on related topics. The particular communication pattern which is enhanced in a given conference by the formal

meeting structure selected is a momentary distortion in the general communication pattern. It is considered necessary by the organizers in order to highlight current issues and to provide a means of supplying new information and arriving at consensus. The programme and meeting session structure represent a momentary compromise between :

- (1) the organizers' understanding of what participants really want or are willing to pay to receive
 - (2) the organizers' understanding of what they themselves want and what participants should want
 - (3) the organizers' understanding of what their sponsors want
 - (4) and constraints of time, resources, and physical or technical facilities.
- However whilst many conferences are organized primarily in the light of interests perceived by the organizer, increasingly conferences must respond to a greater degree to the real needs of the participant as expressed during the conference. Participants do not want to be only consumers of what speakers produce. Conferences are for the benefit of participants, not just for the benefit of speakers and organizing bodies. Conference participants are increasingly critical and less passive in their response to sterile meeting environments and to seemingly arbitrary imposition and manipulation of particular communication patterns during the course of a conference. Experienced participants

have a number of reasons for attending a given conference. They have their own private agendas. For them the travel expenses are in large part justified by the opportunity of meeting colleagues with similar interests with which they may (or may not yet) have long-standing working relationships. Objectives of fruitful meetings include :

- (1) maximization of beneficial contact between participants with complementary interests and commitments.
- (2) maximization of participant ability to
 - initiate new action
 - inform and involve other interested participants
 - form groups and formalize group action (to the degree necessary).
- (3) maximization of flexibility of programme structure informal meetings and associated meeting room allocation without disrupting the coherence of the conference as a credible setting capable of attracting key resource people and sponsors.

Some indicators that current conference organization is inadequate

The following phenomena may be observed in an « efficiently » run conventional conference :

- (1) During a sessions some participants wish to question the speaker but cannot because of time limitations. The selection of those that do speak is arbitrary even when based on a process of selecting and combining written questions collected by hostesses.
- (2) After a session a group of participants crowds around the speaker(s). Not all can ask questions and not necessarily those with the best questions. The speaker cannot make adequate contact and frequently cannot even speak to his colleagues from other parts of the world with commitments in concurrent sessions.
- (3) Where the organizers permit and facilitate the use of a message notice board, it is covered in a multitude of messages of great interest but which do not necessarily reach the (busy) persons to whom they are addressed.
- (4) During meeting sessions, a discontented crowd may form around the coffee bar.
- (5) According to a Unesco study, it is — only the novice conference goers who attend the meeting sessions as laid down in the programme. More experienced participants select sessions and parts of sessions and spend the remainder of their time in the hallways talking to the eminent people seated at strategic spots to receive them. However the most eminent people, according to the Unesco study, are to be found outside the conference centre in a bar arranging the next conference, or other conferences with which they are associated.
- (6) After a session, if the speaker has copies of his paper available, there is a scramble to obtain one. If not, parti-

Extracts from a letter from a group of disenchanting conference participants

Dear Sir,

I am writing to you on behalf of a group of international NGO executives who have just returned from a meeting of two hundred persons from all parts of the world — namely, the International Conference of... On the way back horns we began talking about the effectiveness of such events. Some of us attend meetings like this regularly and we are questioning their value. This last conference on the... issue was just as sterile as the previous ones in spite of hopes that we could start afresh. One sees the same faces, only at different meeting sites; one hears the same positions defended and one sits in the same kind of hotel or conference room. Somehow we must find another process for such international gatherings.

As we talked on the way home, we agreed that such meetings of 100-200 participants (assembled at costs estimated at \$ 700,000 as a minimum) are like eight cylinder engines running on only two cylinders. We estimated that 85 % of the group listened while 15 % spoke. Not only is this an extremely inefficient use of human resources, it means that many travelled all this way without ever having the opportunity to express their needs and ideas. The more aggressive persons, those speaking the conference language fluently — the conference professionals, still dominate these events. Frankly we feel such meetings are often oppressive...

participants must wait patiently to give their names and addresses to the speaker to receive a copy by mail.

(7) The distribution of documents by participants (whether or not they are speakers), is usually a very haphazard and disorganized process dependent upon the whim of the organizers and the aggressivity of participants with something to distribute.

The key question is : Should participants travel long distances, in many cases thousands of miles at great cost, in the hopes that by chance they may establish contact with just those people having the same, or complementary, professional interests and commitments ? Should they be expected to accept features of the programme which do not correspond to the interests of a significant number of participants present, thus wasting their time and the opportunity for the more beneficial interaction which may well have been the factor originally motivating them to attend the conference in the first place ?

Index of inter-participant communication effectiveness

Such an index does not exist. Opinion surveys of participants during and after

the meeting might however establish the approximate number of new and useful contacts made per participant. The purpose of such an index would be to enlighten organizers as to the amount of time participants perceive as usefully spent as against time spent conforming to communication requirements perceived as of relatively little use. A key question to a participant might be : how many of the new contacts made after the first day of the conference could have beneficially been made on the first day ? And : how many contacts were made too late to be beneficially explored on that occasion ?

Participant communication checklist

To clarify these matters it is useful to look at a checklist of participant communication desires (see pages). It should be noted that this is quite distinct from a code of conduct for meeting participants, namely how they should behave in order that the meeting should function according to the desires of the organizers (*). In this case, it is rather how the meeting should be organized in order that the participant should be satisfied. The distinction is between the responsibilities of the participant permitted to participate in the conference and the rights of the participant having paid to be there.

Checklist of possible participant communication requirements (tentative)

A participant may well be prepared to pay whatever reasonable cost is necessary in order to have good communication guaranteed by technical support and thus ensure significant benefit from his investment in the (usually considerable) cost of participation in meetings. The participant may be assumed to want the following communication problems to be resolved for him during an ideal conference. The following list does not take into account the conventional problems of sound amplification, interpretation, audio-visual assistance and other facilities increasingly considered as normal.

1. Communication by a participant within a particular session

- a. Ability of a participant to inform (a) the speaker, and/or (b) the chairman, and/or (c) all participants, and/or (d) a selected group of participants of points such as :
 - (1) his agreement or disagreement with the speaker
 - (2) his agreement or disagreement with a proposal under discussion
 - (3) his desire to move onto the next agenda item
 - (4) his desire for clarification of the point being made
 - (5) his desire for the speaker to make his point more rapidly
 - (6) his desire to adjourn the session
 - (7) his desire to break into small group discussion sessions.
- b. Ability of a participant to participate in electronically-assisted weighted voting on issues in order to arrive at consensus without polarization and oversimplification of the issues under discussion.
- c. Ability to receive an extensive summary of a session into which he has come late, or a brief summary of the past 5-10 minutes of the session if he has been otherwise temporarily occupied.
- d. Ability to convey a message to any other participant he can identify during the course of a meeting session (e.g. to the last speaker from the floor to several speakers from the floor with whom he is in agreement).
- e. Ability to exchange messages with one or more known people during a session to determine a common course of action (e.g. on leaving for a discussion over coffee, or discussion on how to vote).

2. Communication by a participant within the conference framework

2.1 With the organizers

- a. Ability to convey messages to (and receive messages from) the administrative officer responsible for revising travel, hotel and other such arrangements.
- b. Ability to receive up-to-the-minute information on
 - (1) the conference programme amendments
 - (2) the reallocation of rooms for meeting sessions
 - (3) any rescheduling of his own time in the light of the previous points, particularly when he has commitments in particular sessions.

2.2 With other participants in general

- a. Provision of a (regular updated) list of names of people present at the conference with some indication of how they may best be contacted.
- b. Provision of a (regular updated) list of names of people present at the conference with interests and commitments similar to those he has indicated as his own

c. Ability to inform all (interested) participants of :

- (1) a proposal for a new issue for discussion or action.
 - (2) a proposal for the organization of a new working group
 - (3) the announcement of a briefing session or audio-visual event
 - (4) a proposal for a new resolution
 - (5) names proposed for election and to receive the names of the persons interested.
- d. Ability to leave messages for (and receive messages from) people he is not able to contact directly with the minimum of delay before the messages are received.
 - e. Ability to have a series of contact meetings (two or more persons) scheduled and re-scheduled according to the changing availability of his prospective contacts, the respective priorities he attaches to them, and his and their respective fixed commitments.
 - f. Ability to specify which portions of his time are
 - (1) definitely committed to particular sessions
 - (2) definitely committed to his own private schedule
 - (3) definitely committed to particular contact meetings, however the other person may want them re-scheduled
 - (4) currently available for automatic scheduling and re-scheduling of proposed contact meetings.
 - g. Ability to re-specify his interests and communication preferences as new issues emerge during the conference or as more desirable communication possibilities become evident.
 - h. Ability to acquire a mailing list of participants having certain types of interest in order that he may send to them (1) during the conference, or (2) after the conference, a copy of some text/report/brochure/meeting invitation, etc.
 - i. Ability to indicate the specific areas of activity in which he has engaged in the past, possibly with an indication of the resulting reports (or articles), so that other participants can leave messages indicating that they would like to be sent copies (or receive further details) after the conference.

2.3 With much-solicited key persons (in the case of a non-key person)

Ability to indicate to a selected eminent person his particular interest and reason for a private discussion, given that such persons are usually faced with the need to reduce the number of people with whom they interact on such occasions.

2.4 With non-key persons (in the case of another key person)

The following measures are required, particularly by popular or eminent persons, to prevent exposure to a flood of communication which they may not be able, or wish, to handle. (They are specially required to reduce communication from persistent, or even eccentric, participants.)

- a. Ability to specify
 - (1) from what categories of participant he does (or does not) want to receive communications
 - (2) from which specific participants he definitely does (or does not) want to receive communications
 - b. Ability to specify
 - (1) to which categories of participant he may be available for contact, if there is similarity or complementarity of interest.
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- (2) In what sort of context he is prepared to make contact (private meeting, coffee sessions, interaction with a group, talk to a small meeting, or prepared conference, etc.)
- (3) what maximum period he is prepared to allocate to such a contact
- (4) what he is prepared to do in any session specifically arranged for his participation.
- c. Ability to exchange messages with (possibly unknown) participants to ensure, if necessary, that they define precisely the purpose of any proposed contact meeting.
- d. Ability to specify
- (1) which people should be able to leave priority messages for his attention
 - (2) which people should only be able to leave non-priority messages for his attention.
- e. Ability to specify which people should be informed, but not consulted, about his re-scheduling of his contacts with them.
- t. Ability, in the case of a speaker, to receive messages containing the names and addresses of participants who request a copy of the text of the speech, when available.
- g. Ability not to have his name listed in the general lists of participants and their interests as distributed to certain categories of participants, but only a contact num-

ber, in order that he can assess the quality of the proposed contact before responding.

- 2.5 With key persons (*in the case of another key person*)
The following measures are required in order to facilitate communications between key persons present at a conference.
- a. Ability to specify which people should be able to contact him immediately and directly, without the necessity of leaving messages, or by leaving priority messages.
 - b. Ability to specify
 - (1) which (even more eminent) people have the right to re-schedule their planned contacts with him, without consultation
 - (2) which people he must consult before re-scheduling his contacts with them.
3. Communication by a participant with the outside world
- a. Ability to receive messages from his home office and send messages to his home office.
 - b. Ability to communicate (i.e. leave and receive messages) with other individuals unable to attend the conference physically because of commitments elsewhere, such that for many purposes they may be considered to be present at the conference.

Implication of augmented meeting dynamics for conference organization

1. Necessity for organizers to be able to re-schedule, during the course of the conference, on the basis of information received at that time :

- (1) the allocation of pre-planned sessions to particular rooms, according to the number of persons who indicate they will attend. (This might include the cancellation of some sessions to give place to others.)
- (2) the allocation of rooms to sessions proposed at the last minute on the basis of interests that have emerged during the course of a particular session.
- (3) the allocation of audio-visual equipment and simultaneous interpretation facilities to meeting rooms according to revised requirements.

2. Necessity for organizers to be able to exert the optimum degree of control over the flow of communications in order to maximize interparticipant contact and formulation of new activity without completely disrupting the conference or exceeding the possibilities of the available facilities.

3. Necessity for organizers to be able to shift the balance of communication patterns between

- (1) an essentially hierarchical mode
- (2) a small group session mode
- (3) an amorphous meeting mode

in order to achieve the advantages of the network mode wherever possible. Clearly whenever the meeting is moving towards sterility, increased participant interaction should be facilitated, but whenever this increases beyond the ability of the conference to contain it, then the hierarchical mode should be used to a greater extent.

4. Necessity for organizers to be able to invoice participants according to their precise use of the conference dynamic facilities (e.g. on a cost per communication or per contact basis), or to identify which forms of such communications should be subsidized to facilitate certain types of communication essential to the healthy dynamics of the conference (e.g. on a low or zero cost per communication basis).
Clearly organizers are faced with the problem of handling flexible evoking conference programmes rather than the traditional pro-determined conference programme. These problems have not yet been explored to any degree.