

TOWARDS AN OUTLINE OF A SELF-REFLEXIVE CONFERENCE

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Data/Place : The conference site should be such as encourage a relaxed atmosphere whenever appropriate. This could mean a building surrounded by parkland for walking. The weather should not prevent this and discussions on the grass should be possible. The conference should be residential to permit fluid overflow of discussion late into the evening. On the other hand it should have non-dormitory accommodation for those who need privacy. The meeting room layout, chairs, heating, floor covering and audio/visual equipment should permit both formal and informal settings. It should be possible to "get away" from the conference into an alternative environment (e.g. a small town) to change mind-sets. Unfortunate compromises should be avoided.

People : The conference should be attractive to people representing a very complete spectrum of perspectives, taking into account :

- fields of interest (arts, sciences, conventional, unconventional, etc)
- preferred modes of action (research, self-expression, organization, etc)
- preferred modes of meeting (discussion, dance, conference, audio/visual, etc)
- cultures/languages/nationalities (even if a common language is used for communication)
- organizational affiliation (governmental, nongovernmental, industry, church, etc)

The most important factor is not any of the above but rather whether the person can respond to a catalytic environment, can help to reinforce it, and can move and blend with any emerging processes (or creatively oppose it). This requires a sense that there is somewhere to go, but that the person's own favoured direction does not reflect the whole truth. Ideally it should be possible to ask of participants that they be neutral to whether they end up being key speakers or not speaking at all, if that is the way the process evolves.

Goals : The essential goal should be open and should emerge from the conference process. The point being that if it is necessary to define the central goal, the participants are thus defined as being of a type requiring that their goals be defined for them. The challenge lies elsewhere however, with the goal defining process amongst sincere, committed, goal-defining individuals - here is where breakthroughs are required.

Preliminary goals should aim for collective awareness of the conference structure and process, as a reflection of participant response to the challenge of working together. Namely the preliminary task is to make the conference, in all its diversity of orientations, collectively self-aware. This means exposing many of the hidden realities which structure conference dynamics and frequently render such exercises superficial.

Given the nature of the participants required, it is not necessary to fear any lack of substance for discussion. Programmes, speakers, discussion leaders and topics can be re-ordered according to participant interest as it emerges. The challenge is to identify within the process those substantive inputs which will take the group as a whole a step further at any given time. And ideally there should emerge a sense of convergence, fed by such appropriate inputs. The means of achieving this are as important to society as the ends which emerge.

Style/Format : Since all the substantive questions have been debated and analyzed on very many occasions (to the point of alienating from such events many of those participants who are most desirable), it is only through the style and format that new ground can be effectively broken. Their importance lies in the fact that they reflect participant ability to provide themselves with a suitable working structure - if they cannot be innovative in this domain, avoiding past failures, then collectively they have nothing of relevance to communicate to the outside world about which they are concerned. The preparation for this conference should therefore result in the elaboration of a "menu" of styles and formats. The key to success lies in providing participants with the ability to move according to need between formulas identified on the menu (and others which emerge spontaneously). To exploit the metaphor further, the conference should be able to compose a suitable sequence of dishes for itself, with some groups of participants favouring particular dishes, and some dishes shared by all. Tastes differ. Any feasibility study should focus on this question and all that it implies.

Summary : The stress here is on the significance currently buried in the simplistic manner in which conference organizers opt for a "packaged experience" to offer to potential participants, thus treated as passive consumers (even of experiential sessions). By giving programme, structure and process choices back to participants, the social reality re-enters the conference environment. A style and format is required in which real choices can be made with their attendant risks. To aim for anything less than this is to express lack of confidence in the quality of participants and in their collective responsibility - this attitude is self-reinforcing. Participants will behave like children if treated as such. Worse still is the widespread acceptability of "soap opera" conferences. The time has come to recognize, as the children's tale recalls, just when the emperor is without clothes. The conference structure and process should itself emerge both as a symbol of a new reality and as a suitable container (or chalice) for a new pattern of energies. Participants will not lose in such a co-creative operation.