

Technical facilitation of meeting dynamics and participant interaction : 2

Introduction

In Part I of this paper (January 1976), it was suggested that 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.

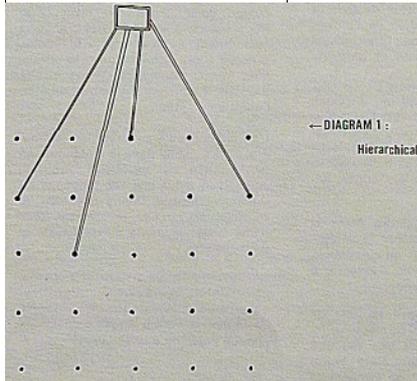
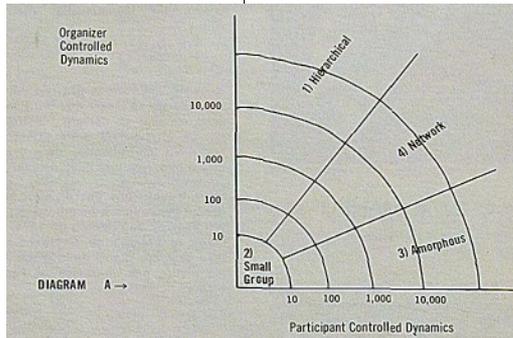
This paper is concerned with the types of meeting which risk being judged a failure under certain circumstances. By coming to a clearer understanding of the flows of communication for different purposes, it may be possible to increase the flexibility with which meetings are designed and conducted. Part I of this paper suggested that new communication flows were required. Part III (in this issue) discusses some technical means of facilitating such flows.

Meeting types

It is useful to distinguish between four basic types of meeting which are best suited to different purposes. The four types are of course extreme cases which in reality blend into one another. The relationships between the extremes can however be usefully illustrated by the accompanying diagram (see Diagram A).

1. Hierarchical meetings (see Diagram 1)

- a. Protocol and policy : These tend to involve a speech by an eminent person which participants must listen to either as a gesture of respect, or for reasons of protocol, or as a matter of good public relations, or because it may outline new policies for the first time.
- b. Exhortative : These tend to involve a speech by a respected per-



son exhorting participants to some new effort, namely a speech by a skilled orator conceived as a means of arousing enthusiasm or of changing beliefs in support of some new action.

- c. Information : These tend to involve a speech by some technically competent person in which new facts are presented, or the results of programmes, or a detailed outline of new programmes.

- d. Administration : These tend to involve the presentation of annual or financial reports, election of officers, etc.

Advantages : These include the absence of restriction on the number of participants; the ability for those organizing the meeting to inform large numbers of some current situation; and the ability of participants to hear the views of individuals who would otherwise be inaccessible to them.

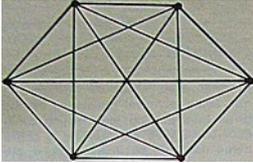


DIAGRAM 2 :
Small Group

Disadvantages: These include the restriction on participant expression; the suppression of viewpoints not in accord with those of the organizers of the meeting, or at least not envisaged within the programme framework; and the channelling of participant expression via the podium rather than directly between participants.

2. Small group meetings (see Diagram 2)

- a. Workshop : These tend to concentrate on the exchange of experiences, discussion of proposals, and clarification of issues.
- b. Committee : These tend to concentrate on the elaboration of specific proposals, drafting of reports, etc.

Advantages : These include the ability to focus in detail and at great length on complex matters; the facilitation of expression of minority viewpoints; and the ability of all present to participate fully in discussion.

Disadvantages : These include the difficulty of informing any plenary session of the substance of the discussions, of taking into account the viewpoints of parallel group meetings on related topics, and of integrating the conclusions into the larger perspective of the plenary body.

3. Amorphous meetings (Diagram 3)

- a. Exhibitions : These involve the free movement of participants and their exposure to a wide variety of information on exhibit stands, according to their special interests.
- b. Social occasion : These include unstructured receptions and parties involving much self-selected interaction between participants.
- c. Open-meetings : These are un-directed, or minimally directed, large meetings, with much movement and interaction between participants. There is frequently relatively free access to the public-address system.

Advantages : These include considerable opportunity for participants to make contact with one another on the basis of their special interests and to choose the manner in which those interests should be developed (whether by holding a small meeting immediately, or planning some collaborative enterprise for some later date).

Disadvantages : These include a considerable restriction on general coordination and consensus formation owing in some cases on a general state of disorder.

4. Network meetings (Diagram 4)

This is an emergent form of meeting organization characterized by the following:

- a. Flexibility : Rapid conversion, in the light of emerging consensus during the course of the meeting, to and from the other forms of meeting organization.
- b. Emergent issues : Identification of emergent issues and formation of subgroups to clarify them rapidly so as to maintain the momentum of the meeting.
- c. Alternative sessions : Organization of alternative sessions not originally envisaged in the programme or room allocation, where significant numbers of participants find that they have more in common on subjects not scheduled in the pre-established meeting programme.

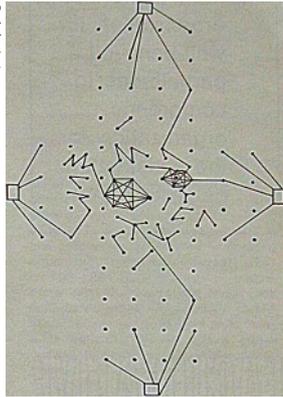
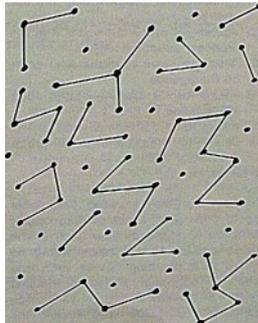


DIAGRAM 4 :
Network

Advantages : These include a much greater response to the needs of participants present rather than the imposition upon them of a programme which may not reflect their pre-occupations or the areas in which they consider interaction to be both possible and useful.

Disadvantages : These include a considerable strain on the ability of the conference organizers to maintain the coherence of the meeting without having it endangered by emerging issues and desires for programme restructuring.



DIAGRAMS :
Amorphous

The first three types of meeting have been well-explored. The dynamics of such meetings and the technical problems of organizing them are well-known. Considerable expertise and technical equipment is available to ensure that such meetings function efficiently and to the satisfaction of participants content with the set-pieces of the pre-established programme. Such meetings require that participants function in a predictable, well-behaved manner within the framework provided and that their satisfaction with the meeting should primarily be derived from the speakers, panelists and moderators of the sessions established in the printed programme by the organizers. The focus of such meetings is therefore on the pre-determined meeting session framework. Considerable problems arise if there is any question of modifying the programme and the room allocation in the light of emerging requirements.

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

during the course of the conference. Yet it is precisely the emergence of these requirements which shows that the conference is an occasion on which something new is occurring. Because all significant interaction is supposed to take place within the planned sessions, mediated by the speaker and chairman, no attention is normally given to the problems of the interaction between participants independently of such sessions, other than during the formal social events. Contact between participants is facilitated solely by receptions, parties and banquets. No serious attempt is therefore made to establish contact between participants on the basis of their professional interests or commitments.

Such contacts may of course occur as a result of chance introductions during social occasions.

Conclusion

It is at least worthwhile investigating how some technical assistance can be given to improving the meeting dynamics when such improvement is considered desirable by in a particular setting. Part III of this paper suggests a number of possibilities. The interesting question is what new types of meeting would emerge through use of such possibilities.

Technical facilitation of meeting dynamics and participant interaction : 3

Introduction

The first two parts of this paper (Part I, January 1976, pp. 34-37, Part II, this issue, pp. 88-90) dealt with the absence of adequate inter-participant communication and contact and attempted to clarify in which types of meeting this might prove critical. In this part, a series of examples of facilitative techniques are given which might lead to the emergence of a new improved style of meeting. It should be stressed that these are only examples and their main purpose is to suggest an area of meeting organization which deserves more imaginative and innovative attention.

Possibilities for technical support of improved meeting dynamics

Participant consensus expression

A simple device can be developed and distributed to participants, in the same way as earphone devices are currently made available, which would permit

each participant to indicate any or all of the following :

- (1) agreement or disagreement with the speaker
- (2) agreement or disagreement with the proposal under discussion
- (3) desire to move onto the next point on the agenda
- (4) desire for clarification of the point being made
- (5) desire to adjourn the session
- (6) desire to break into small group discussion sessions or similar points.

The device given to each participant would consist of a set of 6 (or more) switches corresponding to each of the above points. The switches would be linked to a counting device such that when 27 participants pressed the first switch a counter visible to all participants (including the speaker and the chairman) would indicate « 27 ». The total for each other point would also be indicated at the same time. In this way, at a glance, all participants in the meeting session could determine with greater accuracy the sense of the meeting and how it should be continued. This would help to avoid meandering

sessions which tend to make conferences a disappointment and a waste of time.

The device as described could be put together from simple items already marketed. A similar device technically is already used in some special classrooms to enable the teacher to obtain feedback from pupils. A simplified device would in fact be particularly useful in lecture-type situations whether in classrooms or in conferences. The great advantage of the device is that it help to change the pattern of communication. Instead of all communications being mediated by the chairman or speaker, participants are able to indicate to one another their assessment of the meeting in a way which prevents the chairman from manipulating the meeting on the basis of his own interpretation of the desires of participants. The use of such a device would introduce much more immediacy into debates since at every moment, in effect, a continuing vote is being made on a number of features of the meeting, (if recorded, as is technically feasible, this would be extremely valuable data for the evaluation of meeting effectiveness, particu-