

Organization of Meetings for Discussion of Complex Issues

Parte of this paper were originally presented as part of a report to the 6th International Congress on Congress Organization (Kyoto, 1975) and were published in International Associations. 1976, Issues 1 or 2. Other portions formed part of the introductory material for some sessions of the 7th Congress (Hamburg, 1977) which was subsequently cancelled.

With the increase in the complexity of society and its problems and with the increase in the number of groups and institutions whose views must be inter-linked to ensure an innovative response to any new issue, it is obvious that the role of meetings as focal points has become of considerable importance. But whilst the number of local, national

ed. as has the variety of issues with which they deal, the form of such meetings has remained essentially the same. Although not applicable to all types of meeting (see below) it is nevertheless valid to note that the basic form of a meeting has not changed over the last half century or even a longer period — despite increasing recognition of the complexity of the issues discussed and despite considerable increase in under-

standing of the psycho-dynamics of meetings.

It is still standard practice to rely heavily on what can be achieved in a plenary session governed by a rigid time schedule with the consequent emphasis on the contribution of main speakers from an organizer-controlled podium and with effective limitation of the open

of commissions or small group discussions is used, there is still a major problem for participants to allocate their time between parallel groups on related topics, and for the meeting as a whole to receive and integrate the work of such groups once completed.

In a very real sense the content and results of the meeting are predetermined by the choice of :

1. the main invited speakers
2. the potential participants informed, invited, or even subsidized.
3. the physical constraints of the space for plenary, parallel and small group sessions.
4. the geographical location of the meeting in relation to the location of potential participants,
5. the time available,
6. the constraints imposed by a multi-lingual audience.

As is well known, much is also predetermined by the (« behind-the-scenes ») activities and intentions of the organizers and sponsors in structuring the programme and ensuring that the meeting " flows smoothly ».

It should not be assumed that these are new observations, for already it is possible to detect the consequences of such abuse of meetings. Questions are increasingly raised concerning the real benefit to be obtained from holding a particular kind of meeting. Consider, for example, the following extract from a letter recently published in International Associations (1976,1) :

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 home 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 S 100,000 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...

Many key individuals who used to attend meetings now find that they can allocate their time and resources to more beneficial forms of activity. (They use phrases like « there are too many meetings », « all talk and no action », - the matter has already been adequately discussed elsewhere », « what is the use of another set of resolutions when nothing was done about those from the previous meetings », etc.). Their absence reduces the quality of the meetings actually held and their lack of interaction with « novice-meeting-participants » means that the latter have to waste more time in learning the limitations of the meeting environment.

Clearly many meetings are simple • badly organized .. But 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.

The question to be raised here is the extent to which the conventional approach to organizing a meeting results in a relatively blunt and crude instrument for :

1. the clarification of complex matters
2. the interaction between groups and organizations whose relationship to the issue and to each other is to be clarified during the meeting.
3. the stimulation of the emergence of innovative and alternative approaches to the issues
4. the initiation of joint projects between the individuals or groups present.

Types of meeting requiring improvement

Four basic types of meeting can be usefully distinguished (see Diagram 1) :

1. Hierarchical, podium-oriented meetings used by organizers for informing or exhorting participants or for ceremonial and prestige occasions. This form is extremely well-developed for its purposes and need not be discussed further, except in so far that it is more or less deliberately used to prevent or control communication (including group formation) between participants within the session or between sessions.
2. Small group meetings used for open exchange of views on a specific question. This form has been well explored and need not be discussed further, except in regard to the problem of integrating small group activity into a larger conference framework.
3. Amorphous, unstructured meetings characteristic of fairs, receptions and various kinds of - happening ». This form has been quite well explored and need not be discussed further, except to the extent that the relative isolation of participants prevents spontaneous formation of issue-oriented groups.
4. Semi-structured, network meetings intermediate in characteristic between hierarchical and amorphous meetings and providing a framework meetings. This form is only just beginning to be explored by

those dissatisfied with conventional methods of organizing larger meetings.

Aspects of meetings requiring improvement

1. Communication between participants

A frequent source of participant frustration within a . well-organized • meeting is the lack of adequate and meaningful contact between participants in terms of their professional interests or organizational responsibilities (namely other than purely social contact). Whilst many conferences are organized primarily for a set of individuals in the light of a ideal of issues and priorities defined by the organizers prior to the meeting, increasingly conferences must respond to a greater degree to the issues and priorities recognized by the real participants or emerging from their interactions during the meeting.

The more experienced participants do not want to be only consumers of what speakers produce. Conferences are for the benefit of participants and the constituencies they represent 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 and organization representatives have a number of reasons for attending a given conference and justifying the allocation of time and resources. The challenge is to maximize the benefits to participants arising from any such concentration of human resources, given that the organizers will benefit most if the participants are well-satisfied by the exercise (irrespective of the original intent of the organizers). Innovation is most likely to be facilitated if :

1. contact between participants with complementary interests and commitments is facilitated.
2. participants are assisted in their attempts to : initiate new action, inform and involve other participants in projects of mutual interest, and form groups and formalize group action (to the degree necessary).

Such processes could occur either during a meeting session (as a parallel communication activity during periods of formal speeches) or between session within the same conference fra-

mework. A guide to the possibilities in this area is given in a Checklist of

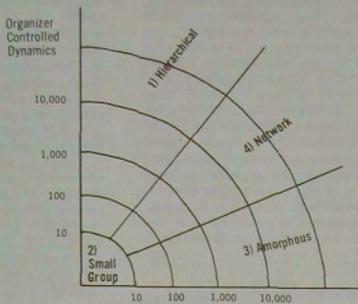


DIAGRAM A

Participant Controlled Dynamics

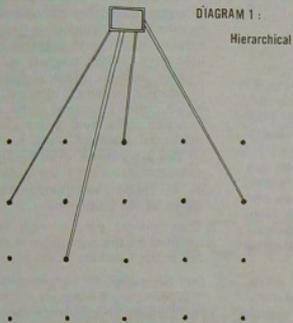


DIAGRAM 2 :
Small Group

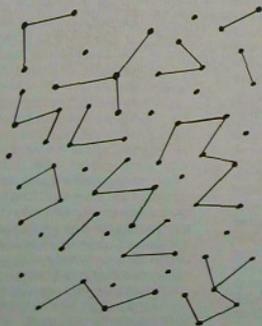
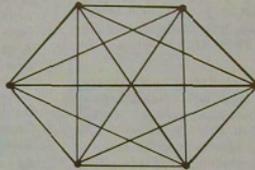


DIAGRAM 3 :
Amorphous

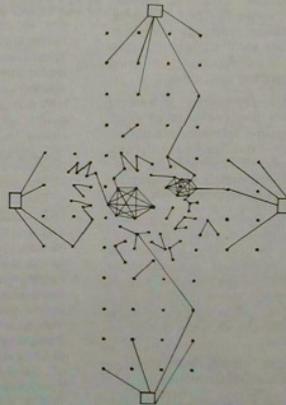


DIAGRAM 4 :
Network

possible participant communication requirements (Int Assoc. 1976. 1). This effectively emphasizes the rights of the participant having paid to participate as opposed to the responsibilities of wellbehaved participants (namely a code of conduct) as conceived by the organizers.

2. Communication between participant stereotypes

There is a tendency to assume that meeting participants conform, or should conform, to a certain mode or code of behaviour. Much of the value and interest of meetings (particularly international meetings) derives from the unusual diversity of participants and their interests. This diversity, if it is not respected and allowed to influence the organization of the meeting, may however lead to the isolation and frustration of stereotyped groups of participants. In this way the value of the conference as a whole is significantly reduced and little benefit is derived by anybody from the variety of perspectives represented which should in fact nourish and orient any innovative activity and be reflected in its constraints.

The stereotyped groups which tend to emerge or be deliberately ignored may be loosely categorized in terms of the following :

- (a) culture (Moslem. Christian. Japanese, etc.) as a determinant of (forms of address, eating habits, etc.) as facilitators or obstacles to communication; language (English, European, non-European) as a determinant of communicable concepts and styles of communication.
- (b) development priorities, namely the challenge of Third World representation; ideology (socialist, capitalist, etc.), namely the challenge of integrating conflicting socio-political assumptions.
- (c) age as a determinant of meeting dynamics (the challenge of youth in meetings; integrating perspectives of older generations); sex, as a determinant of meeting dynamics (interrelating male and female viewpoints).
- (d) expertise (expert and non-expert), namely the challenge of communicating complexity; commitment (naive enthusiast and hardened professional), namely the activist challenge; status (official and unofficial participants), namely the challenge of wider public involvement.
- (e) discipline, namely the challenge of inter-disciplinary meetings.
- (f) structural preference (formal versus informal), namely the challenge of relatively unstructured meetings; activity mode (cognitive, affective, physical, etc.), namely

the challenge of the experiential mode; activity priorities (debate, information, contacts, demonstrations, etc.), namely the challenge of blending distinct meeting objectives; media preference (speech, discussion, text, audio-visuals, etc.), namely the challenge of non-lecture communication.

The question is therefore what techniques can be used, other than in small group meetings, in order to breakdown the barriers between groups characterized by such differences, whilst at the same time integrating the special perspective which they represent in society at large.

3. Interlinking topics and issue areas

In the case of a conference to deal with a straightforward issue of a kind which has arisen occasionally in the past, clearly there is a fund of experience and allied meeting procedure to ensure that all aspects of the matter are adequately discussed by concerned parties. But in the case of a complex, ill-defined issue where the terminology, categories and action priorities remain to be clarified, special care is required.

A conventional meeting approach may oversimplify the discussion process. ignore many relevant side issues and concerned bodies, and generate resolutions which are ineffective, irrelevant, impossible to implement, or positively harmful.

As was implied earlier, the actual choice of the meeting space and duration is a major factor in determining how the issue can be discussed. Time and space factors govern the extent to which the issue can be broken down into sub-issues, possibly to be discussed in parallel. The relationship between meeting rooms on related issues influences the manner in which such issues are linked. The presence or absence of a common, neutral ground between the meeting rooms, and the quality of that space, influences the extent to which participants can and will interact freely and fully. It is in that space that links are born and nourished and that innovative projects take shape.

The actual programme structure is largely determined by these time /space constraints. Many organizers may ignore these constraints by simply multiplying the number of conference and discussion rooms, increasing the number of parallel sessions, or increasing the duration of the meeting. But although each sub-issue may be discussed, there is as yet no satisfactory way of interrelating the discussions and conclusions on related issues where this is justified — or in fact of clarifying the degree of relationship, if any is suspected. A complex network of sub-issues cannot be satisfactorily handled within a meeting governed

by a three-dimensional programme matrix.

It has frequently been noted that it is simplistic, even naive, to expect that an interdisciplinary (or multi-view-point) synthesis will necessarily emerge simply by collecting into the same space-time framework the specialists from different disciplines or schools of thought. Synthesis is even less likely if their views are expressed in parallel sessions and funnelled through the traditional technique of the « group reports to the plenary session » — which

words of the chairman or to the reader of the proceedings. Efforts towards improving this situation are urgently required.

4. Flexible programme restructuring

Clearly there are many restrictions on a conference which is bound to a programme structure determined many months before the meeting itself. In the extreme case, some sessions must be held even though there is no current interest in them, some speakers must be heard, even though most participants would prefer their time to be used otherwise; some new topics cannot be discussed because there is no time on the programme, even though many participants consider the questions to be of greater importance than other topics on the programme. The dynamic programming flexibility required by the organizers is summarized in the following points :

- (a) Necessity for organizers to be able to re-schedule, during the course of the conference on an hour-by-hour basis in the light of information received at that time :
 - 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).
 - the allocation of rooms to new sessions proposed at the last minute on the basis of interests that have emerged during the course of a particular session.
 - the allocation of audio-visual equipment and simultaneous interpretation facilities to meeting rooms according to revised requirements.
- (b) 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.
- (c) Necessity for organizers to be able to shift the balance of communication patterns between

- an essentially hierarchical mode
- a small group session mode
- 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 inter-action 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.

Clearly organizers are faced with the problem of handling flexible evolving conference programmes rather than the traditional pre-determined conference programme. These problems have not yet been explored to any degree.

Expertise required to improve meeting dynamics

There is considerable expertise available to improve small group meetings (10-40 people) in a unilingual environment. Very little attention has been

given to improving the dynamics of larger meetings especially in a multi-lingual, multicultural environment. It is of course in the latter kind of meeting that many projects are formulated, acquire necessary support, and approved.

Some of the new skills that could usefully become as common as that of co-meeting dynamics mediator, intercultural mediator, inter-disciplinary mediator, meeting analyst, meeting evaluator, contact specialist, presentation advisor, etc. Some of these are reviewed in Int. Assoc. 1976, 2.

Technical facilitation of meeting dynamics

Considerable attention has been given to technical equipment for conferences. Almost all such equipment is concerned with facilitating the task of one person in informing many others of his views under the control of the chairman of the session. Little of it, if any, is concerned with facilitating the two-way communication between participants.

As an example, it is still very common for 500-1000 participants to attempt to communicate via a crude « message board » (if the organizers permit it) on which notes are pinned in the hope that the addressees will find them. Many other technical and procedural devices are possible to improve meeting dynamics. Some are reviewed in Int. Assoc. 1976, 2.

Alternative forms of meeting

The use of the methods noted in the two previous sections offer a means of modifying meeting dynamics modestly or very significantly depending on the risk which the organizers and participants are prepared to take. Some of those arising from the previous section, particularly :

- participant-controlled communication devices
- computer-assisted contact formation
- on-site computer-conferencing would effectively result in a different and much more dynamic style of meeting. Some effects are reviewed in Int. Assoc. 1976, 2.

A.J. *
