

HOW TO ORGANISE MEETINGS / SEMINARS

General introduction

Meetings and seminars play a significant role in the life of an international and national organisation. During the course of average year, literally hundreds of seminars and meeting are held. Included in this list are such things as board meetings, training sessions of all sizes and priority setting meetings, and hundreds of others too numerous to be delineated. The total cost of all these meetings to an organisation is almost impossible to compute: the cost of professional staff time, but also such associated items as transportation, rental of space, preparation of materials, meals lodging, translation and other such expenses. On a sheerly time and financial basis alone, it is clear that seminars and conferences represent a major expenditure of organisational energy.

Even more important than the time and money cost, conferences represent a critical part of the overall organisational work. Without them, it would be almost impossible for an organisation to accomplish its goals effectively or maintain any sense of commonality and seminars can mean the difference between successful and unsuccessful programmes, and in some cases even become the central event around which all others move, the opportunity offered us for fact finding, decision making, Training, socializing, and just plain enjoyment of each other, makes them worthy of our continued attention and concern.

Given this importance, it seems only logical to ask the question : « How well are we using this potential ressource ? ». In attempting to answer this question we might first consider some of the forces in the environment which we have to contend with in order to run successful meeting these days.

Running meeting and seminars has become more difficult in the past few years. In many cultures, people are now attending many more meetings, groups etc., than they have in the past, and as a result, they may be less taken with the sheer novelty, the chance to travel, etc. In addition, in some cultures, teaching methods has created an increasing demand for new styles of meeting. Few people are as willing as they used to be sit passively and listen to an « authority ». Changes in formal educational style, etc., have led participants to expect more and more participation and serious involvement in meeting than used to be the case.

BASIC STEP IN DESIGNING

Designing is probably the most critical elment in producing successful meeting. More meeting fail because the original planning was not sound than for any other reason. It is not at all unheard of for professional trainers to spend as much time or more in the designing stage as they do in actually running meetings. Designing is to meetings very much as architecture is to construction. In the designing or architectural stage, the

architect is forced to analyse exactly the kind of building he wants to construct, what materials are available, what kinds of environmental influences may affect him, what use the building will be put to, how much he can afford to spend, etc. In light of all this information, he must then attempt to draw up plans, which offer the maximum compromise between the variables. The final quality of the building will depend largely on how successfully this architectural stage is done. Without a good set of plans, even the finest of construction crews will find it impossible to build a satisfactory building.

Planning has a second value in addition to its primary usefulness as a tool for ensuring good results in the meeting itself. It also provides us with enough self-consciousness about what we are attempting to do to allow us to do thoughtful evaluations about our results. If we are clear at the outset about what we are trying to accomplish, and the methods we are going to use, it will be much easier for us at the conclusion of the meeting to know what was successful and what was unsuccessful. If we have done our work well, we will be able at the end of our programme to produce a very thoughtful analysis which will be of enormous help to us in planning future meeting.

There are many different ways of designing a workshop. In the following material we would like to present one way which many of us have found to be very helpful. As you experiment with it, you may find even better ways than this, or changes that may be necessary because of cultural differences, but we hope that it will, at the minimum, offer a good place to begin.

STAGES OF DESIGN

I. Assessment of Aims-Diagnosis

Why are we interested in holding a meeting ? What needs are we attempting to meet with this tool ? Why do we think that a group gathering of any kind will help us meet those needs ? Is a meeting really the best way to deal with the problem we are working on ? Would the expected cost of a meeting, not only financial, but time an effort produce significant enough results in this area to warrant the expenditure ?

II Participants

Who should attend the meeting in order to accomplish our goal ? What will the effects be of not including certain people ?

What will the group attending be made up of :

- A. What kind of educational background will they have ?
- B. What will their previous meeting experience be ?
- C. How well will they know each other ?
- D. What languages do they understand, know ?
- E. Given their own situations what frame of mind might they be in when they come to the meeting ?
- F. What kinds of expectations do we think they will have ?
- G. What is our relationship to them ?

Answering these questions about the audience will make designing the meeting a good deal easier. If, for example, we find a wide range of educational backgrounds, needs, meeting experience, etc., we will be forced to re-examine whether this group can work together at all, or what kind of meetings we can arrange that will adequately meet such a diverse set of backgrounds. On the other hand, if the entire group looks very homogeneous, we may want to ask whether they will have enough creativity to avoid simply reaffirming past behaviours, etc.. Analysis at this stage should also help us avoid setting up meetings to do things that the audience is incapable of doing. For example, if we intend to make certain kinds of decisions at the meeting, make those decisions attend.

Most important of all – what are their needs as they see them ? What do they want from this workshop ?. What expectations will they bring with them, both about the material covered and the role of the workshop leaders ? *If the conference does not either meet their needs, or create new ones. i.e., « I know you think X is the issue, but further analysis demonstrates that it is really Y, so let's deal with Y instead»... it will fail. This is probably the single most important point in all conference design.* In many cases we will know our participants well enough to anticipate in advance what their primary concerns are. In others, however, it may be necessary to send out questionnaires, etc., in advance asking for the four or five major things want covered in priority order.

Once we have made this general analysis of both the problem area we wish to deal with, and the people we expect to be involved, we are ready to begin designing a workshop that will be compatible with both our needs and theirs.

III RESSOURCES

Now that I have established what I want to accomplish with this meeting, what resources do I have available ?

1. How much time do I have ?
2. What kinds of materials, etc. are available that may be helpful ?
3. How much money can I afford to spend ?
4. Which people may be able to help in leading the meeting ?

It is not all that uncommon at this stage to find that the training objectives outlined seem too ambitious for the resources that are available. Most of us find that we are attempting to cover a great deal more ground than we have either the time or resources to adequately do. The temptation of course is to attempt to cram in everything one way get another. Although there are times when a leader can get away with this, it is more often the case that attempting the following diagram, this may be a little clearer –

LACK OF MATERIAL.... BOREDOM ... TOO MUCH DATA-FRUSTRATION

This line represents the range of options you have in deciding the volume of material that you will be able to deal with. On one extreme you can deal with a very small amount of information which will leave participants bored through lack, of activity and stimulation. On the other extreme, you may attempt to do too much which will result in people remembering only the frustration of not being able to comprehend everything that happened rather than the material itself. The goal meeting design is to move as far to the right on this line without overloading to the point of frustration. This of course will always be at best an educated guess, but a necessary one. It is of course possible to make alterations in the pacing of the meeting while it is actually running. For example, if people seem exhausted and overworked one can always eliminate some sessions, or shorten them. If we're lucky however the design will be accurate enough so that this won't be necessary.

In the event that it seems impossible to cover all our objectives in one meeting, we must then review the objectives to see if any more of them can be combined, and if not, make decisions about where our priorities are. In some cases it is possible to increase the amount of resources – especially time – in order to cover all the material necessary.

This will become clearer in the next stage.

IV Sequencing

Now that we have determined precisely what we want to do and have decided that we have the resources to do it, we are prepared to actually outline the workshop itself. In order to do this we need to go through the following steps:

- 1- Draw out a schedule showing an alterable schedule requirement, i.e at what time will the meeting start, at what time will meals be served, what is the latest we can reasonably expect to work in the evenings, etc.
- 2- Estimate how much additional time will be required for the mechanics of the meeting, making room assignments , checking in and out and for coffee breaks and other free time.
- 3- Add up the total number of hours remaining for actual meeting itself

V Evaluation

Every person, either consciously, or unconsciously, evaluates every meeting of which he is a part. What we do not always do, however, is evaluate systematically, using all the information available to find out how we are doing and where improvements can be made.

One of the important things that has developed recently, in terms of evaluation of meetings, is a concept of evaluation different from that which we used previously. Evaluation is seen now as an integral part of the process of planning a meeting rather than as something which takes place after in our planning, we will improve the effectiveness of our meeting.

There are several places where evaluation is critically important :

At the initial planning.

When firming up the program plan

At the meeting

After the meeting

Initial Planning

Let us look first at number one – the initial planning. Every meeting has a number of stated objectives. These may include exchanging experiences conducting business, receiving new information, solving problems, setting policy, and so on. In addition to these stated objectives, there are a number of unstated objectives which are equally important and must be dealt with if to see friends, exchange gossip, or do any number

things that do not relate directly to the business at hand. This is part of one category of objectives— member's objectives. Another category is the objectives of the planners themselves. In addition, there are the organisation's objectives - the policies that must be decided upon, the business that must be transacted. Then there are the officers' personal objectives – to appear on the platform, deliver an address, be re-elected, and so on. The planner must find ways of integrating these several sets of purposes in such a way that the organisational goals will be met, insofar as possible, in terms that meaningful to all individuals concerned.

A second area where evaluation is critical is at the point of finalizing the program plan and setting the methods of presentation and whatever audience-participation methods are to be used. Here again, it is important to have a systematic procedure for determining which presentation method and which audience technique to use. Each single item of subject material on a program should be related to these two questions :

1. *What is the nature of the material (technical, philosophical, statistical, controversial) ?*
2. *What is the situation in which it will be presented (activities that precede it and follow it, level of audience interest in subject, level of audience familiarity with subject) ?*

Answers to these questions will almost automatically determine preferences in presentation method and will help to determine audience-participation procedures.

Evaluation techniques

Familiar to all of us is the systematic evaluation that takes place at the meeting and after the meeting. Because there are several kinds of evaluation that can be used, Planners should determine to what purpose the evaluation is to be directed. Basically, there are two categories of facts collected at a meeting : the first category in facts for steering purposes – this would include reactions of a group that was meeting several times. Such facts can guide the discussion leader in his planning and can aid in the day-by-day evaluations of a conference as guidance for a steering committee. The other major category is facts for future planning. This category includes end-of-the-meeting reactions and reactions taken at a later date – after the members are back home.

The first category of evaluation – for steering purposes – may be performed in a number of ways. A short evaluation form, sometimes called a postmeeting reaction form, can be distributed at the end of each session. It would ask such questions as these : how did you feel about this session. (very good, good, all right, not good ?) How helpful was this session ? Why ? What do you think the group ought to do next ?

Periodic Interviews

A selected sample of members can be interviewed at periodic intervals, say once a day. Another device is to select an evaluation team which more or less systematically conducts hallway interviews and reports its findings to some central source at periodic intervals.

All of these techniques also provide useful information for the second category of evaluation – for future planning. In addition, planners usually need to know the answers to the following questions to guide them in future planning /

1. *What did the members expect and hope for from the meeting ?*
2. *How well did the meeting meet their expectations and hopes ?*
3. *What gaps in information, experience, and so on, did the members see as unfilled ?*
4. *How useful did the members consider the meeting ?*
5. *What were members' opinions on the subject matter chosen ?*
6. *What were members' opinions on the presentation methods used ?*
7. *How well did the members feel that their problems were dealt with ?*
8. *What use, if any, do members plan to make of material from the meeting ?*

Council of Europe, Y.E.C ; C.E.J, Training Course, Ressources Files n°7.