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How to Run a Conference

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HOW TO RUN A CONFERENCE

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I am happy again to have the privilege of addressing a group of distinguished military officers. During the past three years I have done so on more than 25 occasions, always with much personal satisfaction. This is not merely because of the friendly and courteous manner with which I have been received, although I appreciate that; of greatest satisfaction has been the open-minded but critical attitudes of my audiences. I have found military officers generally more ready to examine and explore new ideas than many civilians; and they do so with a thoroughness and a healthy skepticism of which I heartily approve. Once convinced of the worth of a new idea or practice, they are more ready than most people to implement it with action. I say this not to flatter you, for which there is no need; but because some college professors hold opposite views and I want you to know that I do not agree.

I must confess that I approach my subject this morning with some misgivings, lest I be misunderstood. I do not know the best way to run a conference. I am not sure that anyone does. Indeed, I suspect that there is no one best way of running a conference. There has really been relatively little scientific research in the area of conference procedures, and much of what we think that we know has been put together eclectically as a result of examination of what appear to be good practices.

Nevertheless, as in many fields of human endeavor, conference procedures in current use often fail to utilize fully the little that

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1

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is known about them. It is my purpose this morning to call to your attention a few of those characteristics of conference procedures of which we think that we have some understanding, in the hope that the insights thus engendered may help you to make the conferences in which you participate or lead more effective. Perhaps a better title for this lecture would be, "Ways of Improving Conferences."

We might begin our study of the subject by raising the question, "Why call a conference?" Most of us are aware of the more common reasons for calling a conference. The leader wishes to submit his plans to his colleagues for criticism; or he wants to persuade his subordinates of the soundness of his views; or he desires to enlist the aid of others in solving a problem; or he needs to instruct those who are to execute his plans. People come together to exchange views, to keep abreast of new developments, and to pool their resources to achieve a common purpose. However, there are other reasons for calling a conference that are not so well understood.

Conferences, when well done, promote teamwork. I cannot work well with you unless I can predict your reactions to a large number of environmental stimuli. This is impossible unless I know something of your scale of values, your interests, and your special skills. Only when I am able to anticipate much of your behavior can I make the necessary preparations in time to make the greatest contribution to the objective of the team. Not knowing who you are nor what motivates your actions tends to make me distrust you and feel insecure in your presence. As long as I do so I cannot play well on your team. I need not enlarge upon this, for all of you have had extended experience in teamwork. Only a team can run a ship, or carry out a bombing mission or make an amphibious landing. However, teamwork resulting from action incident to achieve-

2   **RESTRICTED**

ment of a common mission may engender group loyalties that inhibit teamwork of greater scope. Thus, action teams within a service may find it difficult to combine to form a well-coordinated larger unit; or laudable pride and "esprit de corps" in one branch of military service may make it difficult to weld together a team involving several branches of the service. In modern warfare, this is a problem of some magnitude and one that is not easily solved.

When I participate in a conference I have opportunities to observe at close range the behavior of persons drawn from diverse places. Since most conferences are problem-centered, I am likely to find it easier than usual to accept the idiosyncracies, the differing objectives, and the variant value scales of others without the customary emotional responses. When a conference is well conducted, I find it easier to accept other participants just as they are.

A conference may also serve as a kind of mirror that enables me to see myself as I appear to others. Thus, I may increase my understanding of the reactions of others to my own behavior. Such insights help me to get along with people and so improve my effectiveness in teamwork.

Conferences may improve learning. Things merely memorized often are not understood. To understand a new idea one must integrate it with past experience, relate it to other similar ideas, contrast it, and apply it. Conferences, since they permit the examination of a new idea against the differing background experiences of participants and allow countering biased views to compete, are very valuable in turning mere knowledge of a subject into an understanding of it. Learning effectiveness is generally increased if lectures are followed by ample opportunity for discussion. Groups formed for this purpose should be small enough to permit each participant to make frequent contributions.

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Conferences increase the range of experience that can be brought to bear upon a problem. This needs no elaboration since it is clear that the total experience of a group is likely to be greater than that of any member of it. Of course, it is rarely possible to relate all of the pertinent experience possessed by the group to the problem at hand. Group members may find it difficult to select the elements of their experience that are pertinent to the problem. Inability to communicate with clarity may prevent the focusing of pertinent experience upon a problem. Emotional reactions of participants may result in a "hidden agenda" that makes the attack upon a problem more apparent than real.

Finally, conferences multiply the creative powers available for problem-solving. A group of persons, if working under favorable conditions, is likely to think of more bright ideas than one person. Moreover, the cross-fertilization of ideas possible in a group may increase the creative capacity of each member of it. Again, major difficulties are encountered in releasing the creative capacities of a group. Much depends upon maintenance of a high level of circular response. Such maintenance depends upon favorable group conditions involving leadership, group size, attitudes of participants, and control of emotional reactions.

There are, of course, different kinds of conferences; although in some respects all conferences are alike. Since they involve people they reflect the hopes, aspirations, habits, and psychological conflicts of humans. These give rise to a series of problems encountered in all conference work—a series so lengthy that time permits mention of only a part of it here.

Communication problems are always present in conference work. Conferees have trouble in selecting experiences pertinent to the group purpose. They may find it hard to organize their

4   **RESTRICTED**

thoughts for purposes of expression. Vocabularies may be limited. They may lack skill in composition and the use of their voices.

Understanding the group goal is often a problem. The goal may be quite clear to the conference chairman but not to other members of the group. Not infrequently it appears to be understood by all, but discussion reveals variant interpretations by different members of the group. Semantic difficulties appear here, since the meanings associated with words tend to vary because of differing backgrounds of experience.

Members of a group may understand the group goal but not accept it. As a group member I may think the goal unimportant or poorly chosen; or I may be more interested in the personal goal of maintaining my own prestige.

The attitudes of cooperation held by members are always important in a conference. Creative group activity requires highly-developed attitudes of cooperation. Even in debate, cooperative attitudes between those holding to one side of an issue are necessary.

The personal attitudes of members toward each other are also important. Feelings of distrust, insecurity, or antagonism can greatly impede the work of a conference. A high degree of respect for the personalities of other participants is generally desirable in a conference.

Success of a conference often depends in part upon the development of group consciousness. As long as group members act independently of one another the full potentialities of the group process are not likely to be realized. There needs to be a feeling of interdependence among members and a sense of cohesiveness in the group.

Of course, the quality of achievement is always a factor to be considered in all conferences. This is likely to be determined

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largely by the conference goal, the composition of the group, the skills of members in conference procedures, and the degree to which an environment favorable to group action can be established.

Continuity of conference work and progress in its use depends upon the adequacy of group satisfactions. If conference work leads to feelings of annoyance or futility, it eventually becomes sterile. In the past, too little attention has probably been paid to this matter, despite the fact that conference work abounds in opportunities for group satisfactions.

Leadership is always imporant in conferences. Unfortunately, conference leadership has been largely conceived as a problem of selection. Considerable evidence points to the conclusion that it is primarily a matter of training. Better results seem to be obtained when all members share leadership responsibilities.

Conferences differ largely because of their purposes. Failure to recognize that differing conference goals require different means of achievement is a common cause of conference failures. Conferences primarily concerned with critical appraisal of proposals require a different group structure, a different approach to thinking, and a different utilization of experience than conferences primarily concerned with creative problem-solving. Time does not permit a full elaboration of the characteristics of each type of conference group, but a few of the more distinguishing characteristics of each will be mentioned.

Study Group. The main purpose of the study group is to increase the perspective and deepen the understanding of the idea, topic, or question under consideration. Thinking is deliberative and involved. The tempo of group action is slow. Contributions tend to be long and infrequent and verbalization difficult. Leadership

6   **RESTRICTED**

problems are usually easy. Group consciousness tends to be relatively sensitive to psychological disturbances.

Conferences of the study group type are particularly useful in exploration of the possibilities of new inventions, in deepening the understanding of concepts presented in lectures or reading references, and in discovering and defining problems.

Administrative Conference. The main purpose of this type of conference is the exchange of views or experience. Contributions to the discussion are relatively short and verbalization tends to be easy. The tempo of group discussion is more rapid than it is in the study group, but still moderate in rate. In both the study group and the administrative conference, optimum group size seems to be ten to twenty. Group consciousness is not as sensitive to psychological disturbances as the study group.

The administrative conference is of great value in marshalling experience for use in problem-solving. It is a valuable device in promoting communication between the members of an administrative team to the end that each member is informed concerning what his colleagues have done and what they are about to do. It is used by executives as a control device to check the soundness of orders, as a means of giving subordinates a share in decision-making, and as a means of improving the execution of plans.

Mass Interview. This is usually an information-getting device, but it may be used also to supplement orders. There are relatively few discussion exchanges between group members, interactions being largely confined to exchanges between the chairman and individual members. Procedures tend to be somewhat formal and since contributions may be prepared in advance, verbalization is easy. A low level of group consciousness is likely to prevail.

The mass interview is used frequently by administrators and

military leaders as an economical means of keeping abreast of the progress of actions. It is also used as a means of supplementing individual orders when there is insufficient time for individual interviews and it is desirable for others to know something of the nature of individual orders.

Creative Committee. This is a problem-solving conference. Its purpose is the discovery of a unique, or the most satisfactory, solution for a particular problem. The creative nature of the task requires integrative thinking as opposed to critical or argumentative thinking. The tempo of the discussion is rapid and characterized by circular responses. When done well, the animation of participants is high and group satisfactions are likely to be strong. There is frequently a strong sense of group consciousness that is very sensitive to psychological difficulties. Verbalization tends to be considerably more difficult than in other types of conferences, and leadership problems are likewise more numerous and difficult. To be effective, the size of the group should be small— normally less than ten.

Representative Committee. This is an appraising and liaison group that brings to bear constituent interests or specialized training and experience upon proposals. It is not a creative conference, although it is often incorrectly used for creative problem solving. Contributions are likely to include detailed criticism and to be biased. The tempo of discussion may be moderate or rapid, depending upon the amount of opposition to the proposal under consideration. Leadership problems are not difficult and the size of the group may be relatively large.

The representative committee is particularly useful in appraising plans formulated by creative committees and in transmitting information concerning these plans to the groups with repre-

8

sentation on the committee. In this way it performs an important service in the execution of plans.

Staff Meeting. This is an informative and persuasive conference. It is a means of acquainting those who must execute plans with their development, purposes, organization, and requirements. It may also be a means of persuading relatively large numbers of persons of the worth of proposals. To be effective, unusual clarity in communicating information is required. A major difficulty is adequate involvement of the audience in the learning activity. There is not much interaction between members and relatively little group consciousness. In terms of the usual objectives of group work it is the most ineffective of the conference types here described. Its value is to be found in economy of time. Through the staff meeting, large numbers of persons can be reached with a relatively small expenditure of time.

Steps in Conducting a Conference. Having discussed the reasons for calling a conference and some of the characteristics, likenesses, and differences of conferences, we are ready to return to the original subject of this lecture, "How to Run a Conference." It is apparent that there is no single way of running a conference, but there are certain steps that may serve as guides in conducting any conference. These may be listed as follows:

1. *Determine the purpose of the conference.*

   This involves more than a general statement; the purpose must be specific and expressed in terms of goals to be achieved.

2. *Select the type of conference most appropriate for the goals to be achieved.*

   Assumptions that all conferences are alike is probably one of the most common causes

of conference ineffectiveness.

3. *Organize the conference groups.*

Each type of conference makes somewhat different demands upon participants and leaders and requires a specific group structure.

4. *Provide adequate leadership.*

This involves, in addition to conference chairmen, recorders, blackboard recorders, observers, and perhaps assistant chairmen.

5. *Arrange for suitable physical facilities.*

In some conferences, members ought not to be seated around a table. Lack of adequate blackboard facilities is a common handicap. Most conference rooms are too small.

6. *Train the leaders.*

Generally speaking, training is more effective than selection in getting competent leadership. Improvement in conference procedures is most rapid when leadership responsibilities are shared. Such sharing can only be effective when adequate provision is made for leadership training.

7. *Train the participants.*

Skills needed for good conference work are not easy to acquire. Some initial training

is usually desirable, but most of the training
needed is best acquired through practice. To
make such practice productive, repeated ap-
praisal and self-evaluation of group behavior
is essential.

Although I fear that the length of this address has ex-
hausted your patience, it has been too short to permit more than
a mere sketch of the subject. Perhaps the discussion period to
follow will provide an opportunity for a more detailed treatment
of matters of specific interest.