

The Importance of People

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How To Con a Conference

AN awful lot gets written about conference planning and design—it's practically a discipline in its own right, with specialists giving it full time. But somehow we've overlooked a related problem that has to be treated if progress toward bigger, better and more frequent conferences is not to be retarded. No well-rounded science of conferencing can be achieved while a critical dimension of the over-all theory languishes at the trial-and-error stage.

This is addressed to those who have serious professional goals, like collecting and assessing new ideas, contributing to the improvement of a field, getting into contact with leading professionals, and guiding and controlling the organization sponsoring the conference. We'll save for a later paper another range of motives such as flight from one's job or from an unhappy marriage, and the need for an out-of-town fling.

The serious student of conference dynamics had better start in local or area conferences. For one thing, it will put him in touch with the local leaders, who usually play active roles in state or national meetings. A first-name working relationship with them will give him anchor men when he is farther from home—as long as the personal association is not pushed too far. Such associa-

tions facilitate introductions to key people from other areas, work assignments, program participation spots, and informal diagnoses of what is really going on. Besides, the local meetings commonly deal with the very problems that make up the agenda at the next level. Experience adds security and enables one to function as though he were an expert in state and national settings, both because of the detailed knowledge acquired and because of the distance from home.

Little can happen as a result of state and national deliberations unless local groups carry through. The effective professional, as he moves up in an organization, must tend his relationships at each lower level; and the priorities had better start at the grass roots.

Know the Program

Early in the conference, establish dominance over the program. The most effective conference-beat worker I know systematically "works the edges." Most of the speeches are mimeographed and can be read more rapidly than they can be delivered. It is also good to be selective about open committee meetings and section meetings.

Most large conferences are designed cafeteria style—with fare for everyone.

One should nose out in advance, or during the early hours, the spots where important things are apt to happen—and be there. Thus one avoids those superficial sessions which tread water from year to year at the same level of information.

Study the Structure

No serious conference-goer will miss allocating time to loitering in the lobby of the headquarters hotel as a way of extending acquaintances and feeling the pulse of things. Here, moving with an experienced member brings introductions to other key people. Don't try to steal the show; just make an initial good impression. Whatever the conversation, you are now in a position to "drop another name" at some later time when something is at stake. Incidentally, adroit name-dropping is often effective in working one's way into a group. But it's bad form to push your luck; build carefully, step by step. An informal cross-check goes on, and a single "never heard of him!" can be serious. It's all right to drop names, but damaging to be labeled a name-dropper. The process must function below the level of the other person's conscious attention.

To work most effectively, it is important to be able to diagnose the power structure of the conference in-group. Techniques for doing so are well known to many. The problem is to evolve a rough sociogram of the significant people, based on two unspoken questions, "Who are the people who really control?" and "On whom do they depend to make things go?"

The fact is that if one has to ask casual acquaintances to explain the power structure of a group, he just is not ready for initiation into the inner circles. And

there's little he can do about it until those in the know are sure he is ready for such heady company and the responsibilities that go with it. For the person bent on working his way in on his own power, purposeful observation and listening are musts. The sociogram he needs will emerge around cue questions, such as "Who defers to whom?" and "Who seeks out whom?" Favored observation posts are the registration desks, the lobby, the dining room, the executive secretary's desk, coffee breaks and receptions—including those of the vendors.

The powerhouses in a group usually move quietly and casually at a conference. People rush up to them. At receptions, they take up stations well away from the door and let the traffic flow to them. If traffic piles up around them, they gently move to another location. They come a bit late and leave ahead of the crowd, suggesting regretfully that other responsibilities have forced the limitation of their pleasure. The aspirants to power are apt to stay longer and move around the room more, greeting and conversing with as many significant people as time and circumstances permit.

Play to Your Strengths

Most of us yearn to leave our mark on conference proceedings and do it in such a way that our services will be sought for more central roles in the future. Working the informal conference agenda is important, but it is no more important than sheer ability to perform effectively in and around general sessions, committee meetings, and discussion sections.

Individuals vary greatly in the size of group they can handle when they get the floor. Some are extremely effective in small discussion groups but come un-

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glued if they try to speak in groups larger than 50 or so. Achieving this knack of making a point in a group of 500 has taken me some 20 years, including some severe bouts with stage fright, and some distressing experiences. One should launch his maiden flights in settings he's sure he can handle.

In a large general session, you'll probably get only one chance to speak. The chairman will have warned the audience that no speeches will be tolerated and only short, succinct questions are welcome. While you may want to speak of several things, pick out one crucial issue. Do not ask your question until you have made the statement you want to make as "background." (Many people jot down a brief outline before getting to their feet.) Be sure to be heard across the entire group. And be sure to stop within the limits of patience for bootlegged speechmaking. The naked question from the floor is especially subject to unintended misinterpretation and to deliberate brush-off. If it is set in a clearcut framework of concern, it is apt to be dealt with carefully, thus adding significantly to the program.

If one falls heir to a spot on a program, careful advance preparation is a must. Brevity is uncommonly impressive. Just indicate quietly that more can be said if needed, and that you will be willing to elaborate during the discussion period. If the meeting is running late, be sure to cut down your intended statement without playing the role of martyr too obviously. One of the best-received speeches I can recall, made by the last man on a big panel, was two sentences, "Most of the points I had planned to make have already been covered well. Do you mind if I just answer any questions related to my topic?"

Let us turn, now, to some tested ways

of making oneself effective at the discussion-group level. The role of group recorder—all too often underestimated—is the one most apt to be open at the last minute. Here is a spot for a newcomer to step into quietly and graciously, where he can make several significant strides at once. He can support the group discussion leader in moving the group along. He can gain the indulgence of the group to state his own views occasionally and record them—and he can thus assure a balanced job of reporting. A good job as a recorder quickly stamps a person on the consciousness of the conference leaders. Such roles often tend to go begging because they are confining.

Procedural questions or suggestions also provide an important group service. Suggestions that the agenda be established or clarified are usually necessary and enable one to propose issues of importance to him. If the group is stalled on an issue, one can propose that a subgroup be named to work out differences; or that the group move on to another issue. In many ways, it is possible for one good "process man" to guide a discussion group a good bit even though not in a designated leadership role, especially if the leader is on the anxious side—which he usually is—and if the "helper" can be supportive of the leader. Of course, it is also possible, by influencing procedural matters, to stall a conference group almost indefinitely without being identified as the culprit.

Refrain from griping around the edges of a meeting. One or two disenchanted individuals—and they tend to seek each other out—can cast a pall over an entire group. A gripe should be directed to key people so that they will have a chance to do something about it.

Even a garden-variety professional, if

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There is no doubt that the many recommendations regarding curriculum change are indicative of real interest in the schools by a broad segment of our society. It is also heartening to see the interest of subject-matter specialists in assisting with curriculum revision. These expressions of interest are to be valued and cherished.

Whether or not the many suggestions for curriculum change will promote better programs of education depends to a considerable extent upon the way in which local school people deal with the proposals and those who make them. The curriculum leader must constantly appraise the proposals against a background of basic values and beliefs. The Statement of Beliefs of ASCD should be of assistance in this. The curriculum leader needs not only to be familiar with the best available research regarding the nature of the learner and the learning process but also to be able to apply the research in evaluating curriculum proposals. He must be able to interpret this appraisal to fellow teachers and to the public.

ASCD, through the work of its various committees, is striving to assist the curriculum leader in this task. Various publications provide him with needed information. CAPCI has encouraged the preparation of the following brief statements, or working papers: "Balance in the Curriculum," "Individual Differences," and "Evaluation of Learning."

Many CAPCI related activities within state and regional groups are proving of

value to participating members. For example, Victor Lawhead is chairing an Indiana CAPCI Committee which is making a survey of promising practices in the three areas of CAPCI in Indiana; Alexander Frazier is chairing an Ohio CAPCI Commission that is preparing a pamphlet entitled, "10 Ways To Meet Individual Needs in the Regular Classroom."

Some curriculum leaders may feel overwhelmed and discouraged with the variety of recommendations they are receiving for curriculum change. We need to remind ourselves that the difference between a problem and an opportunity is in our state of mind. The great interest in the curriculum of our schools should enable us to develop effective teams of teachers, specialists, psychologists, and research experts. If we can effectively utilize the talents of these individuals and if we can capitalize on their interest and the public's interest in improving our schools, we will steadily improve the quality of education in the next decade.

—ARTHUR J. LEWIS, *assistant superintendent in charge of elementary education, Public Schools, Minneapolis, Minnesota.*

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he applies himself intelligently, can soon be in demand on the conference circuit—despite the fact that our knowledge in this field is still limited, mostly of a descriptive nature. In fact, another problem quickly develops—how to select and manage conference commitments in keeping with one's own energy and professional goals. We badly need more study of this hazardous problem.

—ROBERT R. SMITH, *chairman, Division of Education, San Francisco State College, California.*

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