



CHAPTER

11

How to Start Making Your Conference a Reality

I've never *organized* a peer conference by myself. I've run a small one-day conference by myself (and that was tough), but I'd never dream of doing the pre-conference design, planning, and marketing work solo. Here's why.

First of all, organizing a conference is a *lot* of work. Unless you're working full time at it, you're going to need and appreciate some help. But there's another important reason not to go it alone.

In my experience, a successful conference flows from a *diverse steering committee* that represents the variety of individuals, organizations, and viewpoints that are the target audience. A steering committee is a group of people who take responsibility for making a conference happen; they organize and run the conference. Although other people may do significant tasks, the steering committee is ultimately responsible for ensuring that the conference takes place and is successful.

Besides the benefit of sharing the workload, a well-chosen steering committee will supply multiple viewpoints on the conference design, and a variety of personalities and skill sets for the various conference tasks. One person happily handles conference registrations and conference fee deposits, another enjoys creating marketing materials, while a third is skilled at updating the conference website. You'll also have more resources for the external contacts you may need to develop any conventional parts of your program. And, perhaps most important, is the pleasure and excitement of sharing with your committee in creating an event that can meaningfully touch attendees' lives.

How do you start? Looking back at the conferences I've helped organize, there's always been an existing group that formed a starting point for the conference steering committee. It doesn't need to be a large group, maybe just three or four people. Typically, someone in the group suggests the idea of a conference and the others respond enthusiastically. You're on your way!

I'm not saying it's impossible for a single charismatic individual to inspire a conference and persuade volunteers to help, but I haven't seen it done, and I'd be wary of a peer conference that was largely the product of a single person's vision.

If you can't easily find people who will volunteer to help you, that's a strong indication that you need to think twice about creating the conference in the first place. There needs to be a certain level of energy for the conference to happen and for people to attend, and ease in finding people willing to serve on the steering committee is a good predictor of your readiness to organize a successful conference.

So, you and some members of an existing group decide you want to hold a conference. Perhaps there are three of you. What do you do next?

Forming a steering committee

I have organized peer conferences with steering committees as small as three and as many as a dozen people. In my experience, 5 to 10 volunteers is a good size for a conference steering committee. With fewer than five, the workload starts to become excessive for a typical volunteer. Committees with more than 10 people tend to become unwieldy and decision making slows down, but I would not reject a couple of extra members if everyone has useful skills and enthusiasm for the work.

Try to form your conference steering committee from the members of an existing group. Suggest the idea of a conference to the group and, if there's sufficient interest, explore the time commitment and work involved and ask for volunteers to help organize and run the conference.

Even if there isn't an existing group to approach, it's often possible to create a conference steering committee by contacting appropriate individuals who you expect may be interested and who have the energy and time to commit.

When you're talking to potential committee members, have in mind the variety of work you'll need to make your conference a reality. Use the list of jobs in Table 12.1 as a guide. Provide this list of conference tasks to the people you approach, so they can think about how they might best contribute and make a preliminary commitment to one or more areas. As people volunteer to help out, keep track of what remains as you assemble a committee that can, collectively, take responsibility for everything that needs to be done.

Group culture, leadership, and your steering committee

The quality of your peer conference and your pleasure, or lack of it, while you are planning and running the event can be greatly affected by how well your steering committee members work together. Over 100,000 books have been written about group dynamics, management, and leadership, and I doubt I have anything new to say on these subjects. Even so, I hope that the following comments provide some useful advice on the many subtleties of working with a group of people toward a common goal.

There are many models of how people behave in groups, and each of them is useful in certain contexts. In the context of organizing and running a peer conference, I tend to employ an *organic* model, in which group members are seen in terms of their uniqueness, rather than categorized by their roles. An organic point of view allows and encourages people to find ways to work together in a variety of complex situations, and leads toward problem-solving that benefits everyone.

For example a steering committee I coordinated was offered the option of engaging a well-known, desired keynote speaker for a conference to be held in six months. Initially, his appearance fee was more than our budget could handle, but at the last minute he suggested appearing virtually, giving his presentation on a large video screen, at an affordable fee. We needed to quickly find out whether the conference site could support a virtual presentation.

If we had been using a linear approach to group organization, we would have already chosen the steering committee member responsible for technical issues and it would be her job to resolve this issue. If she were busy or sick, I'd have had to poll the other committee members

“I believe organizations are successful when they have shared values, a clear vision of success, motivation to succeed together, and respect for the various roles required to succeed. Shared values help avoid irreconcilable differences. . . . While the vision must be clear, the leadership needs to be flexible. The world changes, and successful organizations need leaders who can guide them through those changes. Every member of the team must be motivated to participate in the team’s success, although different people may have different motivations. One of a leader’s roles is to understand those motivations and address the needs of the people on the team. One critical shared value is recognition of the importance of every person’s role on the team. When people don’t feel valued, they lose motivation to support the success of the team.”

—Ken Flowers

for help and ask someone to take on additional work. In this case, our committee was comfortable with an organic approach, so I sent a request for help to all the steering committee members, most of whom had some technical expertise.

Because the committee culture was one of staying flexible in the face of unexpected circumstances, cooperatively working together to solve problems, and respecting each member's unique constraints and contributions, I didn't worry about treading on anyone's toes by sending out a general request for help. The outcome: One of the committee members had some free time and immediately offered his expertise, while another, the speaker liaison, told us he thought the speaker would have the information we needed and would check with him.

How do you build this kind of culture for your steering committee? This brings us to the question of what *leadership* means in the context of organizing and running a peer conference. Every book on leadership has a different approach; here's what fits for me.

Author and polymath Jerry Weinberg describes organic leadership as leading the *process* rather than *people*. "Leading people requires that they relinquish control over their lives. Leading the process is responsive to people, giving them choices and leaving them in control." Jerry's resulting definition of leadership is "the process of creating an environment in which people become empowered." This is what I try to elicit when working with a peer conference steering committee.

I also find Dale Emery's definition of leadership helpful. Dale describes leadership as "the art of influencing people to freely serve shared purposes." Bear this definition in mind as you work with steering committee members. It ties your interactions with them to your shared goal of realizing a vision, in this case organizing and running of a conference.

Who on the steering committee leads in this way? Unlike the traditional, role-based version of leadership, any member can help build a committee atmosphere that supports this kind of leadership. Once the seeds of this culture are established, I've found that it tends to become self-perpetuating. People like working together in this way. Experiencing a steering committee coming together, with the members enjoying their interactions while creating a great conference, is one of the most satisfying aspects of my work.

Although the impetus for an organic approach can come from any committee member, the conference coordinator is the natural initiator of these flavors of leadership. She is responsible for keeping the conference planning on track and avoiding planning and execution snafus. She does this, not by ordering people around, but through a respectful flow of timely reminders, check-ins, questions, requests for assistance, and appropriate redirections.

Some people have little experience working organically. They may join your committee with the expectation that their responsibilities will be determined by others, that a committee

leader will give them well-defined jobs to do. Often, given a relaxed and open environment where their ideas are encouraged, they will grow into a more active role as they become more confident in their ability to contribute creatively and flexibly to the needs of organizing and running the conference.

Jerry Weinberg suggests you assume that everyone you're working with wants to feel useful and make a contribution. He quotes Stan Gross's device for dealing with his feelings that people are not trying to contribute: "They're all doing the best they can, under the circumstances. If I don't think they are doing the best they can, then I don't understand the circumstances."

Such a mindset will help you focus on finding solutions to people problems that inevitably arise in any group working together on something they care about.

Working with volunteers

Some peer conference steering committee members are paid by their organizations, but the majority, in my experience, are volunteers. When peer conference organization goes well, there's no significant distinction between these two groups. All organizers get paid in intangible ways. Volunteer motivations, usually shared by those receiving a paycheck, are numerous—altruism, the joy of service, giving back to a community that has benefited the volunteer, social opportunities, and many other reasons.

But the flip side of working with volunteers is the very lack of that paycheck. Interests and enthusiasm change with time, for both internal and external reasons, and there's no financial cost to bailing out from a committee if a volunteer's child or parent falls sick, he discovers a new passion, or finds that organizing the vendor exhibit takes more time than he thought it would.

As a result, volunteers sometimes are unable to follow through on their commitments. When this happens, don't take it personally. The reasons probably have nothing to do with you. Find out, with respect, what's going on, renegotiate responsibilities if possible, and ask committee members for help with any unassigned tasks.

Treating steering committee volunteers as individuals with unique motivations, and understanding and respecting these motivations, whatever they may be, is key to creating an environment for committee members to be effective and enjoy their work, thereby contributing to a positive and rewarding conference planning effort for all involved.