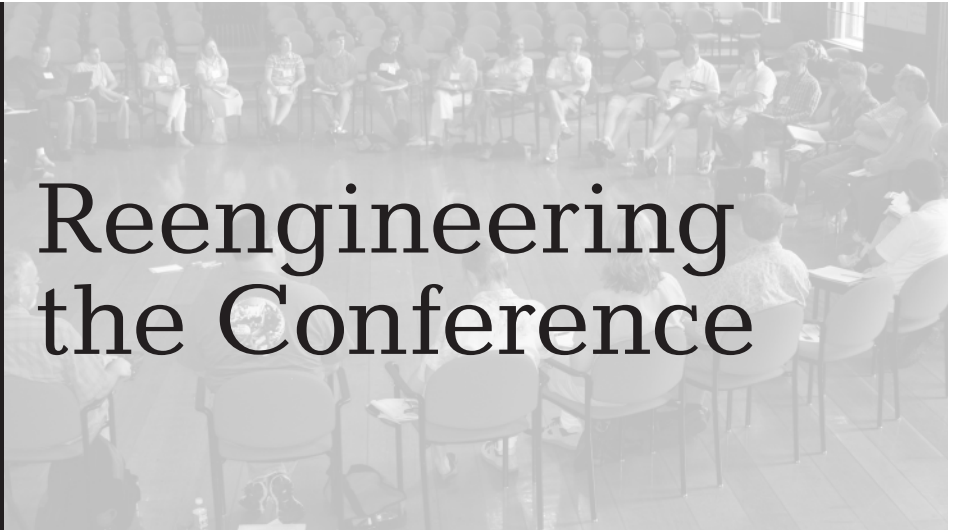# Reengineering the Conference

What Is a Conference?

The people I interviewed about their conference experiences had to satisfy the prerequisite of having attended at least five conferences in the last five years. On hearing this, most prospective interviewees asked me how I defined a conference. Did workshops or trainings count? How about meetings over dinner with medical salespeople? Or one-day community forums? I told them they could decide what they considered to be a conference, and, as the interviews progressed, it became clear that the word *conference* means quite different things to different people.

> "Welcome to the Theater Parking Attendant Symposium."
>
> *—Title on a pamphlet being read by a woman sitting next to me while flying between Phoenix and Chicago on August 22, 2005.*

Thousands of books and articles have been written about conducting business meetings. In contrast, fewer than 50 books about conference organization are currently in print, and nearly all of these concentrate exclusively on *logistics*—the nuts and bolts of planning and running a conference—rather than what should actually happen during the event. Considering the massive expenditure of money and time spent attending conferences today, it's disconcerting to realize the lack of critical thought about the group processes used during them.

While it's true that any kind of conference can be improved by employing better logistics—a nicer location, tastier food, smarter organization—improving the logistics of a mediocre or downright poor conference will not make it great. This book is fundamentally about conference *process* rather than logistics.

What I know is how to create great conferences of a certain type. I call them "peer conferences." In order to understand what a peer conference is, it's first necessary to understand what it is not. Let's start by making some distinctions among the bewildering variety of present-day conferences.

How we got here

The word *conference* was first used around the middle of the 16th century as a verb that described the *act* of conferring with others in conversation, rather than a formal occasion where people met and discussed a topic. Over time, the word's meaning shifted to denoting the meeting itself. The neighboring quote is an early, perhaps the earliest, written English example that uses *conference* in the way we would today. Other words that are currently used for conference-like activities, listed with the century they acquired this meaning, are: *congress* and *convention* (17th), *symposium* (18th), and *colloquium* and *workshop* (20th).

In reality, conferences are arenas for many important activities not captured in these terms, such as maintaining and increasing professional status, making useful connections, conferring legitimacy, promoting issue activism, and building community.

Few of today's conferences provide substantive opportunities for consultation or discussion. They are instead primarily conduits for the one-to-many transfer of information on the conference topic. Predetermined presentations dominate these conference programs.

> "These Conferences are held once in a Month by divers Able Masters making reflexions and observations upon the rarest pieces in the Cabinet of his Most Christian Majesty . . ."
>
> —*A Relation of the Conferences Held at Paris in the Academy Royal for the Improvement of the Arts of Painting and Sculpture, as 'tis Found in the Iournal Des Scavans, A. E. H. Love in Philosophical Transactions (1665–1678), Vol. 4, 1669*

In this book I refer to these conference formats as *traditional* or *conventional* conferences: events built around pre-planned sessions where invited experts present to audiences of attendees. Attendee interaction and conference contributions are secondary to the main purpose of these events—imparting knowledge from those who hopefully have it to those who supposedly haven't. In general, traditional conferences provide little or no formal support for attendee interaction, which is expected to occur by default at meals and social events, during questions at the end of presentations, or via "birds-of-a-feather" sessions wedged into gaps in the conference schedule.

Although most people still think of conferences primarily as a vehicle for pre-planned content, the 1990s saw a rebellion against the rigid structure of traditional conferences, leading to the

birth of a number of alternative designs. All shared an emphasis on the development of fruit-ful attendee interactions over the supply of predetermined material. Some of these approaches, such as World Café, the Art of Hosting, and Everyday Democracy, concentrate on building participant connections, conversations, and communities. Shared issues and concerns moti-vate these events, but their focus is on specific group processes that lead to group outcomes.

Three other conference variants—peer conferences, Open Space Technology, and unconfer-ences—are also attendee-driven, but steer a middle ground between content-driven and group development process models. These conference formats, which I'll cover in more detail later, move the focus of the conference away from pre-planned sessions with fixed presenters and toward a more fluid program that is determined by the desires and interests of the conference attendees. Such attendee-driven approaches have arisen as a response to the rigid structure of traditional conferences.

Face-to-face versus online

I spent the summer of 1973 working for the Long-Range Studies Department of the British Post Office, a long-defunct group that attempted to predict the exciting future that new tech-nologies would surely bring about. The Post Office had just built a few hideously expensive teleconferencing studios, connected by outrageously expensive telephone trunk lines, and one of our jobs was to find out what they could be used for. Could businesspeople be persuaded to stop traveling to meetings, to sit instead in comfortable local studios hundreds of miles apart, handsomely equipped with cameras, microphones, screens, and speakers that magically allowed them to meet as well as if they were all in the same room? Why yes, we concluded brightly in our final report. "A substantial number of business meetings which now occur face-to-face could be conducted effectively by some kind of group telemedia."

Thirty years later, my Macintosh laptop contains all the components of those glossy studios, and the Internet connects me, by both video and voice, to anyone who's similarly equipped. The technology is finally here for the masses, and video conferencing, web conferencing, and virtual worlds are starting to change the ways we have communicated, met, and done business for hundreds of years. And yet, face-to-face symposia, seminars, workshops, trainings, con-gresses, conventions, colloquia, and conferences still abound. In-person conferences, despite the significant expense and the explosion in other forms of communication, still apparently fulfill attendees' needs in ways that electronic alternatives do not.

Perhaps this will soon change; we may be at the beginning of a radical shift in the form and structure of conferences—a change that will relegate the face-to-face conference, little changed since its first blossoming over 400 years ago, to a quaint, old-fashioned technique,

made obsolete by the advent of cheap, ubiquitous, high-bandwidth telecommunications available to every global citizen who wishes to connect with her peers.

It's true that online conferences offer a convenient and low-cost way to receive content, and they can provide limited interactivity. Yet you can also abandon one with the click of a mouse. Online conferences require little commitment, so it is harder to successfully engage participants when the cost of leaving is so low.

If you think of a conference primarily as a way of transferring content, then online conferences seem attractive, inexpensive alternatives to face-to-face events. If, however, you value conferences as opportunities to make meaningful connections with others, face-to-face conferences offer a number of advantages.

I expect that the unique benefits of face-to-face conferences will continue to be valued. The advantages of being physically present with other people, dining and socializing together, the serendipity of human contact, the opportunity to meet new people in person rather than hear a voice on the phone or see an image on a screen, the magic that can occur when a group of people coalesces; all these combine into more than the sum of their parts, building the potential to gain and grow long-term relationships and friendships. Anyone who has been to a good face-to-face conference knows that these things can happen, and that, either in the moment or in retrospect, they may even be seen as pivotal times in one's life.

Able Masters

We don't know much about the Able Masters of the Academy Royal who began holding their art conferences in 1666, but given that the mid-17th century was the dawn of formal art criticism, I don't think the Able Masters sat in rows listening to Abler Masters. Instead, I visualize a room of fledgling critics, magnificently gowned, standing around a Leonardo da Vinci drawing while arguing about the role of perspective in painting, creating a witty salon of a conference, full of arguments and opinions shared among peers.

This vision of mine is a fantasy—yet it illustrates an important point. When a new area of human knowledge or interest blossoms, *there are no experts*—only a vanguard struggling to see clearly, to understand more deeply, to learn. During this period a traditional conference format can only offer an uneasy fit—if there are no experts yet, who will present? Today's explosion of knowledge and, hence, associated conference topics, implies an increasing need for flexible conference approaches that can adapt to spontaneous, real-time discoveries of directions and themes that attendees want to explore.

So, why do most contemporary conferences follow the traditional, prescheduled model? There are several reasons.

Education as gardening

I was educated in England at a time when schools acted as master gardeners, with students their plants. Our teachers sprinkled a rain of knowledge on us and expected us to soak it up, with the successful students absorbing and growing the most. We were encouraged to compete with each other; individual test scores were announced in class, and a ranked list of each class's students, from best to worst, was publicly posted every school term. At the tender age of eleven, the infamous Eleven Plus exam weeded out the "second-rate" students; they went on to second-class comprehensive schools while their top-scoring classmates enjoyed superior opportunities available at prestigious grammar schools—just as gardeners weed less successful seedlings from their faster growing companions.

Not surprisingly, we grew up feeling dominated by our teachers' mastery of their subjects, and we believed that our role was to compliantly learn what they told us, as quickly as possible. In this environment, the idea that we students could contribute to each other's learning was as ridiculous as the idea that garden seedlings could help each other to grow.

Conference process = Elementary school process

In the main, traditional conferences have adopted this common and largely passive model of education, a mode that still permeates society today. Take a moment to think about how you were educated. How much of your time in school did you spend learning through interactions with your peers, compared to sitting in a room listening to a teacher? Probably very little.

There are, of course, important times and situations in which one-to-many classroom instruction is completely appropriate. Much vital learning of basic information and techniques is best imparted by teachers in the classroom. Elementary school students at the same level of achievement, for example, are not going to spontaneously learn from each other how to read and do arithmetic.

But conferences are for adults. By the time most of us reach adulthood, we are able to think critically, to learn from experience and from others, and to be creative in our work and our response to challenges. These abilities allow us to handle and contribute to much more complex and nuanced forms of learning and achieving personal and group goals. And yet, the traditional conferences we attend are still modeled on the classroom paradigm—sit still and soak it up—that we experienced when we were in school.

We have forgotten that we are no longer children and have, unthinkingly, chosen the old, comfortable classroom model for our conference process. As a result, our new adult abilities are restricted to the times during the conference when the classrooms are not in session.

Social events and meal breaks are the times assigned to peer interaction, just like when we were in school and had playground recess and lunch. Yes, traditional conferences continue to treat us as if we were still children.

Traditional conference = Training

One of my hopes for this book is that it will redefine your vision of the core function of conferences, which I see as providing structure and support for a group of people so they can effectively reflect, share, and learn about a common interest. Unfortunately, traditional conferences do not do this well.

Instead, many "conferences" nowadays are primarily *trainings*: events whose foremost aim is to transfer largely predetermined knowledge to the attendees via presentations and panels. This lack of distinction between conferences and trainings is a natural consequence of carrying over our early educational experience into adulthood—we instinctively fall back on the educational modalities we encountered in our youth. Because the word *training* sounds somewhat simplistic, such conferences are often promoted as "professional development"— around 15 percent of my interviewees reported being required to attend conferences for their "continuing education"—and in some professions, especially healthcare and primary and secondary education, such events are often the only kind of conferences that people attend.

Sponsorship distortion

Training-centric conferences can also suffer from an additional influence that further distorts their content away from what attendees really want. Commercial interests that inject their own self-promotion into the proceedings often financially underwrite these events. The effects of commercial sponsorship can be relatively benign—for example, displaying company logos on conference materials and in conference spaces. But sponsorship can also lead to serious distortion of the conference program. For example, sponsors may obtain prominent placement in the presentation schedule, amounting effectively to a paid promotional opportunity for the company, or they may be able to effectively censor the inclusion of subjects or sentiments that are at odds with their point of view.

> ". . . in several dozen symposiums during the weeklong meeting, companies paid the APA [American Psychiatric Association] about $50,000 per session to control which scientists and papers were presented and to help shape the presentations."
>
> —*"Industry Role in Medical Meeting Decried," Washington Post, May 25, 2002*

Conference form

Currently, traditional conferences make up the vast majority of conferences held. A traditional conference's format is determined by its program and schedule, which are planned by the conference organizers well in advance of the actual conference. The conference program announces who will speak, on what subjects, when, and for how long. Potential participants are so used to having this level of detail provided in advance that their decision to attend is based principally on the contents of the advance conference program.

In contrast, alternative conference process models support attendee input into what happens at the conference. This is usually done during the conference, though in some models participants suggest or offer topics of interest prior to the conference to provide a jumping-off place at the start of the conference. Although there are many similarities and overlaps, as we'll see, each alternative conference model implements an attendee-driven conference in its own unique way.