Introduction

I've always been curious. I've always wanted to understand the world I found myself living in.

As a child growing up in England, I was driven to study physics, the most fundamental science, a way of looking at the world that perhaps had the greatest chance of explaining the mysteries of the universe to me. By the age of twenty-five I had worked on a key neutrino experiment at CERN, the European particle accelerator, and received a Ph.D. for my efforts.

But a funny thing happened along the way. I became increasingly curious about *people*. The neutrino research was a collaboration of eighty scientists and hundreds of support personnel from five different countries, and I was fascinated by the social and cultural differences that shaped our frequent meetings. Heated discussions about how we should proceed and whose names should go on our journal articles flared and sputtered, and I marveled at the energy scientists poured into the politics of their work. Their passions frequently distracted and detracted from the science we were exploring.

Understanding people better became important to me. I immigrated to the United States after falling in love with Vermont, a rural state with no opportunity to continue the big-lab science path I'd been traveling. I embarked on a series of careers that increasingly integrated my technical background with working with people: owning and managing a solar energy business, teaching computer science at a liberal arts college, and information technology consulting.

As a consultant I worked with hundreds of organizations, discovering that the "technical" problems they had asked me to solve were fundamentally *people* problems. Over and over again I found myself talking with senior executives on managerial issues, which was a far cry from what I had been ostensibly hired to do.

I also found myself drawn to creating conferences about everything I was doing, both professionally and in my community, and I founded a couple of non-profits along the way.

Event Crowdsourcing: Creating Meetings People Actually Want and Need

I loved this work. (Still do.) In 1992, I developed a new conference format where no experts are invited in advance to speak, and where the value of the event grows from effectively tapping the shared expertise and experience of everyone present.

During the ensuing years I wrote two books to share what I'd learned from designing and facilitating hundreds of conferences:

- *Conferences That Work: Creating Events That People Love* (2009) detailed my reinvention of conferences using the participant-driven event process I'd developed for over fifteen years. Since publication, I've released important free updates that improve and extend the book's peer conference model.

- *The Power of Participation: Creating Conferences That Deliver Learning, Connection, Engagement, and Action* (2015) offered an extensive tool chest of processes that further improve significant learning by supporting fruitful connection, meaningful participation, concrete outcomes, and building community at meetings.

Even as *The Power of Participation* was published, I was noticing interest growing in designing meetings that included topics and issues chosen by attendees at the event. Meeting owners were discovering that predetermined sessions weren't adequately meeting attendee needs. They wanted to know how to make their conference programs include the most valuable in-the-moment topics, rather than the best guesses of a program committee.

So I wrote this book.

It's a guide to **designing conferences and sessions that become what attendees actually want and need them to be.**

I call this **event crowdsourcing**, and as you'll see, it includes much more than simply picking good topics to discuss.

Event crowdsourcing, done right, ensures that attendees will be enthusiastic about the content and value of your events and sessions. Whether you're a presenter who knows the importance of meeting the actual wants and needs

of your audience, or a conference stakeholder eager to grow your event by making it the very best it can be, event crowdsourcing is an essential ingredient of an effective and successful session and conference.

What I share in this book is not rocket science. It doesn't require any expensive technology. I've designed and facilitated hundreds of events using nothing more than standard A/V, pens, paper, and index cards. Typically, my clients hire me to "show them how it's done" the first time, and then incorporate what they've learned into future events themselves.

I'm excited about the potential for event crowdsourcing to fundamentally improve just about any meeting. This book is my attempt to convince you to try it, and to support your effort every step of the way.

And remember, reading is only the beginning. If what you read stays in your head, it will benefit no one. If you're serious about significantly improving your meetings, you'll need to *put into action* what you read here. When you do, you and your attendees will reap the benefits!