

Introduction

When people talk about large conferences or meetings several traditional images are evoked...

- Glitzy, staged proceeding with slides, backdrops, videos, soundtracks and glossy papers.
- Town hall meetings with disgruntled people throwing rotten fruit at frazzled presenters.
- Passive audiences sitting in rows listening to high-level speeches, which miss the detail they relate too.

This type of experience is unsatisfying for leaders and participants alike. At best some of the messages are heard and retained. At worst stereotypes, resistance and issues are reinforced.

Yet another model of conferencing has been developed over recent years based on Von Bertalanfy's Systems Theory, Kurt Lewin's Social Group Psychology and Wilfred Bion's Psychoanalytic Psychology (socio-techno systems). These conferences are designed to support very large numbers of people to work together and:

- Understand the need for change.
- Analyse current reality and what needs to change.
- Generate ideas about how to make the changes happen.
- Implement and support making it work.

What does an interactive conference look, sound and feel like?

From the very first invitation to participate the whole process connects with the real organisational issues from across all levels. The venue and programme is designed to meet the specific needs of the organisation and the work progressed is real and relevant for everyone present.

Yet the processes and activities are based on tried and tested ways of working interactively with large numbers. A variety of learning methods are used to ensure that every personality and learning preference is accommodated and everyone can contribute fully.

There is an air of anticipation as people enter into a large venue and are greeted in ways that are designed to evoke the spirit of the changed organisation. Packs with maps make it easy to find the assigned tables and meet the mixed group of 8 people that form the basic working unit.



A minimal welcome with some advice about how the day will work, and the groups set off with simple stories that build connection. This sets the pattern. No long speeches, and short inputs are followed by discussion of specific questions at the tables. Mutual education about the internal and external environment builds a clear case for change, which is shared by all. A blueprint for the future is shared and shaped, ideas for implementation are generated, synthesised and prioritised. Clear common ground emerges to which people have attached energy, commitment and plans to achieve.

What are the typical outcomes of working in this way?

These conferences can, and should, be designed to achieve specific organisational outcomes. However there are some universal benefits to getting the whole system into the room and working interactively on change.

- People grasp the issues, become aligned around a common purpose and create new directions – resistance reduces and commitment grows.
- People experience working together in a way that is congruent with the change message and urgency and energy are produced to create the new future.
- Flows of essential information and co-operation replace organisational silos.
- Issues are identified and creativity is sparked to resolve them bringing productivity and customer satisfaction.
- Capacity for future change increases as people develop new ways of working together

What will it mean for the leaders?

The greatest challenge for leaders in any change is in striking the right balance between clear direction, and inviting active participation. Conferences of this kind provide many opportunities and responsibilities for leaders in ensuring success.

1. **Making the initial commitment** to invest resources in involvement on this scale can make a significant and symbolic contribution to the messages that things are going to be different.
2. **Clearly articulating thoughts about change** and an honest assessment of what is needed together with hopes for the future provides much needed visible leadership. When coupled with limited speeches inviting genuine questions of understanding and constructive ideas it invites leadership from everyone.
3. **Thinking and acting as if the future is already here** allows leaders to model significantly the new behaviours and ways of working they want people to commit to.
4. **Being a fully contributing participant** can be a refreshing and informative experience and bridge the gap of understanding between operational and strategic spaces in organisation.

Many leaders embark on this journey trusting in the process and the experience of other organisations; others want to fully understand what it is they are letting themselves in for. At the end of 'Make it Different' event on Civil Service reform The Cabinet Secretary said, "It all worked as you predicted, everything you said would happen worked – now I want to know why it worked!"



How do you guarantee it will work and make predictions?

Every conference is uniquely designed to fit the context and aspirations of the organisation. The processes used to develop the design and many of the event techniques are from an extensive body of experience. The main predictor is the setting up of a 'design (planning) team'. This consists of people with large-scale expertise, leaders and people who represent a microcosm of the people who will attend the conference. This group includes the enthusiasts and cynics and represents every function and level in the system.

This group diagnose the issues and shape the desired outcomes. They sum all this up in a clear and worthwhile statement of purpose. This purpose is then used to design the right type and sequence of activities. Games and irrelevant information are excluded – every activity is real work to achieve the purpose and outcomes. Yet the activities are playfully constructive bringing the whole brain to bear for every participant. The design team are a unique and important predictor of what will work, ongoing evaluation and data gathering help to keep the conferences on track.

How do you make sure leaders are not exposed to difficult and embarrassing conflicts?

This type of conferencing can seem risky for leaders. It seems to require large degrees of trust. Yet the design team provide an invaluable source of information about the issues and minimise the risks. The partnership with them is developed to provide for a win:win for everyone. Many of the techniques have been developed to support safe and productive dialogue across situations of organisational conflict.

One of the important principles is listening for understanding. If the design team want to hear directly from leaders they help them by saying what they would be curious to understand. The process then ensures that the leader can be open, honest and spontaneous without being unfairly judged. Questions are developed by table work using reflective practices that invite integrated thinking and discourage speeches and ridicule. Facilitation maintains a spirit of mutual enquiry and constructive dialogue.

How much time will leaders need to invest?

This varies. Leadership can be defined tightly as the board or senior management team or as broadly as everyone with supervisory or co-ordinating responsibilities. Some level of the leadership team need to be full and active participants throughout the process of the design team and at the conferences. Other levels of leadership might be remote enough to allow for participation to be confined to a specific dialogue about the wider strategic context.

The more active participation leaders can provide the more visible they will be. When multiple conferences are planned the design team can help to advise on what will support demonstrating maximum visibility and commitment whilst ensuring leaders are not required to repeat the same experience too often. Many leaders find the experience an engaging and worthwhile one and increase their participation throughout the process.



Leadership alignment – what’s the big deal?

Our experience in this field of working with leadership teams shows the importance of what we would call ‘leadership alignment’. Individuals, even at the most senior level in any organisation, are unable to make sustainable change happen. However, when they are aligned as a leadership team they know they have the commitment of a body of people behind them. They make wise decisions – not in isolation – but with confidence that their decisions will take them in the same direction and would be recognised and supported by their colleagues.

Further reading

Title	Author(s)	Publisher	ISBN Number
Terms of Engagement – Changing the way we Change Organisations	Richard Axelrod	Berrett Koehler	1-57675-084-1
Large Group Interventions - Engaging the Whole System for Rapid Change	Barbara B. Bunker & Billie T. Alban	Jossey Bass	0-7879-0324-8
Seeing Systems	Barry Oshry	Berrett-Koehler	1-881052-99-0
Synchronicity – The Inner Path of Leadership	Joseph Jaworsky	Berrett-Koehler	1-881052-94-X
The Art of the Long View	Peter Schwarz	John Wiley & Sons	0-471-97785-3

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