

THE CONFERENCE
PLANNING AND REPLANNING

By

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Part I
Planning the Conference

The Conference Leader
Ten Key Points of Planning and Preparation

1. Decides when to call a conference.
2. Decides who should be present - regular members, experts or technicians, others.
3. Formulates purposes of the conference - scope and "out of bounds."
4. Selects reference materials and arranges to make them available at or before the conference with appropriate questions or suggestions of study. This may be assigned to specific members.
5. Appoints certain persons to be prepared for special assignments, including secretary and summarizer.
6. Prepares agenda and time schedule.
7. Prepares opening statement, types of questions, and anticipates difficulties that may occur.
8. Provides for needed equipment and conditions - proper lighting and ventilation, comfortable seating, blackboard, projector, etc.
9. Decides on organization of conference group such as chairman, secretary, summarizer, committees, in addition to the discussion leader.
10. May call a meeting of a small selected group to plan and prepare for the conference.

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A Sample Outline of a Leader's Preparation

Topic: Problem Solving Conference

- I. Introduction
 - A. Outline the situation
 1. A brief statement explaining the problem and the motives of the conference.
- II. Discussion
 - A. Problems that might arise
 - B. Consideration of possible solutions.
- III. Decide the best solution
 - A. Advantages and disadvantages of each solution
 - B. Feasibility of each solution
 - C. Pick the best solution
 1. Recheck it against other alternatives
 2. Decide how to put the solution to use.
- IV. Summarize
 - A. Why the solution was selected
 - B. How it will be selected
 - C. Emphasize the value of the solution

The Element of Time

It is the duty of the leader to see that the conference does not drag on. Members will become bored and useful participation ceases.

Better thinking is often done when time is short. One can take half an hour to cover a given topic. If there is an important deadline it can be covered in ten minutes. When the mind is sharpened by a deadline, it often exercises better judgement in far less time.

It should be noted that setting a time limit can be useful in certain circumstances. However, this may not always be the case. If the group is in a constructive discussion it may be to the conference's advantage to extend the time limit.

A time limit is, in essence, an arbitrary period which is useful in planning the conference.

Preparing Reference Materials for Conference Use

There is not standard plan when preparing materials to be used by the members. The following questions help the leader decide what materials should be prepared, when to hand them out, and how to make the best use of them. Decisions on these questions can be made more intelligently after the leader has prepared his own outline. It is important that he have his outline ready far enough in advance of the conference so that needed materials can be prepared.

1. What technical data will be helpful for reference by the group during discussion?
2. Should members have an opportunity to study the materials prior to the conference?
3. Will it help the discussion to put it into the hands of the group:
 - a. A statement of the topic?
 - b. Objectives of the conference?
 - c. Obvious issues - problems or difficulties?
 - d. Solutions which have already been proposed?
 - e. Limitations under which conferences must work?
4. Should the members receive any of the above information (1) before the conference meets, (2) at the opening of the conference, or (3) during the conference?
5. Will it help to have some of the above materials put on large charts or exhibits?
6. Should each member receive the information in bound form or loosely assembled in a folder?
7. Would it be helpful if materials are produced on different shades of paper so that the leader can say, "Turn now to the green memo" or, "Let's check the figures on the yellow sheet."
8. Be sure that someone, possibly the secretary of the conference, is familiar enough with the materials that distribution during the conference can be made quickly without distracting the attention of the members or taking the leader's time. Smooth organization of materials promotes orderly thinking.

Replanning the Conference

Sometimes even the best of conferences must be replanned. This may happen when:

1. Someone introduces a logical objection which changes the attitude of the group from a previously accepted solution.
2. Stubborn opposition occurs within the group.
3. An emotional flare-up prevents logical thinking.
4. The problem turns out to be more complicated than previously anticipated.

What the Leader Can Do

Replanning a stymied conference has much in common with the techniques involved in getting a decision, as previously outlined. There is a difference, however. In the replanning, the leader takes the initiative. He decides that replanning is necessary. He determines which technique he will use. He tries to get the group to accept his judgement regarding the replanning.

Approaches

Here are some approaches that the leader may want to use in replanning:

1. If he sees that the problem area is too broad he may want to limit the scope of the conference objective or specific problem.
2. He may want to lead up to a delayed decision.
3. Substituting a problem which now appears to be of greater or immediate concern.
4. If he finds the group hopelessly deadlocked, he may want to change the group.
5. Assign a specific part of the problem to a smaller 'task force' composed of members from within the group who have immediate concern with that part of the problem.

In Brief

When a conference group is not making visible headway, make sure that it does not adjourn with a sense of frustration or failure. Refer to something either directly or indirectly related to the topic under discussion which will give the group a sense of satisfaction for coming together even though they have not made the progress they expected to make.

The leader can be honest in doing this because people can hardly discuss a problem which really concerns them for an hour or more and not make some progress toward a better understanding - one that will bring them closer to a sound conclusion.

Handling a Potentially Dangerous Situation

There are three principle ways in which a leader prepares himself to meet possible difficulties and exercise appropriate control:

1. He must know the kinds of trends or actions which delay, handicap or wreck a conference - and be able to sense their approach before they materialize.
2. He anticipates the kinds of problems, members and ticklish topics he is likely to meet in the conference and prepares himself for them. (Refer to list in the following section).
3. He develops skillful and tactful handling of these situations through practice.

Two Potentially Dangerous Problems

A. The Problem Member

There are the problem members. Fifteen types are listed below. Sometimes a leader meets all fifteen types in a group of only five members. Sometimes they are absent in larger groups. The leader must be able to recognize them - and to act quickly so as to neutralize or prevent the kinds of member actions which block joint, constructive thinking and sound judgment.

Problem Member Types:

1. Talks too much - over zealous.
2. Talks too long - the "cannot terminate" type.
3. Talks off the subject. Wanders.
4. Talks on inappropriate step. Not systematic in his thinking.
5. Impatient. Demands inappropriate action. Wants decision before investigation. Illogical - does not tie in with previous thinking.
6. Unwilling to consider alternatives or compromises.
7. Enjoys a personal duel with opponent. Ignores group and leader. Likes to debate just to win an argument rather than solve a problem.
8. Seeks to stir up a feeling of antagonism through opposition, instead of understanding, good will and cooperation. Has to win to feel important.
9. Talks only in terms of his own interest vs. others' interest.

10. Makes dogmatic, unsupported statements. Gives no reason.
11. Makes a point without needed clarification or illustration.
12. Does not pay attention - whispers, bothers, interrupts.
13. Makes false statements; uses facts wrongly.
14. Does not talk at all, but could make contribution.
15. The 'easy solve it' type; has a ready cure-all for every ill.

B. Ticklish Topics

The leader should be able to sense explosive situations. These usually develop around emotional topics. Sometimes they are due to the composition of the group. Here are a few typical topics:

1. Hassling the management.
2. Hassling company policies.
3. Making comparisons discreditable to the organization.
4. The uncovering of actual bad situations or processes reflecting on some member of the group.
5. Controversial questions - such as 'closed' versus 'open' shop.

Many times it may be best to let the members air their feelings. After this has been done the members can turn their attention to solving the problem at hand.