CHAPTER 3 What's Wrong with Traditional Conferences?

Four assumptions of a traditional conference

Four key assumptions lurk behind the traditional conference format—assumptions so deep-seated that they go unquestioned by most conference organizers. These assumptions embody, and consequently help perpetuate, a distorted and outdated way of thinking about conference purpose and structure, leading to a conference model that, as reported by a majority of my interviewees, does not well serve today's conference attendees.

Let's look at these assumptions.

Assumption #1. Conference session topics must be chosen and scheduled in advance.

During my conference experience interviews, I asked the following question:

> "Most conferences have a conference schedule and program decided in advance. How would you feel about a conference where, at the start, through a careful conference process, the attendees themselves determine what they want to discuss, based on what each person wants to learn and the experience each attendee has to share?"

Forty-five percent of my interviewees were unable to conceive of a conference that did not have a schedule of conference sessions decided on and circulated in advance.

The most common response was that the interviewee wasn't sure she'd want to go to such a conference without knowing what was going to happen there.

The next most common response was that the idea sounded great/interesting/intriguing, but the interviewee had no idea of how one would create a relevant conference program at the start of the conference.

Suspend disbelief for a moment, and assume that at the start of a conference it is somehow possible to use available resources to create a conference program that reflects actual attendee needs. Imagine attending such a conference yourself, a conference tailored to *your* needs. (You might want to reflect on how often this has happened for you.) Wouldn't it be great?

The peer conference model described in this book does indeed build a conference program that automatically adjusts to the actual needs of the people present—we'll see how later.

What is the origin of the assumption that a conference program must be pre-planned? Perhaps it arose from our experience of learning as children, from our teachers in school who knew or were told what we were supposed to learn following a pre-planned curriculum. Certainly, if one thinks of conferences as trainings by experts, a pre-planned schedule makes sense. But conferences are for adult learners, and adults with critical thinking skills and relevant experience can learn from each other if they are given the opportunity. We'll see that there are ways of putting conference attendees in charge of what they wish to learn and discuss. But this cannot be done effectively if a conference's program is frozen before attendees arrive.

Assumption #2. Conference sessions are primarily for transmitting pre-planned content.

The three communication modes used among a group of people are *one-to-one* (individual conversations), *one-to-many* or *broadcast* (presentations and panels), and *many-to-many* or *conferring* (discussions). Traditional conference sessions are predominantly one-to-many, with perhaps a dash of many-to-many at question time.

One-to-one conversations are infinitely flexible; both participants have power to lead the conversation along desired paths. Many-to-many conversations are powerful in a different way—they expose the participating group to a wide range of experience and opinions.

In contrast, one-to-many communication is mostly pre-planned, and thus relatively inflexible if the presentation involves a passive audience. At best, a presenter may ask questions of her audience and vary her presentation appropriately, but she is unlikely to get accurate representative feedback when her audience is large. Some presenters are skilled at creating interactive sessions with significant audience participation, but they are the exception.

Presentations and panels are appropriate when we are training, and have expert knowledge or information to impart to others. But with the rise of alternative methods for adults to receive training—reading books and articles, watching recordings of presentations, downloading answers on the Web—what can't be replicated at a face-to-face conference is the conversations and discussions that occur. So why do we still cling to conference sessions that employ the one communication mode for which a variety of alternatives can substitute?

Assumption #3. Supporting meaningful connections with other attendees is not the conference organizers' job; it's something that happens in the breaks between sessions.

People are impressed when I tell them that on arrival, peer conference attendees are immediately given a face book that includes photographs, names and contact data, and additional pertinent information about each participant. They tell me that it's rare to receive such a document at conferences. It's sad that conference organizers don't bother to provide this basic tool for learning about fellow attendees. (Perhaps it's not too surprising, since an attendee face book is not mentioned in any book on conference management I've read.) The absence speaks volumes about the lack of support for attendee interaction at traditional conferences.

Typically, support is limited to providing meals and social events where people can mingle. Attendees are left to their own devices to learn who else is at the conference, to seek out interesting people, and to introduce themselves to others. All these barriers must be surmounted before conversations and discussions can occur. Consequently, attendees who are new to a conference are disadvantaged compared to the old-timers who already know other participants, reinforcing the formation of cliques.

It doesn't have to be this way. Actively supporting useful attendee connections is an integral part of every peer conference. When the information, openings, and opportunities needed to meet like-minded attendees are provided, not only during session breaks but also as part of the formal conference structure, it becomes attendee-centered rather than session-centered, greatly increasing the intimacy and enjoyment of the event.

Assumption #4. Conferences are best ended with some event that will hopefully convince attendees to stay to the end.

How to end a conference? Trainings and conferences that professionals must attend to maintain certification can close with the triumphant presentation of certificates of completion or attendance, but other traditional conferences have no such obvious conclusion. All too often, the conference finale is manufactured: an awards ceremony, a closing keynote, a fancy dinner, a raffle, a celebrity speaker, or some combination thereof.

The reason for this artificiality is simple: Traditional conferences that are not training-oriented don't provide any kind of progression through their theme. The sequence of session topics is guided by logistical, political, and speaker availability considerations, rather than logical flow. One session doesn't follow from another. Such a conference doesn't have a beginning; how can we expect it to have an end?

> "'We know that people will be strong in the beginning of the conference, so we anchor the keynote speaker at the end so attendees will stay,' says Karen Malone, Vice President of Meeting Services for the Chicago-based Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society."
>
> —*Jennifer Nicole Dienst. Meetings and Conventions Magazine, November 2007*

Some conferences dispense with the pretense of closure. This at least is honest, though the effect of "transmit content, go home" is somewhat blunt.

In contrast, peer conferences provide a progression, not through content, but through increased attendee connections as the conference proceeds. Two closing "spective" sessions build on the generated intimacy to provide a powerful and appropriate conference ending.

Predetermined content

Sometimes a trusted colleague will tell you about a conference you've never attended. *You really should go—it's a great fit for you. I've been the last five years and I wouldn't miss it.* Or, *I went once, never again. Badly organized, lousy location, sessions that weren't as advertised, and I didn't meet anyone who does what we do.* If you are lucky enough to get an evaluation from someone whose judgment you trust, this may be all you need to determine whether you should attend a conference.

Otherwise, how do you decide to attend a particular conference? Well, it seems obvious that you'd want to know in detail what the conference is about before you decide to spend valuable money and time on it. And what better way to find out than to obtain the pre-conference program and scan the lists of scheduled sessions. The more detail the better. *Aha, there's a presentation that sounds really appealing. And maybe I'll like that one. Hmm, nothing of interest on Monday afternoon, but perhaps I can do some sightseeing then.* Eventually you decide to go, or not. Simple. Reasonable. How else could you decide?

Access to this kind of information certainly makes sense when deciding whether you should attend a traditional conference. Since it's rare to find that dream conference where an appealing session is scheduled during every conference hour every day, perusing a pre-conference

Choice

For ten years I taught computer science at Marlboro College, a wonderful tiny liberal arts college in southern Vermont. Unlike most schools, Marlboro has almost no course requirements (a demonstrated ability to write with clarity being a notable exception), with students creating a "plan of concentration" for their last two years. Students' study culminates with an examination of their body of work by faculty members and an outside examiner expert in their chosen field, a process very similar to a master's level thesis defense. Because of the school's unusual learning format, students are essentially free to choose freshman and sophomore courses based on their interests rather than on degree requirements.

At the start of my seventh year of teaching, I thought I was finally becoming a half-decent teacher. So I was surprised and depressed by the atmosphere in my larger-than-usual fall semester introductory class. Students seemed distracted, homework was perfunctory, and getting classroom discussion going was like pulling teeth. Every class has its own personality, but I'd never experienced a class like this one. Was it me? Had I regressed to my early years of bumbling teaching? I didn't think so. Perhaps it was the students?

I soldiered on for a few weeks; the class environment stayed grim. So one day I summoned up my courage and asked my students about the class. I extracted the information that they thought the content was at the right level, but they just weren't that interested in it.

"So," I asked, "why did you sign up?" And finally the truth came out. The school had recently created a joint degree program with another local college. This joint degree program had requirements, one of which could be satisfied by taking my class. Unlike any class I'd previously taught at Marlboro, about two thirds of the students were in my class because they saw it as the easiest way to satisfy a degree requirement. The dead atmosphere I'd experienced was because a majority of my students didn't want to be there.

Unfortunately, this knowledge didn't make teaching the class any easier. But I did realize how lucky I was to have students in my college classes who, most of the time, were there because they wanted to be. And I came to appreciate the dedication of the vast majority of teachers who don't have this advantage.

During my interviews, it became clear that many traditional conferences are "have-to's" instead of "choose-to's." When people attend conferences to fulfill continuing education requirements or because the boss said so, all other things being equal, the conference atmosphere suffers, just as my class environment suffered when students had to attend. One of the reasons that peer conferences work well is that, with few exceptions, *attendees have chosen to be there*. And that can make a big difference.

schedule helps you figure out what proportion of the conference program is likely to be of interest. (Provided that the conference program doesn't mislead, which, as we've seen, is not uncommon.)

But behind this thinking hides a big assumption. To see it, let's first go over how a traditional conference program is developed. Usually, a program committee, representing (hopefully) the conference constituency, convenes long before the conference and decides on the conference structure and content. Formal academic conference program committees often issue a call for papers, with the conference content and presenters determined through who responds with what content, filtered through some kind of review process. Other program committees may decide on a list of hot topics and then go after big names who can present on them. Slowly a raft of sessions is assembled and scheduled, gaps filled, and the conference program takes shape.

Predicting what attendees want—and getting it wrong

For the last 15 years, I've been in a unique position to determine just how well the above process predicts and serves up the content that attendees want. Because what happens at a peer conference accurately reflects the participants' needs and wants, it has been possible for me to compare the pre-conference program predictions of the conference organizers with the actual programs that were developed by attendees.

The results of this comparison are sobering. Although, as you'd expect, some conference committees are better predictors than others, when I've compared program committee forecasts of hot topics with those that attendees actually chose, *I've found that even the best program committees predict less than half of the session topics chosen at the conference*.

This dismal showing may surprise you. I suspect that the majority of conference organizers will be dismayed by this finding, and will question its accuracy. After all, many traditional conferences receive highly favorable attendee evaluations—how can favorable reviews be reconciled with such a poor match between content offered and content desired?

One reason is that seasoned attendees' expectations for a conventional conference are, sadly, not very high. If they have never experienced getting more than half their concerns addressed, attendees will set the bar at that level, and define as successful a conference that meets this standard.

However, there are several other important reasons why peer conferences are so much more successful than program committees at generating the best conference topics.

Uncovering the unexpected

At every peer conference I've facilitated, attendees suggest unexpectedly popular topics during the conference roundtable that is the first step of the peer conference process. These are topics that were off just about everyone's radar, including the steering committee's. Usually these topics arise from expertise casually shared by an attendee, who often has no idea that others would be interested in her experience and want to discuss it further. I have seen these topics turn into informal presentations or panels attended by half or more of the attendees.

Although program committees sometimes make well-meaning attempts to poll attendees about potentially appealing topics to incorporate into a traditional program, I've found in practice that few attendees expend the time and energy to suggest subjects they'd like to see covered at an upcoming conference. Even if a popular topic is uncovered in advance, it may not be recognized as such by the program committee.

Timeliness

Conference programs developed in advance suffer from the curse of already being obsolete. Typically a multiday conference program will be fixed six months or more in advance. In some fields, a lot can happen in six months. I'm reminded of a conference-planning meeting held when legislation that affected our conference's target audience had just been passed. Everyone felt it was very important that we invite a legal expert to keynote the consequences for our attendees' organizations, so we found a suitable speaker and publicized our program. But by the time the conference was held, eight months later, a host of articles in related trade journals had thoroughly covered the issue, and our keynote covered what had now become familiar ground.

What can you do to ensure that fixed program topics are still relevant by the time your conference rolls around? Not much. I've noticed that sessions on structural issues, like the consequences of legal and accounting rule changes, are more likely to become dated than sessions that cover new approaches or research. But I've had little success over the years in predicting which topics will still be fresh and exciting when the presenter steps up on the stage.

A long lead time between the publication of a conference program and the conference itself also impacts presenters, who are required to turn in session descriptions and handouts months in advance without knowing yet either what their presentation will entail or what might prove pertinent in the intervening months.

Do conferences need to have keynotes?

It's sad that so many conference organizers think that a keynote is an essential part of a conference; that if there is no keynote then the conference is incomplete in some way. This is why keynotes are often unnaturally grafted onto a conference, creating a kind of Frankenstein mutant that roars around with great sound and fury, but is forgotten by all quickly soon after the conference is over.

I think that a conference keynote is appropriate when you can snag a dynamic, engaging, and knowledgeable speaker on a relevant topic that a clear majority of your attendees will find interesting. In my experience, if you start from the premise that you *must* have a keynote, there is a real danger of ending up with a speaker who does not fulfill these criteria.

Finally, if you engage a keynote speaker, have a backup plan. Recently, some conference organizers with whom I was working had a traditional conference keynote speaker cancel just one week before the event, because she was invited to the White House on the day she was scheduled to speak. The ensuing last-minute effort to find a substitute significantly increased the organizers' pre-conference stress.

Hot topics—that aren't

Besides worrying about scheduling topics that have passed their sell-by date by the time the conference is held, you also need to worry about choosing topics that, while seemingly "hot," draw little attendee interest come the day of the presentation. How can this happen? Well, sometimes a topic talked up as the "next big thing" just isn't—it's hype that attendees largely reject, either before the conference or when they get there and discover, outside the formal sessions, that no one else is really interested either.

Topics can also misfire at a conference when they're *too far ahead* of audience needs or interests. For example, this can happen at information technology conferences when new operating systems or software applications are first introduced. Sometimes these products are available well before attendees are interested in or able to purchase or roll out the software for their companies. The lead time required to put a program together further complicates the decision whether to feature such topics at a conference. While an experienced and knowledgeable program committee will help reduce this kind of audience-subject mismatch, it's nearly impossible to prevent entirely.

The case for predetermined content

Predetermined conference content has its place, and there are several situations in which it's entirely appropriate. For example, marketing of a conventional conference often is anchored around one or more big-name presenters. Their presentations, which are often complex multimedia affairs, require plenty of time to prepare—they can't be created on demand at a conference. Speakers with a proven reputation for visionary, dynamic keynotes are usually able to provide a relevant, up-to-the-minute, topical presentation, despite the delay between the time they were booked and the time they speak.

Similarly, conference sessions that provide a well-presented, comprehensive overview of a topic can be very valuable to attendees. Such sessions also need careful preparation, and must be solicited and scheduled in advance.

Some professional and amateur groups would not think of holding a conference where the acknowledged leaders in the field or topic were not given pride of place in the conference program. (Politics is one area that comes to mind; you can probably think of others.) A conference that lacked a program defined in advance is obviously not the best choice here.

Sometimes conferences are organized by a group with a strong agenda of conference activities and outcomes. Political and social activism conferences are obvious examples. In addition, company conferences are often tightly controlled affairs, focused on firing up a sales team or bringing employees up to speed on management's upcoming agenda. Events with such preplanned, action-oriented goals require predetermined content.

Finally, conferences that are clearly marketed as trainings obviously need to provide a comprehensive description of the material to be covered in advance.

However, the fact that so much traditional conference time is taken up with content that is a poor fit to attendee desires is a depressing reality that program committees need to bear in mind. It's my hope that the approach to conference design described in this book will lessen our reliance on predetermined content, and encourage us to create conferences that are designed to respond to actual attendee needs rather than our best guesses as to what they might be.

The new kid on the block: making connections at a traditional conference

Just about everyone who's attended a conference has at one time or another walked into a room full of strangers. Unless you're an extreme extrovert, this can be a daunting experience. Think for a moment about how you like to meet new people. It's easier if you have some kind of opening to start up a conversation. The more people in the room you know, the more

Together, yet alone

In October 1984 I was one of 700 attendees at EDUCOM '84, a conference on information technology in higher education. I had recently started to teach computer science at Marlboro College, a tiny New England liberal arts college, and was looking for professional support and ideas.

Unfortunately, EDUCOM '84 turned out to be a depressing experience for me. The conference sessions focused on the needs of large institutions. Hundreds of people sat around me as we listened to talks on subjects that left me cold, or solutions requiring equipment and staff that I couldn't begin to afford. And there was a strong whiff of "look at all the cool stuff we're doing, bet you can't match this" that I didn't like.

I was sure that there were other attendees like me at EDUCOM '84. But how was I to find them? I tried talking to the people I sat next to at mealtimes. I struck up conversations with my seatmates as we were shuttled to campus tours and off-site demos. I scanned the directory of attendees for people from small schools like mine, and then scanned name badges, hoping to spot them. But I didn't meet a single kindred soul during the entire four-day conference.

Do I blame the folks at EDUCOM for my miserable experience? No. They organized a traditional conference that may have served many attendees well. However, it certainly didn't work for me.

But one good thing came out of my time at EDUCOM '84. I began to wonder whether I could create a conference that better met what I felt attendees needed. I wanted a conference that was responsive to the needs of attendees, encouraged positive attendee interactions, and fostered a spirit of community among those who came.

possibilities exist for you to meet others through your acquaintances' existing connections. When you know no one, you're completely cut off from the connections that already exist in the room.

It's even worse when no one in the room knows anyone else. Everyone then needs to build his or her connections from scratch.

A traditional conference lacks formal opportunities, opportunities that are part of the conference process, for these kinds of introductions to occur. It's hard to go up to a complete stranger and start talking to him. And, with many potential people to talk to, and not enough time to talk to them all, how do we pick whom we'll approach?

Because making connections at traditional conferences can be so inefficient, it's common for people to spend significant time preparing for upcoming potential conference interactions. As the quote at the start of this section recommends, people research in advance other attendees they want to meet, looking for the commonalities that they can use to engineer an introduction and subsequent conversation. Seasoned conference-goers advise new attendees to perfect their "elevator pitch," a 30-second introduction to their work and selves, so that when that all-important person is within range, they are ready to make their best attempt to create a connection.

This is all very well if you enjoy this kind of competitive behavior. In my experience, most attendees don't. Consequently, people make new connections at a traditional conference largely via the combination of chance and a slow increase in familiarity with other attendees. This is a pretty inefficient process.

Sadly, most of my interviewees seemed resigned to the session-centric format of conventional conferences. Although all indicated, one way or another, that making new, significant connections was important, expectations that this would happen were low. People saw making valuable connections as a relatively rare bonus, rather than expecting it as a matter of course.

So how can you find out about people at a conference? How can you discover attendees' backgrounds, interests, and personalities that provide points of connection for you? And how can you bring to light others' experiences that are valuable to you if shared? Read on, and you'll discover how peer conferences actively support all of these attendee needs!

Beginnings and endings

We have come to expect that stories we read will have well-crafted beginnings and endings. If the beginning is poor, we probably won't continue, and if the ending is unsatisfactory we feel profoundly let down. Given that attending conferences may require as much commitment of time and attention as reading a story, why do we accept token beginnings and endings at these events?

> "The reader is by no means obliged to read any story—is seduced, so to speak, into doing so; and, unless he can sense an entertaining half-hour within the first two or three paragraphs, then it is all over with the author . . .
>
> . . . the story ending should have just as critical and painstaking preparation as the introduction or the climax."
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> —*Elinor Glyn. Beginning and Ending Your Story*

Beginnings

At a minimum, the welcome at a conference should cover the formalities of introducing one or more of the conference organizers or hosts, and sharing necessary logistical information with attendees. Ideally, a welcome should also foster a comfortable atmosphere that reassures people that practical, conference-related needs can and will be taken care of. Once these items are out of the way, a traditional conference starts and sessions begin.

> "Once upon a time . . .
> . . . and they all lived happily ever after."
>
> —*Start and end of innumerable fairy tales*

Unfortunately, such a beginning does nothing to support forming connections among attendees. Consequently, people go to sessions not knowing other attendees, unless they knew them previously. Initially participants are isolated, at best slowly building a network of connections as the conference proceeds, but missing out on the benefits of finding simpatico peers early on.

It doesn't have to be this way. Later, we'll see how peer conferences use an initial *roundtable* to facilitate attendee connections in ways that minimize attendee isolation.

Endings

There will always be logistical reasons—like planes to catch, families to feed, or traffic to avoid—for people leaving events before their formal conclusion. However, a surprising finding from my interviews was the extent to which people either left or wanted to leave a traditional conference before it was over—not for practical reasons but because they had come to the conclusion that it wasn't worth their while to stay. Though personality certainly played a part in the variability of interviewees' responses—several people said that they were incapable of leaving before the end due to the way they had been brought up—the median answer to the interview question *"What is the percentage of the conferences you've attended where you either left before the end (for other than practical reasons) or wished you had?"* was 25 percent!

> "I usually leave when they have that canned stuff at the end."
>
> —*Interviewee*

Perhaps this high level of premature abandonment is not so surprising. First, traditional conferences are disjointed events; unless they are trainings or workshops, sessions tend to lurch from one topic to another with little coherence or progression. As a result, participants tend to decide whether to go to a session based purely on their interest in its subject, rather than considering its contribution to their experience of the conference as a whole. If they decide that the last session holds little interest, they may decide (or wish) to leave early. Second, a majority of my interviewees reported that the subject matter and/or perspective of traditional conferences are frequently misrepresented in conference marketing. This commonly leads to attendees chafing to abandon conferences that they belatedly find not meeting their expectations and needs.

Professional conference planners worry about keeping attendees until the end, and usually suggest scheduling some kind of climactic event to tempt people to stay. When the formal sessions of a conference fail to create an environment where people want to stay to the end, such manufactured closing events can be effective, but that they're used so often is a sad commentary on the level of event commitment generated by traditional conferences.

Read on to learn how peer conferences, by building an environment in which attendees actively participate, create a conference experience so compelling that attendees stay to the end because they don't want to miss a minute!

Passivity

As the home-schooling proponent John Holt pointed out, learning is not a passive process. And yet, the principal advertised activity at conventional conferences is largely passive—namely, sitting and listening to one or more speakers for the majority of each conference session. Even if we put aside attendees' needs for connection at conferences and concentrate on thinking of conferences as an event for learning, a traditional conference assumes this nonparticipative knowledge acquisition model.

> "The most important thing any teacher has to learn, not to be learned in any school of education I ever heard of, can be expressed in seven words: *Learning is not the product of teaching.* Learning is the product of the activity of learners."
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> —*John Holt. Growing Without Schooling Magazine, No. 40, 1984*

Think about how you learned vocabulary as a child. It was primarily through active immersion in an environment where language was used (typically tens of thousands of words), rather than through vocabulary enrichment lessons at school (typically a few hundred words). In this case, active, interactive learning was far more effective than passive reception of a teacher's lessons. Like learning a living language, social knowledge acquisition requires active interaction with others, not passive reception of information.

> "Recent investigations of learning, however, challenge this separating of what is learned from how it is learned and used. The activity in which knowledge is developed and deployed, it is now argued, is not separable from or ancillary to learning and cognition. Nor is it neutral. Rather, it is an integral part of what is learned."
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> —*John Seely Brown, Allan Collins, and Paul Duguid. Situated Cognition and the Culture of Learning. Educational Researcher, Vol. 18, No. 1, 1989*

Nothing is required from an attendee at a traditional conference beyond payment of the conference entrance fee. Even conferences created to maintain professional certification rarely require more from attendees than their physical presence. Conventional conference sessions, by tacitly endorsing passivity, drain energy from people who attend conferences with a desire for connection and social learning. We can't force anyone to actively engage at a conference, but I believe that it's possible to provide a structure that encourages and supports participation, and to offer an environment where active involvement is the norm, rather than something for attendees to attempt unaided outside conference sessions.

Size matters

Try this quick experiment. Think of an interesting short topic you'd like to share with other people.

Now imagine sharing your topic with someone and what that would be like. How might the sharing develop?

Next imagine sharing the same subject with 10 people simultaneously. What would that be like?

Finally, imagine the same sharing, but with 300 people simultaneously. What would that be like?

Notice any differences?

You probably found that changing the number of people involved in this simple thought experiment greatly affected your imagined experience. In all three cases you started the same way—with an audience. But as we all know, with another person or a small group, questions can be asked and conversations entered, conversations that can involve everyone present. In other words, the majority of conversations with another person or a small group are interactive, and any initial audience quickly dissolves into a discussion.

> "As the size of a group increases, the connectedness among members decreases, which can lead to increases in social loafing, bystander apathy, and even deindividuation. Larger groups also promote more conformity, since there are more peers to exert pressure on any individual to conform.
>
> On the other side of the coin, the effects of social facilitation increase with group size, and having more members means that there are more opportunities during group discussions to consider more perspectives and more knowledge. Thus, the real issue is not group size per se, but whether a group is managed well enough that its size is an asset rather than a liability."
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> —*Linda K. Stroh, Gregory B. Northcraft, and Margaret A. Neale. Organizational Behavior: A Management Challenge. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001*

In contrast, sharing with a thousand people is, fundamentally, a one-way experience. There simply isn't the possibility of significant two-way interaction when a thousand people are listening to you—at best a few questions can supply interaction with a miniscule percentage of your audience. There is no possibility that your audience and you can have a discussion.

These scale-generated differences are large enough that we have separate words for these forms of communication. With a small group, we have a *conversation*. With a larger group, we call our sharing a *discussion*. And with a thousand people, we talk about a *lecture* or *presentation*.

So, how humans communicate varies radically with the size of the group involved. At a conventional conference, the emphasis is on the presentation sessions, where one or two people speak to many. Unless the conference is small, its sessions will be one-way—any conferring will be relegated to the hallways and social events.

How big is big?

How big is the average conference? It depends, of course, on your definition of "conference," but in 2007, according to *Meetings and Conventions Magazine*, an average of 1,440 people attended "association conventions," while "association meetings" had an average attendance of 146.

I am a confirmed small conference-goer, and my interviewees indicated a clear preference for small conferences too. Although I didn't ask specifically about conference size during my interviews, 35 percent of my interviewees indicated a preference for attending conferences with fewer than around 100 attendees.

As you might expect, interviewees who saw conferences primarily as training opportunities seemed unfazed by attending large conferences, while those who looked for connections with other attendees showed a clear preference for small events.

> "The downside of going for size and scale above all else is that the dense, interconnected pattern that drives group conversation and collaboration isn't supportable at any large scale. Less is different—small groups of people can engage in kinds of interaction that large groups can't. . . . You have to find a way to spare the group from scale. Scale alone kills conversations, because conversations require dense two-way conversations. . . . The fact that the amount of two-way connections you have to support goes up with the square of the users means that the density of conversation falls off very fast as the system scales even a little bit."
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> —*Clay Shirky. A Group Is Its Own Worst Enemy. Speech at O'Reilly Emerging Technology Conference, April, 2003*

What's good about big?

What are the benefits of a big conference? Here are a few.

Big conferences can attract big-name presenters, people you wouldn't otherwise get to see.

Big conferences can include sessions on a wide range of topics, covering anything you might be interested in.

Big conferences, if you already know many of the attendees, give you the opportunity to get together with lots of colleagues or friends at one event.

Big conferences can conjure up big trade shows—all the exhibitors you might want to visit will be in one place.

The crucial question is whether these advantages compensate for the drawbacks of large conferences: the increased difficulty in making meaningful connections, the prevalence of one-to-many sessions with limited opportunities for interaction, and the de-emphasis on developing and transmitting social knowledge. If these deficits become increasingly important to attendees, we can perhaps expect a move toward smaller conferences in the future.

Meeting interesting people at conferences

When I attend a traditional conference, I'm fretting about who I'm missing. No, not my family at home; I'm fretting about missing meeting conference attendees who would be interesting for me to meet, who I'd love to get to know *if only I could figure out who they were*. Even if I can figure out who would be interesting to meet, I then have to find a time and place to meet them, and I also have to come up with a way to introduce myself.

Each of these concerns—who interests me, when can I meet them, where can I meet them, and how do I introduce myself—are obstacles to connecting with interesting people at a conference. Unfortunately, as the size of a conference increases, our ability to meet more people doesn't improve proportionately. As a result, trying to find new people who share specific interests at a large general conference is a daunting task.

Saving graces

Over time, many organizers have become aware of the limitations and frustrations of the traditional conference format, and have, to their credit, attempted to add ways for attendees to propose sessions and interact outside standard predetermined conference sessions. Three common formats are poster sessions, birds-of-a-feather sessions, and facilitated small group discussions. Although these approaches often appear to be uneasily grafted onto the conference, they are worth discussing for two reasons: First, they demonstrate the desire of participants for more control over their conference experience, and second, they show the limitations of attempting to provide what attendees want while clinging to traditional conference process. I've also added a description of the Gordon Research Conferences, which are designed to minimize some of the difficulties posed by the conventional conference format.

Poster sessions

Poster sessions originated at academic conferences as an opportunity for individual attendees to present their research to other attendees. Presenters stand next to a poster summarizing their work and present to any interested attendees. Nowadays, poster sessions are frequently used informally to display general information and invite viewers to ask more detailed questions of the person who created the poster. Because posters are prepared before the conference, poster sessions provide a somewhat makeshift method of broadening available content, following the usual teacher-to-student(s) model. Control over content can range from requiring preapproval for each session to an "anything goes" philosophy. The sessions are often held during meal breaks, though they sometimes merit their own conference time slot.

Adding a poster session to a conference program is a tacit acknowledgment that attendees possess potentially useful expertise and experience not available through the traditional conference sessions. A poster session offers participants a genuine opportunity to contribute, reducing the customary distinction between presenters and audience. Because the session supplies an intimate, usually one-to-one, interactive format, it provides useful feedback to the poster presenters: Are conference-goers interested in what I have to say, and, if so, what do they think about it? At a large conference, poster sessions may be the most practical method to expand the available content beyond the fixed program.

Unfortunately, poster sessions are a fairly crude way to democratize and extend a conference. They require would-be presenters to create session materials and dedicate conference time to standing by their display with no guarantee of interaction with other attendees. It can be disconcerting to make this commitment and receive limited attention. Even when like-minded souls appear, they may well arrive at different times, offering little opportunity for a group discussion on the topic. Given these limitations, it's not surprising that poster sessions have a reputation as second-class presentation opportunities for lower status attendees.

Birds-of-a-feather sessions

Birds-of-a-feather sessions, commonly known as BOFs, offer attendees an opportunity to create their own session on a topic of their choosing. Typically, the conference organizers supply a

Gordon Research Conferences

The Gordon Research Conferences (GRC) started in 1931 as a way to "bring together a group of scientists working at the frontier of research of a particular area and permit them to discuss in depth all aspects of the most recent advances in the field and to stimulate new directions for research." Currently the organization holds 150–200 conferences annually. The GRC model has several attractive aspects that minimize some of the unwelcome effects of traditional conference process that I've described in this chapter:

- Conferences are small (generally fewer than a hundred participants).
- Attendees are expected to participate actively and meaningfully in discussions.
- All information presented and discussed at the conference is considered private.
- Presentations are held in the mornings and evenings, with afternoons available for informal discussions.
- Presentations are short (15–20 minutes) with time scheduled for discussion, and discussant leaders provided.
- Invited speakers are encouraged to stay for discussions after their presentation. (They don't receive expense reimbursement unless they stay for at least 24 hours after their talk!)

These features promote active involvement by attendees, confidentiality (through the privacy requirement), and the flattening of hierarchy (by keeping speakers around and offering plenty of time for informal discussions).

Peer conferences, by contrast, provide a more flexible conference format, and are less narrowly focused and more tolerant of a wide range of attendee experience. Nevertheless, the GRC conferences, now in existence for over 75 years, provide an excellent strategy to address weaknesses of conventional conference process.

time or place for attendees to announce or post discussion subjects. The resulting sessions are usually scheduled during meals or evening free time.

BOFs are valuable additions to traditional conferences. Because they normally use a discussion format, they provide relevant, small group, interactive experiences. BOFs allow people to find and informally connect with others who share their interests, broadening their circle of conference acquaintances in the process.

Although BOFs appear to offer a conference format that is responsive to real-time attendee needs, like poster sessions they sometimes provide an inferior and frequently frustrating experience. Crucially, apart from providing a way for BOFs to self-announce, they are not otherwise supported by conference staff. As a result, it's hard to know how well attended a proposed BOF will be. Sign-up sheets are a useful but not reliable indicator of popularity.

More than once I've had to decide between attending an evening BOF or going out to dinner with a group of friends, chosen the BOF, and waited around only to have one other person turn up. Another consequence of keeping BOFs outside the traditional conference support structure is that any facilitation is strictly *ad hoc*. This can lead to BOFs being hijacked by a minority of vocal extroverts who may take over or steer the discussion in ways that a majority present don't want.

As we'll see later in Chapter 7, *the peer conference process optimizes the BOF experience*, providing time, space, and support for relevant, interactive conference sessions.

Small group discussions

My interviewees often cited the inclusion of small group discussions, usually called *discussant* or *breakout sessions*, as the saving grace or highlight of traditional conferences. It's clear that many participants hunger for small, focused group discussions of pertinent topics, and it's sad that most traditional conferences don't set aside time for such sessions. Small group discussions, usually run by a panel of experts or conference speakers, are *interactive* sessions where the central goal is to promote and support discussion between attendees. These sessions may be tightly focused around a set of papers or presentations, or loosely structured around one or more introductory themes.

For small group discussions to be successful, they must be well facilitated, and the topics and questions must excite and be pertinent to the people present. When these conditions occur, small group discussions are like peer sessions, the core of a peer conference. But when a small group discussion's predetermined topic or focus does not match attendees' needs, the resulting session disappoints. As we'll see, a peer conference avoids this outcome by generating the best topics to spark attendee interest and involvement.