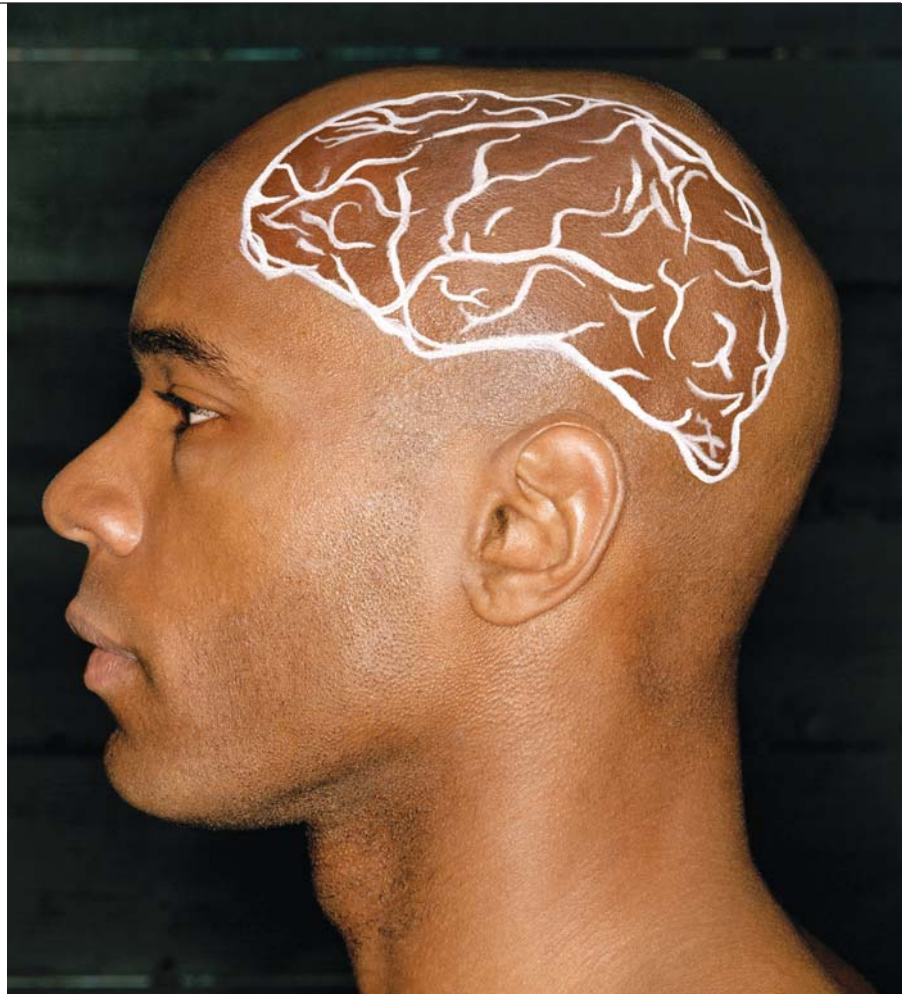


In the first of a regular series on making meetings more effective Katherine Simmons looks at how good connections beat delegate objections



*Brain wave: the average person's concentration span is between 20-30 minutes*

# Meeting of **minds**

People are becoming less accustomed to the role of passive listener and one-way forms of communication can seem stiflingly old-fashioned. Whether you inhabit the tribe of the digital immigrant or digital native, getting delegates' to understand your message requires better audience engagement. With the amount of power we now have at our fingertips, it's no wonder we're no longer content to just sit back and listen.

Research shows the average person's concentration span is between 20-30 minutes - a mere 1,197 seconds longer than the average goldfish. Little wonder then, that in conference rooms throughout the land there is often someone "just resting their eyes" at the back of the room.

Concentration is a complex mental

'There is no single remedy to enhancing concentration'

process which involves zooming in on detail and stepping back to survey the big picture. The brain's attentional state is controlled by the neurotransmitters dopamine and noradrenalin. Dopamine encourages a persistent, goal-centred state of mind whereas noradrenalin produces an outward-looking, vigilant state.

Even the mere process of thinking makes us tired. What conference organisers should be aware of is that trying to over-run these feelings of tiredness can not only be counter-productive, but could lead to the potentially more serious consequence of burn-out, according to neuroscientist Maarten Boksem. Boksem reported the discovery that our dopamine system was responsible for mental fatigue in a paper published by Rijksuniversiteit of Groningen in the Netherlands in

February 2006.

Dopamine is commonly associated with the brain's "pleasure system," providing feelings of enjoyment and motivating a person to proactively perform certain activities. Its release is dependent on naturally rewarding experiences - food, sex and, of course, meetings.

"When doing a task we like dopamine is released in our brain," explains Boksem. "This is the fuel for the anterior singular cortex, a little brain area that is responsible for control processes. When at a certain moment the brain struggles to concentrate on one task, the dopamine level drops and so the activity of the anterior singular cortex. That is what humans feel as 'I'm tired.'"

"Indeed, if dopamine drops, your brain tells you the 'reward' is not

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in balance with the task. Some individuals will make more mistakes, other just work slower. In both cases, the work is adapted to the reward.

"For a moment you can put yourself over that fatigue, but people who ignore these fatigue signals, structurally could risk a chronic shortage of dopamine with potentially nasty consequences. A dopamine shortage is seen as one of the potential explanations for chronic fatigue and burn out," adds Boksem.

There is no single remedy to enhancing concentration, but there are a few ways you might consider topping up your delegates' arousal levels. For starters you could increase dopamine levels with another form of stimulus – cocaine, amphetamines or ADHD drug Ritalin – any of which should do the trick. The alternative is to make your meetings more interesting.

Steen Elsborg and Ib Ravn at Learning Lab Denmark at the Danish University of Education published their research, the Learning Meetings Project, last year. The research posed the question "What's wrong with traditional conferences?"

By Elsborg and Ravn's definition, a traditional conference is defined as "a series of presentations lasting 30 to 60 minutes each followed by questions and discussion." The conference model is described as "a manager presents a few PowerPoint slides, the employees ask questions – and that's it."

This "one way" model of a conference is referred to by Ravn as the 'Empty Container Model,' where participants are empty knowledge vessels to be filled by the wisdom of speakers. Ravn's alternative concept, 'Human co-flourishing,' prefers to make the assumption that each audience member possesses a brain rather than vacant space. They refer to their alternative models and methods of audience engagement as "Learning Meetings."

Elsborg and Ravn argue that in the educational world teaching should yield to learning – yet many conferences do not bring their attendees knowledge, resources and experiences into play.

The project found the traditional model rendered the delegate as passive. "The usual pattern where lectures take up about 80 per cent of the schedule is way too much. The 5-10 minute any questions period at the end of the session is way too little."

So if key messages are delivered



Is your conference keeping your delegates switched on?

'Decision making about the form, content, style and purpose of education should no longer exclude the learner'

Tim Rudd  
Futurelab

after this magic half hour with delegates given no time for reflection or discussion with their colleagues, then perhaps it would be pointless even bothering to hold a conference?

If you subscribe to Malcolm Knowles' adult education theory "Andragogy," this would appear to be the case. Central to Knowles' theory is the concept that an adult learner develops a psychological need to be perceived by others as being "self-directing."

According to the theory of Andragogy, merely talking at grown adults and not allowing them the opportunity to discuss and share their opinions is enough to spark rebellion. It can also result in people putting up their own 'brick wall' to what's being said.

James Anderton of [www.learningandteaching.info](http://www.learningandteaching.info) explains more: "When he (the learner) finds himself in a situation in which he is not allowed to be self-directing, he experiences a tension between that situation and his self-concept. His reaction is bound to be tainted with resentment and resistance."

For Knowles, the opportunity of sharing views and knowledge is a vital component of adult learning. "Adult learners have a variety of experiences of life which represent

the richest source of learning," adds Anderton.

Teaching innovation organisation Futurelab also wants to call time on the traditional teacher-at-the-front learning method and is calling for a radical reform of UK educational culture to allow schools to keep pace with rapid changes in technology.

Futurelab is championing a move towards learning networks which exploit the resources and expertise from the wider community – from workplaces to museums. Digital resources will offer students opportunities to go beyond the traditional classroom walls to learn and interact with others beyond the school walls and across geographical boundaries.

And the organisation wants students to play an active part in shaping the process of how they learn.

"Decision making about the form, content, style and purpose of education should no longer exclude the learner," says Futurelab senior researcher Tim Rudd. "Students need to actively participate in setting their own learning agenda so that they become fully engaged in the learning process. Student voice can act as a true gateway for change but a new cultural attitude is required for this to be the case." ■

## Delegate diagnosis

Is your audience listless, fidgety, a little fatigued perhaps? Ray Elmitt of conference technology specialist Crystal Interactive says these are typical symptoms of information overload. "Overload is the same as indigestion," says Emmitt, "You are trying to eat too much in a short space of time. Either cut down the size of the meal or break it down into smaller courses. You need time to digest!"

With grateful thanks to the Meeting Support Institute  
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