



# That's the Plan

BY IB RAVN

## Mastering the “Learning Meeting”

**M**eeting planners and suppliers alike have experienced meetings that repeat the same timeworn formula: PowerPoint presentations throughout the day, maybe a question-and-answer session, maybe a panel of experts, maybe workshops with more presentations and a bit of group discussion. All of these approaches include far too much one-way communication. Delegates are kept quiet and get to talk principally during breaks and lunch. Many tire by mid-afternoon and try to escape early, regretting they wasted another day being lectured to.

Surviving from the days of authoritarian schooling, such meetings effectively prohibit learning. If the past 50 years of educational research has established the inefficacy of the lecture as a learning tool, why is it still the centerpiece of conferences everywhere?

In today's knowledge economy, people attend conferences not only to hear the experts, but also to meet the other delegates. They want to share knowledge and contacts, and they want to talk about the professional projects and personal concerns that propelled them to attend the meeting in the first place. They want to learn.

This calls for another kind of meeting, what I call the “learning meeting.” The meetings have four essential features.

1. Input must be concise. Presentations from experts are still useful, but they must be few, brief and to the point. Three or four 30-minute presentations per day will suffice. Offer no long arguments beginning from scratch; they are better read. Conclusions, bullet points, crisp ideas, provocative statements, fun and illustrative anecdotes and stories with distinct lessons are preferable.

2. Input must be filtered. The information presented must be filtered through the delegates' minds and experiences. Presentations must be followed by five-to-15-minute periods during which

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the delegates are asked to reflect upon and discuss questions put to them by presenters, such as, “How is this information relevant to me?” “What

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ongoing projects of mine are enriched by what I've just heard?" and "What ideas for things I can do does the presentation bring to mind?"

3. There must be room for delegates to be active and involved. All delegates have projects and interests that motivate them to attend and about which they want to talk. There must be ample well-structured occasions for them to do this and get peer feedback.

4. Delegates must meet each other. The knowledge and resources present in a conference room far exceed those embodied by the hired experts and speakers. The learning meeting has many processes that help delegates meet and inspire each other. By sharing their projects with strangers, they acquire new perspectives and, in the process, may develop professional contacts to be explored after the conference.

These four principles for the learning meeting must be expressed in the meeting through particular techniques and processes introduced and executed by a facilitator. The meeting organizer or host may play the role of facilitator, or a professional process consultant may be hired. A variety of techniques can be employed.

- **The humming dyad.** During a presentation, the presenter prompts audience members to turn to their neighbors and ask, "What's important to you in what has just been presented?" This gives everyone a chance to check for relevance and talk about it in a small forum for five to 10 minutes.

- **Two free consultants.** The room is divided into groups of three. In each group, volunteer A presents a current problem or professional challenge and then goes silent. Consultants B and C give A all the help and advice they can, but they

address it to each other, ignoring A, who just listens. Finally A chimes in, picking out the few useful bits of advice while ignoring the rest, and they all spend the last 10 minutes exploring the one or two good ideas. Typically A will find some of the advice rewarding, and B and C will have enjoyed throwing around ideas.

- **The knowledge exchange.** To efficiently find the right people in 90 minutes, have 30 strangers listen to one-minute presentations about everyone's current professional challenges and main resources. Then link them up, in consecutive and facilitated five-minute periods, with people they can help or use.

- **Squared lunch.** After being seated for a full morning, delegates will enjoy a lively, no-chairs-allowed buffet lunch. To promote circulation, use masking tape to divide the floor into 10-foot squares and assign 10 delegates randomly to each square. Give them a question to ask each other, such as, "What was the most interesting idea that came up in the morning?" Tell them you'll quiz them on the group's consensus after lunch.

- **Facilitated group discussions.** Smaller groups and breakouts are instructed to elect a facilitator whom the group will authorize to keep the discussion focused and help it produce a result as desired.

- **An appreciative panel of experts.** Instead of having the experts monopolize the rest of the afternoon, take comments and stories from the floor. The experts are called upon to deepen and enrich each comment, showing the exciting perspectives it opens up. This empowers the audience instead of stealing its limelight, as experts sometimes do.

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