

MANAGING THE LEARNING – IN SEARCH CONFERENCES

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We spent two years, mid 1982-84, in Philadelphia working at Russ Ackoff's Social Systems Sciences (S3) program at the Wharton School, Uni of Pennsylvania. This and other notes illustrate something of the growing divergence of views between Fred and Russ (ME).

AIM: to allow the conference to produce its *own* product.

METHOD

1. Shepherding the conference through the designed phases e.g. holding them in phase one until that is well done; use of parallel groups; use of task forces; use of summary and review sessions; maintaining tempo by setting time limits for the various phases; maintaining the unity of the product by re-setting time limits and occasionally recycling.
2. Maximizing time spent in group emotion of PAIRING and avoiding or breaking down the emotional roadblocks of dependency and fight-flight. This requires that at any one time one of the managers should be freed from the first task and be able to sit back and listen to 'the music' of the group.

This statement of methods leaves several current notions of conference management unanswered. Thus to what extent does management act as experts to enriched the product of the conference? Not necessarily at all. The reasons for being selected to manage a search conference for bankers, citrus fruit growers, etc are proven competence for managing search conferences, not because of outstanding expertise in these fields of banking, fruit growing etc. It may well happen that the managers have some valuable knowledge that is not possessed by the members of the conference. It is our experience that such knowledge, if it is introduced at all, must be introduced with great care. It should only be introduced when the conference is in the pairing mode and even then very tentatively in the throwaway manner so that the conference does not feel that their competence to produce a good product is being challenged. Similarly, in the processes of review and

summary and final report preparation the managers must lean over backwards to avoid inserting their ideas. The conference members must have every reason to believe that it is their ideas that are being summarized and their views that are being reported.

Second, to what extent are the managers *facilitators*? They do facilitate the overall process by the structuring and restructuring of the work. However, if they are forced to facilitate in the discussion process of the plenary or sub-group sessions it is a sure sign that the conference is getting bogged down in fight-flight or trying to escape into dependency. Such efforts at facilitation will only worsen the situation. A solution can only be found by re-structuring the work process e.g. go to plenary or go to groups.

REFLECTIONS ON MONDAY 14 December 1983

“Interventions, when and how”

I endorse Hasan’s statement that ‘any intervention by the conference managers is profoundly manipulative’ and I think they will be seen as such by the conferences.

In my previous note I failed to make this explicit – a major short coming. Jamshid made two suggestions for coping with the problem that fully accord with my experience:

- a. If it is so happens that a conference manager has resources that could be valuable to the conferences he should wait till he is invited to contribute (Trying to the patience of us ‘know all professors’ but I presume that he did not mean to exclude the tactic of dropping a hint of your ‘resourcefulness’ to some conference or other during chit-chat over coffee).
- b. If you are lucky enough to be invited to give an input try to give it in the form of some example of what others have done. In this way you make it easier for the advice to be rejected without eliciting a challenge to your primary competence as a conference manager.

Russ agreed with the second idea but went on to say that if he did not have an actual experience that was relevant he was perfectly happy to confabulate same and invent appropriate statistics (referring in passing to *Ackoff’s Fables*). I should hope that S-cubers do not gain notoriety for such practices of intervention.

However, Russ gave two examples of how the initiation of an intervention might sometimes be legislated:

- a. To clarify meanings or to question apparent cover ups. I don't agree that this is legitimated by supposed superiority of college professors in the art of clear thinking (I have attended too many faculty meetings in too many universities). In so far as such interventions are legitimate it is because the conference managers, as well as the conferences, have accepted the joint responsibility for producing a product that will look good in the eyes of the reference group – the community or organisation for whom they are doing the searching. In this context it is legitimate to ask such question as, “Won't that formulation confuse others?”
- b. Protecting 'creative' contributions. Some of these contributions may only be creative in your context. Nevertheless, it is legitimate to protect contributions by making sure they are recorded on the wall charts and by referring back to them at appropriate moments. If they continue to be ignored then that is that, according to my doctrine – both Wlad and Russ suggested, as I heard them, that they would press on heedlessly.

Jotting down these notes interfered with my perception of what Hasan was saying about actors but my position is that managers *cannot* assume that they have all of the rights of the conferences to engage in and initiate debated (after all, at the end of the conference we managers can pick up the tab and walk away).

RLA 28 December 1983

Sorry I can't be here today, but A-B thinks it needs me in St. Louis.

The intent of today's Busch Centre session is to give the students a chance to be heard. The faculty could easily continue the debate and monopolize the conversation. I hope this won't happen. But I feel compelled to comment on some things that have been said and written since the last meeting because I believe it could be dangerous to leave them unchallenged.

As Fred noted in his memo, I believe in fabricating stories, an activity Fred apparently disapproves of on moral grounds. His moral judgement is based on the assumption that I present these fabrications as facts. He should know better since I've published many of them as “fables”. Most of these have some basis in fact, but this is irrelevant because they are stories that *ought to be true*. They make important morals. The stories are not evidence in support of the validity of the morals, but illuminations of them. The morals are justified by common experience.

If Fred knows of a more effective way of making the kind of points my fables make, I wish he would share it with us.

According to Hasan all interventions are “profoundly manipulative.” Right! But there is nothing necessarily wrong with this. The question to be asked about manipulation is: To whose and what ends? If by manipulation we can enable others to do good things that they want to do, but otherwise could not, what’s wrong with it?

Bill Deane and I have manipulated hell out of Alcoa’s Tennessee Operation. (This can be taken literally). We pushed and pulled an Operation that corporate Alcoa intended to shut down, manipulating it into a transformation that reversed the corporation’s decision. Last Tuesday, the Governor of Tennessee and Alcoa’s President announced a \$250,000,000 first stage of a modernization program of the Tennessee Operation. They said 4,000 jobs had been saved. What was immoral about such manipulation?

Immorality is the use of others for one’s own ends at a cost to the others. The use of one self for the ends of others without personal gain is not my idea of immorality.

Finally, I don’t believe catalysts should “play a role.” I believe they should be themselves. Nor do I believe that process-management is their sole or most important task. Their most important task is the insertion of *ideas* into discussion. Exciting ideas into a discussion can do more to make it productive than any amount of self conscious manipulation of an idea-less process. Process-management can only facilitate; ideas alone can catalyze.

A facilitators/catalyst should not play the role of an intellectual eunuch. He or she should be a full-fledged participant. There is no effective substitute for complete involvement in planning, management, or sex.

Russ.***