From one-way communication to active involvement

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Executive summary

Most large meetings and conferences share a particular format: Multiple presentations, often backed by PowerPoints, are given to an audience of passive listeners.

Such one-way communication taxes participants' attention and energy and is unlikely to produce major changes in their knowledge, attitudes or subsequent behavior.

Underlying this meeting format is the information transmission model. It assumes that information sent equals information received. But the mind filters and discards information not perceived as immediately relevant or usable. This is the fate of most presentations.

A more viable model of human communication has people sharing knowledge that leads to action. To generate such actionable knowledge, meetings must enable participants to be *active*, to *interpret* and discuss the presentations, to be autonomously *motivated*, to engage in *social relations* with peers and strangers at the meeting and to clarify the *value they can create* for others after the meeting.

Three design principles for knowledge-sharing meetings are offered: Meetings must transform (1) *information* delivered in presentations, through (2) *knowledge sharing* into (3) *action that creates results.*

Introduction

Large meetings and conferences are based on power-point presentations that transmit information to passive listeners. That is not good enough. Meeting venues offer a beautiful wrapping around meetings, but pay too little attention to what goes on inside the meeting.

Large meetings and conferences, held at hotels and other meeting venues, are big business. Whenever 50 or 5000 people gather to meet and talk in rented facilities for a few hours or days, meeting professionals have helped the meeting owner make the event unique. Yet, for all the diversity of their purposes and attendees, large meetings are remarkably similar in one important respect (Ravn, 2007): They feature a series of presentations delivered to an audience sitting passively in their seats, usually for hours on end.

The present policy statement argues that the traditional format is based on the assumption that the mere transmission of information from presenters to listeners will cause the meeting participants to act after the meeting as the meeting owner intended. This assumption does not bear scrutiny.

Meeting professionals, whether independent agents or employed by venues, rarely concern themselves with the substance of meetings, focusing instead on budgeting, catering, accommodations, logistics, and social events (evident, for example, in the trend reports that the meetings industry produces every so often (e.g., World Tourism Organization, 2014) and in the textbooks used, e.g., Rogers, 2013). They leave the substance of meetings to meeting owners and their planners; it's *their* meeting, after all, isn't it? However, meeting owners only care about *what* is to be dealt with and presented at the meeting, not *how*. They are banking executives, marketing specialists, orthopedic surgeons and scholars of Italian art history. They generally know next to nothing about *how* the content can be best presented to participants or discussed with them. Meeting formats are all too often overlooked by all parties in the meetings industry. "Empty box marketing", as it has been called by one critical observer. This is the excessive concern with the beautiful wrapping that meeting venues offer: white beaches, marble foyers and gourmet food. But when you open the box, it's empty (Hamso, 2014, p. 60, citing ICCA CEO Martin Sirk).

This neglect may account for the astonishing persistence of the traditional format, even in the face of modern information technology and the social media that offer the well-known diversity of tools for sharing and communicating. Whether the meeting is called to communicate a strategy to middle managers, inform a sales force about a new product line, help physicians adopt safer treatment methods or disseminate professional or scientific knowledge, meeting participants spend their days listening quietly to presentations, barely speaking a word to each other outside of the coffee breaks, the meals and the bus tours.

Whether selling, buying, designing or conducting meetings, a modern meeting professional must show responsible thinking and take action to ensure that participants share knowledge in the meeting in such a way that, after the meeting, they manage to create results comparable to those hoped for by the meeting owner. Only in this manner will the meeting yield the return on investment intended.

In this white paper, we shall examine the form of the traditional meeting and find that it is based on an obsolete model of human communication. We shall identify the elements of human knowledge, motivation and action that can better inform large meetings. A more appropriate meeting design, a more creative setting for the meeting, will allow for the sharing of actionable knowledge, between the presenter and the audience and, in particular, amongst audience members themselves. A presenter may indeed *transmit* information and scattered facts, but knowledge that means something to participants is properly *shared* in a process of active involvement—if it is to have a real impact on subsequent behavior.

Traditional meetings and conferences

Meetings and conferences feature too much one-way communication and too little interaction between participants. Social events are often irrelevant to meeting content.

Meetings that are large or important enough to require a rented meeting space are usually called to convey certain messages that meeting owners want participants to appreciate and act on subsequently. Invited speakers, whether in-house or external, deliver these messages through presentations (PowerPoint, Prezi, etc.) that typically last 20-60 minutes. All this intense one-way communication is interspersed with short question-and-answer periods that allow a few participants to interact with presenters.

Sometimes, after lunch, a large meeting may break into smaller, concurrent sessions. Their structure is similar, however: presentations with Q & A. Even when they are called “workshops” and thus suggest a more hands-on format, these sessions are rarely more active or interactive than the plenary. As a moment’s thought reveals, breaking a meeting of 400 people into four sessions of 100 people *in itself* hardly makes for more direct contact between presenter and audience.

If participants need more time for understanding and digesting the input, won’t they use the time between presentations, like breaks, breakfast and lunch, the afternoon reception, the gala dinner? These periods, however, customarily invite relaxation or socializing and cannot be relied upon for participants to process the professional substance of the meeting. Relaxation also seems to be the purpose of those sessions with entertainment proper that are sometimes included in meetings, for example, in late afternoon, seemingly to prevent bored attendees from jumping ship. This makes for the well-known split personality of the presentation-based meeting, as identified by one of the few researchers in this field (Hansen, 2010, p. 236): When it’s about the substance it’s boring, and when it’s fun it’s not about the substance.

Meeting owners often consider the return on investment of meetings. It may be estimated through exam-like questionnaires administered to the participants, but whether they actually act differently afterwards *because of* the meeting is difficult to determine. This, of course, is often the very rationale of meetings: Meeting owners want to influence participants to deliberate and act in more appropriate and well-informed ways after the meeting, so as to better achieve professional or organizational goals, thus ensuring an appropriate return on investment for the meeting owner.

The question is: Is this purpose served by the meeting design adopted—many presentations, a little Q & A, and substantially irrelevant social events? There is little research to back up this expectation. Experience and reflection, as well as evidence from neighboring fields, suggest otherwise.

The traditional meeting transmits information

Meetings with many presentations transmit information in the manner of traditional classroom teaching. As in schools and universities, this produces very little action.

Underlying the traditional meeting is an assumption about human communication that is known as the transmission model. This has been a teaching paradigm in schools and universities for ages and was formalized into a theory of communication that informed early computer science (Shannon & Weaver, 1949). It is the idea that learning, or communication generally, involves the transmission of facts from an informed sender to uninformed receivers (Bligh, 2000, p. 3). If the facts held in the mind of a teacher or an expert can be formulated and communicated efficiently in a presentation—whether in schools and colleges or at conferences and meetings—they will penetrate the skulls of attentive listeners and become embedded in *their* minds, too (Wilson & Korn, 2007). They will have picked up these facts and they will know how to act on them—and, by extension, they will do so, as required, when the time comes.

We also know this model from public health information campaigns: Tell people how dangerous smoking is, and they will stop. Likewise, in the meeting the assumption often seems to be: Tell people the facts about next year's strategy and they will implement it. Tell sales reps how to sell the new product and they will. Tell physicians when to prescribe a new medication and they will.

The theory of knowledge underlying the transmission model is the idea that facts are the foundations of knowledge. They are the true descriptions of an objective reality external to the observer's mind. Science and education are about finding and picking up facts; and thinking is the processing of facts. "A logical picture of facts is a thought" and "The totality of true thoughts is a picture of the world," wrote the influential philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1921, §3, §3.01) a hundred years ago, when this view took hold.

With the advent of computers and the internet, the combination of ones and zeroes in electronic communication would come to represent facts in the world, whether expressed in digits, words or images (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986). We have witnessed an information explosion, with sound bites and disjointed facts galore. It has become every manager's responsibility to communicate and supply information to their staff and workers, and meetings are the obvious forum for this. "Our people must have the full set of facts (or, in any case, as many as they need), so convene a meeting and tell them!" Voila, the presentation to a large audience.

In a sense, the fascination of our age with information has blinded meeting owners to the shortcomings of the information transmission model. With evermore powerful and flashy, ICT-based tools for telling people what the facts are and what the story is, everyone seems to believe that doing just this is enough to move people into action.

However, for intelligent action to be produced in *me*, the meeting participant, I must transform information that *someone else* gives me into knowledge that means something *to me*.

Photo: Denmark Media Center

From information transmission to knowledge sharing

Nowadays, most information is overwhelming and of little use. Only tiny bits of relevant information can ever become knowledge that a meeting participant can use in action. The meeting must help translate information into professionally useful knowledge.

The information transmission model is very much a product of 20th century thinking: it draws on scientific positivism (science is seen as the accumulation of facts), authoritarian teaching methods (the teacher knows what is right) and the computer model of the mind (a mind processes and retains information much like a computer does).

However, by the end of the century it was pretty well established that these points no longer hold (Winograd, 1987). Information communicated by a sender only becomes truly integrated in the receiving person's mind when it is filtered and digested to fit his or her current knowledge (Bransford et al., 2000). A receiver typically rejects most information as irrelevant; only the tiny fragments that survive the filtering and rearranging may become knowledge, that is, facts a person can use to create a difference in the world (Ravn, 2004). Too much information transmitted is just rejected; presentations lasting more than 30 minutes achieve little (Bligh, 2003).

Knowledge is information you can use. The airport monitors that flash departure gates for 80 flights convey information. As a traveler, you look for what is relevant, discarding everything else. The one line on the screen with information about your flight becomes knowledge as the information enters your brain and body and makes you act—run—to reach the gate in time, so you can attend your important meeting in the other city.

Too much information presented in lectures is like the 79 departure gates: irrelevant to any one participant. Of course, the information delivered in meetings is more complex than airport departure information, but the risk of overload is similar. We all listen for the bits that are relevant to us, and when we find them, we want to put our teeth into them to really understand them and make them our own. That requires blending our experience with the new information presented, to really see how it may be relevant to where we are and what we want to accomplish in our work. This is how information becomes knowledge.

The traditional view of knowledge as a reflection or representation of an external world has been criticized for being static, reductionist and leaving out the subject (much as we have characterized "information" above). The American philosopher Richard Rorty (1979) has argued that this notion of knowledge as a "mirror" of nature must give way to a more pragmatic (Dewey, 1938) and humanistic view of knowledge. Knowledge is less important than *knowing* (Polanyi, 1969), which is a process that involves a subject who is likely to act on that knowledge. Knowledge shows its worth in acting (Argyris et al., 1985): Acting with competence *is* knowing, even if this acting is purely mental activity, like planning a complex project in the mind. The Cartesian split of mind and body no longer holds: knowledge resides in the body as well (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), in the central nervous system and the innervated muscles that extend our arms and flex our fingers. Properly understood, knowledge is action knowledge, or actionable knowledge, terms that underscore the transformation from passive mirror knowledge to the kind of knowledge that leads to action. Hence, meetings should downplay the mere transformation of information and play up the sharing of knowledge that may prove useful and practicable to participants.

An example: As a foot solider in a corporate meeting, I watch the PowerPoint presentation that sets out the new corporate strategy. But what does it have to do with me? I may not see it. Nobody helps me translate the corporate mission and the high-level generalities into specific actions and goals for me. Do I just wait for these to be handed down as performance goals, or can I contribute my own thinking? I see five hundred colleagues in the other seats; are we not in the same boat? Can't I exchange experiences and ideas with them about the work that we share, so that what I do over the next weeks and months may be *more* useful to our clients and to the organization than what I do currently?

Many forward-thinking writers in the meetings industry agree that meetings need to be more interactive and engaging (Vanneste, 2008; de Groot & van der Vijver, 2013; Segar, 2015; Hansen, 2010; Roger Kellerman at meetingsinternational.com; Elling Hamso at eventroi.org). A considerable amount of research and scholarship on human learning and knowledge supports this view:

Knowledge requires interpretation

To see how information transmitted by a presenter may be relevant, meeting participants must be given opportunities—*at the meeting*—to reflect on it and discover its meaning and usefulness.

Information is not picked up by receivers the way senders hope. Lecturers like to believe they communicate objective facts, but those at the receiving end of a communication often see the world differently, as informed by their own subjective experience (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). The world does not present itself to us as objective facts (Heidegger, 1993), but must be interpreted to become personally meaningful (Gadamer, 1975). This is an active and reality-shaping process (Gergen, 1982), which requires reflection and verbalization (Boed et al., 2013).

To put it bluntly, we may say that the traditional meeting, with its considerable reliance on the presentation, assumes interpretation is not a major problem. "Everything is said plainly, and if you just listen carefully, you will pick it all up."
This model is derived from the Prussian university auditorium of the early 1800's: the professor reads his lecture and leaves. "I said what there is to say. What more can I say?"

Of course, the now-common Q & A period is acknowledgement of the point that listeners do not grasp everything immediately and need an opportunity to clarify points. However, when hundreds of participants share the 10 minutes typically allocated to Q & A after a conference presentation, *very few* of them actually get a chance to discuss their interpretations. Chances are that one person's concerns are not shared by another, so there is generally little to be gained by listening to other people's questions. Add to this the common experience that questioners often exploit the floor for political statements, self-promotion, academic nit-picking and other irrelevancies.

Meeting planners often feel that participants should use the breaks, lunch, reception and dinner for discussing the presentations. They sometimes do. But they also need to recharge their batteries, call the office, socialize, breathe some fresh air, etc. The brain needs breaks; listening attentively and thinking seriously for hours on end is enormously demanding (Jensen, 2008) and will drain anyone by mid-afternoon.
Interpretation is the gateway to the participant's mind, to his or her appreciation of the messages sent during presentations. If we overload this gateway, little will enter and no action will be taken subsequently. Active involvement on the part of meeting participants starts with providing opportunities for interpretation.

Knowledge sharing and <u>motivation</u>

Meeting owners and presenters often try to *control* meeting participants by lecturing them on the facts as seen by experts and executives. This rarely motivates action. In contrast, when people are addressed in a manner that respects their *autonomy* they are more likely to take responsible and creative action.

Underlying any social or professional process is the question of what really motivates people. Why would people bother to listen to information and act on it at all? How can meeting owners motivate meeting participants to share knowledge and help each other do their best?
In the past, motivation researchers have focused on the *amount* of motivation people have, on the assumption that the more, the better. However, according to one increasingly influential theory of motivation, Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2012), what is interesting is the *quality* of motivation, what *kind* it is, because this strongly influences how well we do.

SDT distinguishes *autonomous* kinds of motivation (or regulation) from *controlling* ones. The controlling type of regulation offers people incentives that are external to the task at hand. For example, you file that weekly project report to avoid being reprimanded or to win the approval of your colleagues. The reprimand and the approval are not part of the report writing. In contrast, autonomous regulation is internal to the task: You write the report because you enjoy it, writing it is fulfilling in its own right, you believe it is important, or you have decided freely that it is the right thing to do.

Controlling factors thus include rewards and punishments like bonuses and notices, but also introjected ("thrown inside") ones like shame, guilt and the desire for social approval. *Autonomous* regulation stems from one's own volition, self-chosen goals, norms that one endorses at the highest level of self-reflection, as well as intrinsic motives: interest, excitement and fun (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In particular, the extent of knowledge sharing between employees has been found to correlate with employees' autonomous (rather than controlled) motivation (Gagné, 2009).

The quality of people's motivation—how controlled or autonomous it is—is important because studies increasingly find that autonomous regulation leads to superior outcomes, that is, better performance by those so motivated. To be sure, some simple tasks can be induced by controlling, but intelligent work—of the kind performed by people who are invited to large meetings—is likely to resist control (Gagné & Deci, 2005).

It is evident that large meetings often rely on controlling forms of regulation, some subtle, others not. When a CEO presents the new corporate strategy and exhorts 500 middle managers to comply with it and then leaves room for only four of five questions at the end, the unstated message is: "Take our strategy and shut up." If the managers in the audience don't see the point of the new strategy or don't find it particularly relevant to their view of things, they will experience this as controlling regulation.

Needless to say, even moderately independent spirits will rebel, if only ever so quietly. Much

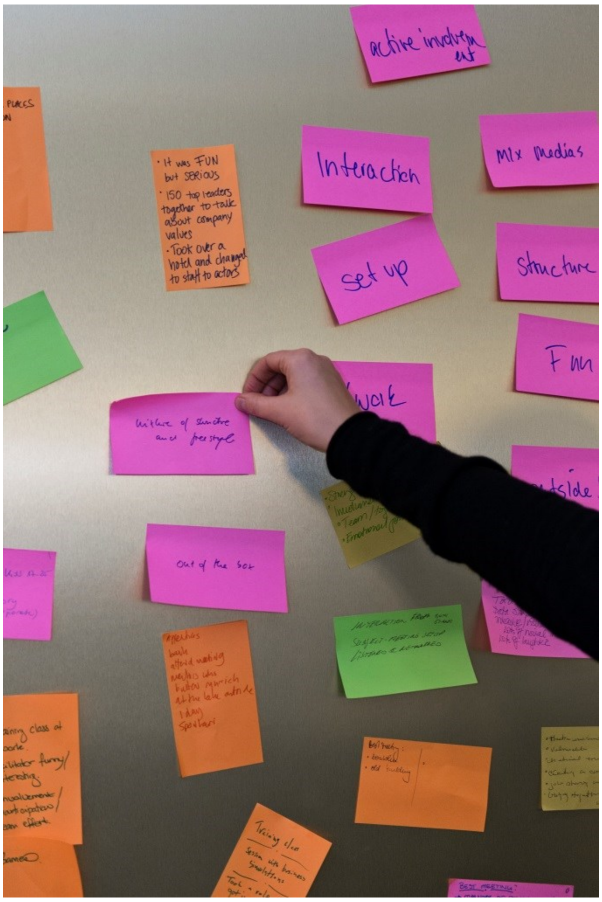

Photo: Denmark Media Center

resistance to organizational change can be traced to management's ill-considered efforts to force employees in this direction or that. When an easily comprehensible set of PowerPoint presentations lead to no particularly new behaviors on the part of participants, meeting owners may well scratch their heads and ask: "What didn't they get? How can we say it more *clearly next year?" The issue may not be clarity, but sensitivity (or lack thereof) to participants' autonomy, to their opinions and values. They are likely to think: "You may tell us this is our new strategy, but I don't quite see how it fits into my sense of where we need to go. And you obviously don't care." When thus received, a message falls flat and produces little new action.*

Knowledge presupposes activity

Telling participants facts and policies rarely makes them act differently later. Meetings are part of the value chain. A meeting shows its worth in the increased value to customers and external stakeholders created by meeting participants subsequently.

To transform information into knowledge, listeners and learners must be active. The impassivity of hotel chair listening has its obvious shortcomings. Learning and knowledge sharing are active processes of inquiry, exploration and experimentation (Dewey, 1934; Bransford et al., 2000). Human brains are not storage devices like computer hard disks, where information sits passively waiting to be used weeks or years later (Dreyfus, 1992). As the saying goes, use it or lose it. If not put to immediate use in mental processing (thinking, planning, deliberation, application), information is rejected by the brain.

In practical domains, like bicycle riding, skilled labor, computer use, etc., this point hardly needs belaboring. But even in the intellectual forum of a meeting, where knowledge is verbal and cognitive rather than manual or embodied, the active application of inputs received is key. This may take the form of reflection and verbalization (Schön, 1983), as in note-taking and writing to learn (Russell, 1997), or as in conversation with one or more peers, or in groups: free discussions with summarizing and questioning, articulating criticism and approval as well as sharing undigested impressions and ventilating emotions that would otherwise block understanding (Elsborg & Ravn, 2007; Brown et al. 2005). Such verbal and intellectual efforts are what being active means in the context of meetings. They are all important as tools that meeting owners can use to make a greater impact on participants, enabling them to create more value for their external stakeholders and better organizational results after the meeting. Being active is the key ingredient in the active involvement that needs to characterize modern meetings

Social relations are essential to knowledge sharing

Meeting participants sitting silently in their seats do not learn from each other. Most people are hugely motived by the fellowship of their peers. Meetings must include the social dimension to stimulate action after the meeting.

An important aspect of knowledge sharing and learning is the social context in which these processes take place (Illeris, 2003). This is immediately evident at meetings, which are social events *par excellence* (Louw & Zuber-Skerritt, 2011). Yet meeting owners rarely rely much on the work-related support and intellectual challenge that participants could provide each other. Sure, there are breaks and maybe a social program but, as indicated, participants often, and wisely so, spend this time relaxing, not deepening their comprehension.

We take cues from others in interpreting facts and events, including presentations at meetings. Do the others respond with enthusiasm or indifference? If everyone spills out of lecture hall, worn out by too much mute sitting, seemingly only thinking about the coffee in the lobby, the effect created is this: “Oh, the others don’t talk about the presentation. They probably didn’t find it important. Well, I guess it wasn’t.” In contrast, if the facilitator asks everyone to pair up with a stranger for the last ten minutes of the session and talk about what they found useful, many participants will keep on chatting about it on their way out, keeping the session topic alive, underlining its relevance (Harrison, 2010).

Executives and highly trained professionals usually derive satisfaction from their jobs because of its technical challenges, but many people go to work to be part of a group and enjoy social relations. So, too, at meetings. As long as you are being talked to from a podium, you can’t talk to colleagues or meet interesting strangers, and when time comes for the coffee break, you may be too exhausted to seek company other than your old office colleagues. Equally dispiriting is going to a conference with a thousand other salespeople in your new organization, only two of which you had any interaction with during a full-day event. Such social impoverishment will lead you to experience your office as a lonely place, and taking sick days or eventually quitting will be the easier.

Meetings provide a vast potential for social support and encouragement, only half of which is usually exploited: The obvious part about drinks and entertainment. The other part is largely ignored by meeting owners, the part where participants experience the joy of learning from each other as they develop professionally through the challenges arising out of small-group questioning and discussions.

Knowledgeable action implies value creation

Obedient listening is *passive*. Sharing knowledge and producing effective action requires *active* learning

While in the traditional view knowledge is "facts" about the world, in the pragmatic sense it involves human action undertaken for a purpose. We see evidence of knowledge in the successful completion of action. A cook who studies books and memorizes hundreds of recipes but is inept in a kitchen doesn't know cooking. She is unable to use all her stored facts for creating something of supreme value to her customers: their meal.

Pragmatically, we only know things when we know how to make a difference with them. "Knowledge" is a noun used to designate what we possess when we manage to act with direction and purpose in the world to create better outcomes. In the professional meeting, knowledge resides not in the PowerPoints themselves, but in what we take home and use for the benefit of customers and clients, that is, the external stakeholders of the meeting for whose sake, in the final analysis, we attended the meeting.

It is all too common to separate knowledge (really: information) from its application. "We give you this knowledge and you go use it back in your office, with your customers". This view of knowledge has contributed to holding back meeting professionals from adopting new and more interactive formats that directly address the subsequent value creation (Ghoshal et al., 2003) that meetings participants supposedly attend the meeting to prepare for. In the larger scheme of things, this is, of course, what makes a meeting provide a suitable return on investment.

Photo: Denmark Media Center

Design principles for knowledge sharing at meetings

Meetings must help participants transform *information* into *knowledge* that they can use in real-world *action*.

If meetings truly were to be platforms for knowledge sharing, what would they look like? How would they give room for *interpretation*, boost people's *motivation* in autonomous (rather than controlled) ways and encourage *activity* and *social relations,* so as to help participants better *create value* after the meeting? Let us combine these factors into three design principles or recommendations for meetings and conferences.

In a word, meetings should help participants transform *information* into *knowledge* that they can use in real-world *action*. Responsible thinking requires attention to these three facts, which may be expressed thus with a few additional words, (1) presentations will continue to be the mainstay of large meetings, but they will *inform* participants by offering *inspiration* to act rather messages to heed. That is to say, participants will be encouraged to search out the aspects of the presentations that make particular sense to them, give their experience, values and intentions, such that they are able to (2) integrate the input with what they know and can do already, transforming it into personally meaningful and actionable knowledge. Knowledge of this kind will prepare participants for (3) subsequent action much more directly than does the mere reception of information.

In yet more detail:

Presentations: From information to inspiration

Meetings must aim to *inspire* participants, not merely *inform* them. Information is often control in disguise, but attempting to inspire is respectful of participants' autonomy.

Presentations need to be considered primarily vehicles for the inspiration of participants, not tools for delivering senders' messages. Everyone welcomes inspiration, but few people like to receive marching orders, which is how "messages" are often heard, regardless of how friendly senders believe themselves to be. Sending a message is controlling: "This is what we would want you to think and do."
In contrast, one shows respect for an audience by attempting to provide inspiration. To communicate in more autonomy-supportive ways, sometimes only small changes in phrasing and delivery are required. Compare these two formulations:

- "We want you to sell our new product this way. First do this, then this and then this. Any questions? No? Thank you."
- "Here are two excellent ways you may sell our new product. Take your pick, add your own best experience as a salesperson and share further ideas for giving the sale your personal touch with the person sitting next to you during the next 10 minutes".

Huge difference in motivational impulse. Some participants may indeed accept the former mode of presentation with no questions asked, but an intelligent, creative and responsible adoption of sales techniques is much more likely to ensue from the latter.

Effective meeting organizers know how to align their organizational strategy and meeting messages with the subjective worlds of the meeting participants—for greater efficacy and actionability.

To prevent misunderstanding: Giving presentations that provide inspiration is not a matter of making them "inspirational" in the American evangelical sense of being intimate, spiritual or rousing. Rather, it is about accepting that information does not enter anyone's brains exactly as intended and therefore needs to be presented in such a way as to appeal in many different ways to the receiver, to ensure that enough of the core elements will seem interesting or sufficiently compatible with the values, beliefs and intentions that the receiver currently holds.

To accomplish this, the sender may prepare better presentations. That is one avenue, pursued by a thousand how-to manuals and consultants (like Reynolds, 2012, Tufte, 2003; Koshlyn, 2007). Another is to ensure that participants have plenty occasions to prepare and digest in their own minds the input provided (Segar, 2010, 2015; Elsborg & Ravn, 2007). Are they adequately primed for what they are about to hear? Do they have reason to expect it is relevant? After the presentation, do they get an opportunity to mull it over, taking notes and summarizing key points, discussing them with one or two people sitting next to them for five or ten minutes? Do they have a voice, not necessarily in the large group of 300 people, but in smaller groups of three and four peers? Are they likely to feel that their view of the matter is relevant and useful? (Hatcher et al., 2006).

Opportunities for reflection and conversation may be introduced by the facilitator with simple questions that explore the relevance of the presentation to the participant, like: "What did you find was the most important point in the presentation?" or "Identify a recommendation in the presentation that you might like to act on afterwards, and explain how." Questions with right-or-wrong answers should be avoided and left for the classroom; in the meeting, we are looking for things that move the participants to think about old matters in new ways, to inspire them for new action (Ravn & Elsborg, 2011).

This allows participants to move to the next step, integrating what inspired them.

Integration: From *factual* information to *personal* knowledge

Meetings must help participants integrate the information and inspiration provided by giving them opportunities for this work *at the meeting*.

Participants integrate the input selected by making an effort to understand what it means to them as individuals, given their backgrounds and preferences. Information given in a presentation is necessarily abstract, so each participant needs opportunities at the meeting to make a coherent and meaningful whole out of their old knowledge and the new input. Participants may reason as follows: "Well, I used to do those tasks this particular way, and that has always made good sense to me, but now management wants to move us all in that other direction. I think that's okay, but I need to discover how I can do some of the new stuff in a way that makes sense to me and fits in with what I think is important and worthwhile. That's going to take a little thinking."

Besides presentations, a meeting must include facilitated processes that enable participants to engage in this sort of reasoning, alone or supported by peers, whether old colleagues or perfect strangers (with whom they share professional domains). The facilitator may divide participants into dyads, trios or small groups or engage them in open-floor activities with varying partners. They can be given shorts tasks to perform with each other, which stimulate, challenge and support participants in conversations about what they heard and what they think and what they would like to contribute. If well-designed, such processes respect participants' autonomy *and* are social and active. Other things being equal, they will lead to better results, because the new input will be fixed in people's minds by association with engaging and often cheerful interactions with their peers, rather than by association with long and tedious lectures.

Processes for integration of input can go between presentations: ten minutes mid-morning after the first long presentation, ten minutes before lunch, half an hour after lunch (instead of the graveyard hour when everyone wants to nap), fifteen minutes at the close of day. No one expects long hours of discussion at the meeting—that's for the next departmental meeting at home—but it is important for a meeting owner to send the right signal: "These are not the words of God, chiseled in stone. Our new strategy is an input to your daily work that we urge you to give your serious consideration. It's important to us, and we sincerely hope it will be important to you; that's why we have allocated 30 minutes for discussing and digesting this, where you will be divided into groups twice: once in dyads for ten minutes with a close colleague for airing your concerns, then trios with two distant colleagues for twenty minutes, where you will share what you have done in the past that may be ramped up if you were to implement the part of the strategy that is most relevant to where you are."

Action: The whole point of knowledge sharing

Meetings must ultimately lead to changed actions subsequently, actions as informed by the knowledge shared and generated at the meeting. Therefore, meetings must feature opportunities where participants can prepare their subsequent actions.

Meetings must ultimately lead to changed actions subsequently, actions as informed by the knowledge shared and generated at the meeting. Therefore, meetings must feature opportunities where participants can prepare their subsequent actions.

This phase if often left out of conferences on the assumption that once participants have been loaded up with valuable information, they will, spontaneously and immediately, put it to use at work as intended by the meeting owners. As experience shows, this is a pipe dream. When evaluations of meetings are carried out at all (e.g., Hoyt & White, 2011), they often show very limited results, usually only at level 1 (immediate reactions) on the Kirkpatrick scale (1998), rarely the more demanding levels 2-4 (Did learning take place? Was behavior changed? Did that produce results?) (but see Wahlgren, 2015; Chapman et al., 2007), which, of course, is what offers the (corporate) meeting owner the return of investment that motivates the meeting in the first place.

A prudent meeting designer would allocate 10-20% of the meeting time to anchoring and fixing the knowledge inspired and integrated in the participants, such that the difficult task of translating it into practice is not left to individual participants to struggle with, amid the phone messages and emails waiting at the home base.

This happens all too rarely but opportunities for it can easily be included in the meeting, from the 15-minute take-away ("What do you take away from the meeting?" Three minutes of reflection and note-taking, five minutes sharing with a neighbor, five minutes of sampling takeaways in the plenary), to creating an individual to-do list of three or five next steps to take, to negotiating with team members present about how to address challenges in the ways suggested by the presentations, to making appointments with relevant persons for further deliberations.

As we shifted focus from information to knowledge of the action-oriented and pragmatic kind, we may remind ourselves of this important aspect of knowledge by designating it *actionable*: "Knowledge that has come to mean so much to me that I can act on it immediately." Other preparation, negotiations, design, training and practice may of course be required before a participant can act competently, but at the very least the meeting should start the participants on this course of active involvement—and not leave them hanging in mid-air, with a stomach full of undigested presentations.

Conclusions

A knowledge economy requires meetings and conferences that deliver actionable knowledge, not merely information transmitted to passive worker bees.

Large meetings and conferences need to be aligned with the transformations occurring in society, particularly the transition from an industrialized to a knowledge-based economy. Delivering information by means of one-way communication may have seemed appropriate in simpler times, but with meeting participants being increasingly well-educated knowledge workers, meeting owners need to find more elegant ways of engaging them and create an appropriate return on their investment.

Whether ICT-related or social media-based or not, these new ways should focus squarely on the principle of the active involvement of participants. It takes courage to experiment with a more creative setting for the meeting, to introduce new meeting formats and interactive processes, to take charge and make sure that the meeting is recast to suit modern purposes. But it is the right thing to do, and meeting owners show responsible thinking whether they are motivated by the prospect of inclusiveness or democracy or because of the manifest effectiveness of letting participants share in the ownership and application of the meeting content.

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