

What Is A Conference ?

H. LeROY MARLOW

Today everyone uses the word "conference." It is a stall by the executive's secretary when the boss doesn't want to answer the phone—"I'm sorry but Mr. Big is in conference." It is baseball lingo when the infield is called to the mound for strategy. It is a highly structured meeting between diplomatic heads of state. It is used colloquially to represent a group of "visiting firemen," dignitaries, Boy Scouts and countless other gatherings. While the word "conference" has become as much of a household word as "Coke" its distinctive meaning has been lost. The common acceptance and interpretations of the word have added to its usage but they serve to dull its intrinsic value as a learning method. Just what, then, is a conference or more specifically the conference method.

True Conference

The True Conference is an informal yet planned meeting, or series of meetings, of experienced people with related

interests and common problems who meet to exchange orally mental perspectives with the thought of pooling ideas and reaching a solution or conclusion. This activity is carried out under the guidance of a trained conference leader.

The conference, then, is planned — at no time should it revert to a "bull session." A plan is outlined, objectives are determined, discussion occurs and group conclusions are drawn. The modern conference does not use parliamentary procedure or Robert's rules of order, but each individual is free to speak whenever he has something to offer for group consideration.

Genuine conferring takes place where there is free, orderly discussion between members seeking jointly an appropriate course of action, a decision, or a common understanding. In contrast with a "debate," a true conference begins properly not with a proposal but with an effort on the part of all to recognize each other's points of view. The discussion takes account of attitudes as well as of the ideas expressed; it invites tentative suggestions

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to be tested through discussion; and it opens the way for artful handling of differences in points of view by the chairman so as to permit members to change their minds without embarrassment. Thus the outcome tends to be a decision which enlists a maximum of agreement.¹

. . . Behavior is not altered by debating; in fact, the chief consequence of debating is to leave individuals more deeply entrenched in their differences and insulations.²

Unlike the lecturing process, the conference does not aim to present new facts. Through grouping and experience the conferees are already familiar with the facts common to the subject being discussed. One important purpose of this method, then, is to promote thinking rather than to impart knowledge.

The philosophy of the conference may be more clearly understood by viewing Figure 1.

The three circles — A, B, and C — represent three individual conference members each with his own ideas, experiences, and opinions. Through the use of group interaction some agreement has been obtained between A and B, B and C, and A and C. But in addition to this, in the very heart is an area of common agreement that has been reached by all three conferees. Each conferee, then, started out with his individual beliefs but through cooperation with others was able to reach areas of mutual agreement.

The popularity of the conference method may be due to reasons very well

AREAS OF CONFEREE AGREEMENT IN THE CONFERENCE METHOD

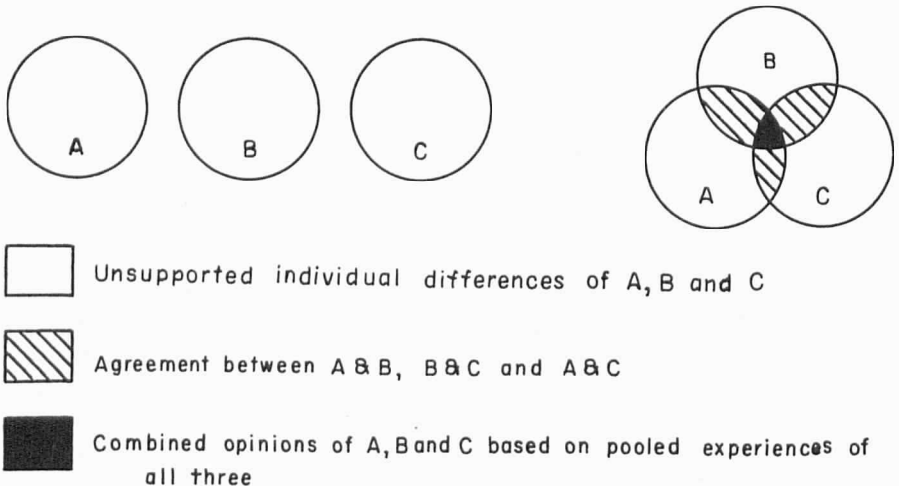


Figure 1

1. Glenn A. Bowers, "Research Manual for the Study of Conference and Committee Processes in Business and Industry," p. 9.
 2. Eduard C. Lindeman, "The Place of Discussion in the Learning Process," *Journal of Home Economics*, Vol. 27, No. 6, June-July 1935, p. 349.

stated in the Conference Leader's Manual:

It is a type of training which executives find both stimulating and flattering. It doesn't put them back into the "classroom," nor subject them to teaching of mere theory. They naturally feel that no single individual can know as much about all their respective executive duties as they do themselves. Rather than acting as a teacher, the conference leader brings to bear upon a problem the thinking of all the members of the group who attend the meetings. The problems are better grasped and evaluated . . . applicants are more readily made, and followed through. Most important of all, a habit of reaching decisions by group agreement is developed which is of inestimable value to the organization.³

It is worth emphasizing that the conference is carried on by the conferees and the leader merely acts to sustain the discussion on the topic. The leader should consider the conferees as individuals not as a class. In the usual connota-

tion of the word he is not teaching but merely helping the individual to participate so that they will contribute to the discussion and the ultimate solution.

Because of the high intrinsic efficiency of the conference as an educational procedure, it often happens that attempts are made to use it under conditions where it cannot possibly function. For example, the conference procedure is no good at all for teaching *new* subject matter. To attempt to use it for this purpose would be just about as absurd as to try to spade the garden with a baseball bat or to attempt to use a spading fork for a bat in a ball game.

Again, the conference is of little or no value when dealing with inexperienced groups. Attempts to conduct conference on questions relating to fields of work in which the group members have had no experience degenerates into guessing contests.⁴

The conference may be thought of as a completed jig-saw puzzle, as in Figure 2, composed of many and varied parts.

CONFERENCE METHOD LIKENED TO A PUZZLE

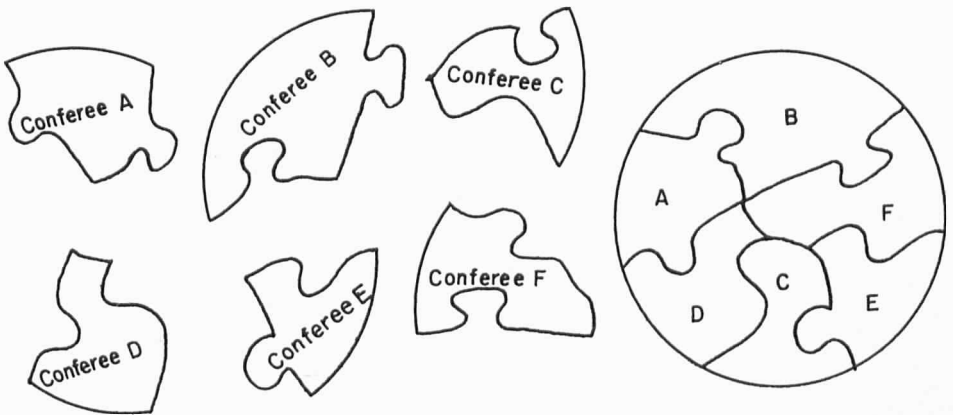


Figure 2

3. National Foremen's Institute, "Conference Leader's Manual," p. 5.

4. Frank Cushman, "Training Procedures," p. 142.

The circle represents the problem and the pieces symbolize the conferees participating. Each person brings with him a unique contribution. It is only when all the conferees cooperate, share their experiences, see and consider the whole problem and strive for the complete solution that successful conclusions are reached.

The success of a conference is directly proportional to that care taken in selecting (1) a capable leader, (2) appropriate topic or problem, (3) suitable conferees and (4) adequate physical facilities.

The method of functions upon the same type of critical thinking that has been advocated by such individuals as Harrison Sacket Elliott, Mary P. Follett, Eduard C. Lindemann, John Dewey and others. It essentially uses four steps.

1. the drawing out of the group experiences which have a bearing upon the problem or topic at hand
2. the weighing of the various facts and experiences to sift out the most valuable contributions
3. the group evaluation of the experiences
4. the conclusions, solutions, or decisions reached by group action.

Throughout each of the four steps it is the group that makes the contributions, the group that does the weighing, and it is likewise the group that makes the evaluation and develops the final solution.

Directed Conference

The Directed or Guided Conference is a modified version of the true con-

ference which is being used quite extensively and has some bearing upon the definition of the conference method. The basic theories and philosophies remain unchanged, but in the modification the leader tends to assume the role of a teacher. The method is used when a certain amount of information must be imparted to the group before it can proceed with the group action. The group still needs to possess sufficient background, interest, experience, etc. as is required when employing the free or undirected conference. For example, the leader may lecture to the group of conferees on the technical aspects of some new law that has just been passed which affects them. This presentation is purely a setting forth of information on the part of the leader. After the group has assimilated the facts the conferees may proceed using their past experience to discuss how this new law will affect the group and what decisions they should reach regarding it. It should be noted, then, that although the topic may be selected by the leader the conclusions that are eventually reached are not predetermined.

The transmitting of facts and ideas, and getting active participation by the learners, calls for a combination of direct teaching and discussion leadership. One person may act as both instructor and conference chairman or these roles may be separated. In any case, the instructor should be an expert in the subject matter, and the discussion leader must understand the significance of important issues. It would seem best for the instructor to be a trained discussion leader.⁵

In drawing an analogy, the conference method may be likened to a racing

5. Henry M. Busch, "Conference Methods in Industry," p. 42.

shell. It has a "coxswain" to control its pulse and see that it remains on course, but the moving force is supplied by each and every individual member of the "team." "For in the last analysis the basic purpose of all conference work is to bring understanding, clarification, agreement and often the creation of new ideas, out of the interplay of the ideas, emotions and wishes of the participant."⁶

Characteristics

On the basis of the preceding definition, the following may be considered as outstanding characteristics of the method.

1. The number of conferees is relatively small — approximately ten to twenty-five. The group is large enough to assure a proper distribution of experience but small enough to allow ample time for each member to freely participate in the discussion.

2. The physical arrangement places the individuals comfortably about a large table or group of tables in such a manner as to have face-to-face contact with each other.

3. The conferees are no longer school boys but matured persons, informally grouped to work on a common problem for which they desire a solution.

4. The leader is not a teacher. He is present only to help direct the discussion and thinking and to assist the persons in expressing their thoughts.

5. A planned outline is used to assure that the desired objectives are reached—

there is no set course of study. The discussion may proceed at a rapid pace or barely crawl, it may follow the outline or deviate greatly; for, it is the amount of participation of and benefits received by the conferees that is the determining factor.

6. A proposed outline of the conference session is distributed to all members in advance of the meeting date. This promotes better understanding and stimulates discussion.

7. Each member of the group has had years of practical experience which he brings to bear in solving the matter at hand.

8. The conferees meet together — to learn together, to think together, to solve a problem by pooling their experiences.

9. Incomplete ideas are "tossed out" for group improvement — it is ideas and not complete statements that make the conference a success.

"The good conference of today — the better conference of tomorrow — is switching over from a listening pattern to a working pattern."⁷

Compared To Other Methods

Even though it has been pointed out that the conference is an educational method, its procedure of functioning is quite different from the lecture, the open forum, the symposium or the panel. The graphic presentation in Figure 3 makes these differences readily apparent. Lest a false impression be created, the conference method of learning is not a procedure that can be used in all

6. Ordway Tead, "The Art of Leadership," p. 185.

7. Thomas R. Carskadon, "The Conference of the Future," *Adult Leadership*, Vol. II, No. 1, May 1953, p. 2.

CONFERENCE METHOD COMPARED TO OTHER METHODS

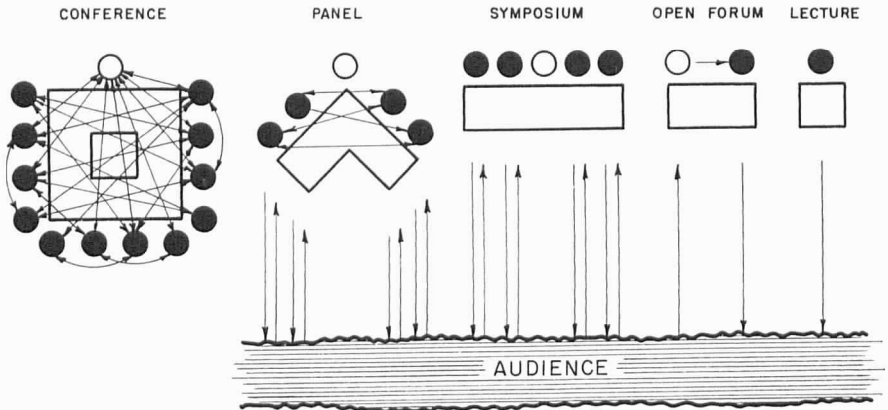
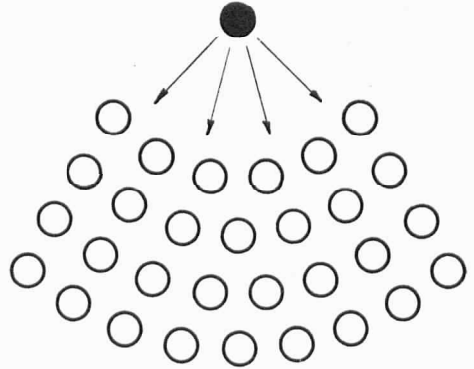
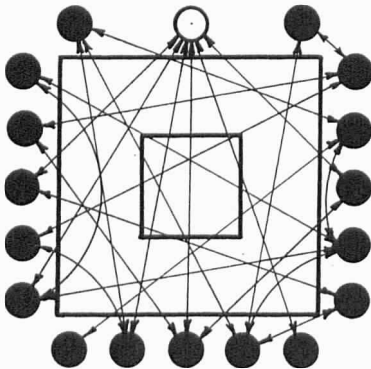


Figure 3

TRUE CONFERENCE VS. LECTURE



- | | |
|--|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A method of pooling experiences. 2. Informal atmosphere. 3. Conferees possess knowledge. 4. Conferees do most of the talking. 5. Leader stimulates group thinking. 6. Conferees determine direction. 7. Conferees develop answers. 8. Leader may lack experience in subject content. 9. Leader does not present his ideas. 10. Group limited to 10-25 persons. 11. Democratic process. 12. Multiple communication. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A method of presenting information. 2. Formal atmosphere. 3. Lecturer is the expert. 4. Lecturer does all of the talking. 5. Lecturer strives to get audience understanding and acceptance. 6. Lecturer determines direction. 7. Lecturer gives answers. 8. Lecturer must be experienced in subject content. 9. Lecturer presents his ideas. 10. No limit on size of group. 11. Autocratic process. 12. One-way communication. |
|--|--|

Figure 4

learning situations or with all types of learners. This method, like all others, has limitations. However, to accomplish educational goals where the group members can use their own talents in contributing to the ultimate end, the conference is the most effective procedure yet devised.

The lecture is a teaching method that is universally understood, but how is it different or similar to the conference? The lecture is most effective when the learner knows little or nothing about the subject being presented. The lecturer is primarily concerned with having his audience understand the points he is trying to make and accept them. Contrasted to this the conference method is the exact reverse of a lecture; it is used

only when the members have knowledge regarding the topic. The leader talks only long enough to stimulate the group's thinking and to guide the discussion so that it remains in the directed direction. These differences are contrasted in Figure 4.

Graphically the difference between the conference and various other methods of imparting information or aiding learning may be seen in the time honored graph in Figure 5.

The open areas present the amount of leader domination, while the shaded area expresses group participation. The extreme lift line represents those situations where passive submission is shown on the part of the group members. They are present, they may listen, but they

GRAPHIC COMPARISON OF THE CONFERENCE METHOD TO OTHER METHODS OF LEARNING

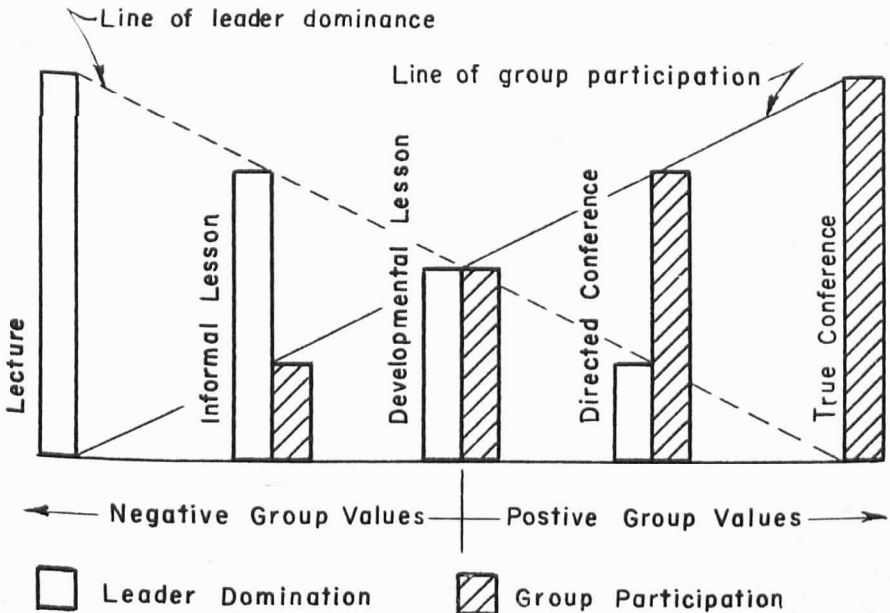


Figure 5

are not given an opportunity to ask questions or express their opinion. A formal lecture would be an exemplification of this type. From the point of view of group values this is most undesirable. The next vertical line to the right illustrates that type of learning situation found in an informal lesson. Here the individuals have some chance for expression, but the main bulk of the time is consumed by the teacher in getting across material. The lecture session that provides for questions from the audience would be classified at this point on the graph.

Midway on the graph a point is reached where the leader and the group share the time equally. This point may be considered as the "dead center" for group values. The developmental lesson could be explained in light of this position.

The next vertical line to the right is located in the area of positive group values. It is that point where the bulk of the learning process is carried on by the members composing the group. The directed conference is illustrative of this type of learning situation.

The line to the extreme right is the one possessing the highest positive value for group learning. It is that type of learning situation found in a true conference, where the issues are selected and solved by group action and the conclusions reached are such that each member feels satisfied with the results.

W. K. Kilpatrick has pointed out that people argue for the teacher controlled method or group discussion method depending upon their experience in this area.

Thus, for the teacher as determiner it is claimed that:

1. His knowledge of the subject gives him a sense of its relative points of importance, without which the learners will choose information in a random way, taking what seems exciting or amusing, or what they happen to hit on.
2. He can present an inclusive view of the subject, without which the learners' view is fragmentary and superficial.
3. His view of the subject shows it as a logically organized arrangement of facts, where the learners' view of it shows only such fact-relations as their limited contacts can bring them to see.

For the learner, on the other hand, it is claimed by those who would make him the determiner of the process that:

1. The state of his interest in the subject determines what he will really learn and in what order. Only with aroused interests do you get the practice and the attitudes that will carry him on in the subject.
2. The inclusive view makes no impression on his mind if we hurry him to it before he has any concern with the facts that fill the information out "inclusively."
3. Organization of a subject is effective for thinking only as the person who is to use it has a part in making it. Prearranged symmetries make information sterile.⁸

8. Alfred D. Sheffield, "Training for Group Experiences," p. 24.

Other differences between the two methods also exist. In the teacher-learning situation the "four steps" of learning are most often used. These steps involve (1) preparation, (2) presentation, (3) application, and (4) testing. In the conference procedure the "four steps" of critical thinking are employed. These

steps are concerned with the processing of group experiences in (1) assembling, (2) discussion, (3) acceptance, and (4) conclusions or decisions.

The following other differences have been enumerated in a chart used by a foreman training conference in the year 1936.⁹

PROCEDURES

<i>Objective</i>	<i>Imparting Information</i>	<i>Developing Skill</i>	<i>Conducting Conference</i>
Purpose	To put individual in possession of information	To assist an individual to acquire a mastery of a standard procedure	To assist a group of individuals to do more efficient thinking on jobs calling for decisions.
Job of Person in Charge	To get information into possession of individual class members	To get individuals so that they are able to do the job	To assist the individuals to do more efficient thinking
Relationship of person in charge of the group	Recognized as instructor vs. learner	Instructor vs. learner	Recognized as chairman, presiding officer, group leader vs. participating members
Asset of person in charge	Possesses information or knows where it can be secured	Possesses the skill to do the job	Can do efficient straight thinking and preside skillfully
Psychological conditions	Absence of information on part of class members	Lack of job ability on part of class members	Possession of experience, job ability, and information by group members
Operating Mechanics	Visual or oral presentation or use of source material	Formal lesson steps	Steps in constructive thinking
Source of content	Other than the group or class	Same	The group
Content determined by	The instructor	Instructor	The group
Test of accomplishment	Learner can reproduce information	Learner can do job unaided	Group members can handle situations better

9. Washington State Board of Vocational Education, "Report of Foremanship Conference," p. 19.

In comparing this method to others it may be classified as a "drawing out" procedure while most other formal learning situations are a "pouring in" process.

This is easily recognized by contrasting the characteristics of the conference method, instruction method and the procedure used in developing skills.

<i>Characteristic of a Conference</i>	<i>Characteristic of Instruction</i>	<i>Characteristics of Developing Skill</i>
Size of group is limited—ten to twenty-five	Large groups to increase economic efficiency	Group limited to working conditions and equipment
Uses techniques based upon the steps of critical thinking	Uses techniques based upon the four step method of presentation	Uses four steps of learning and demonstration techniques
Common group experiences are necessary	No common group experience necessary	No common group skills or information necessary
Requires pooled experiences	No pooling of experiences	No pooling of experiences
No addition to group content	Understanding and facts acquired	Additional skill acquired
Trained conference leader needed	Trained instructor needed	Qualified skilled teacher needed
No teacher-pupil relationship	Teacher-pupil relationship	Skilled-unskilled teacher-pupil relationship

Uses

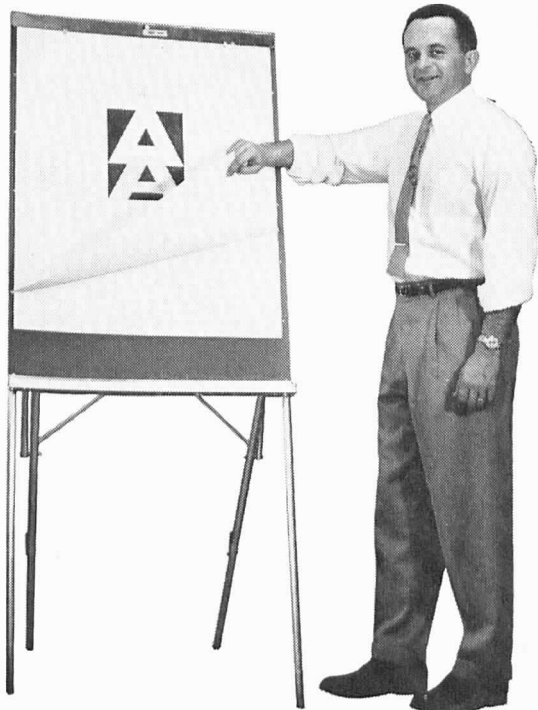
The topics which may be considered and the material which may be developed under the conference procedure are boundless. The application is limited only by the definition stated previously, and no distinction is placed upon who may become a conferee. Anyone may join with his peers and use the conference method to an advantage.

From the simplest neighborhood organization to the United Nations, therefore, government is conducted in a large part by conference. We take it for granted that conference will be the order of the day in government at the higher levels—in the executive offices and in the legislative committee room.¹⁰

As has been stated, this procedure is best when the individuals are matured, possess similar backgrounds of understanding and have a common problem to consider or solve. For, if these individual values, experiences, and opinions have any weight in determining the final decisions, establishing the policy or charting the course of action, the conference procedure is the best method available to obtain the expression of group judgment.

The conference is especially useful in preparing manuals or instruction books. In this case a group of experienced employees or supervisors, through discussion, decide on what is the "one best way" to handle each situation. The older members of the

10. William E. Utterback, "Group Thinking and Conference Leadership," p. 10.



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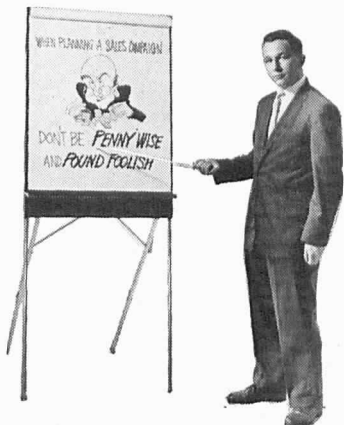
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group are much more likely to accept the verdict of the group and change their way of doing certain things than they would be if the manual were written by the management without such a conference.

Incidentally, this type of conference has proved, time and again, to be the best method of training older employees who had become somewhat set in their ways. It has been used successfully for the double purposes of preparing a manual and training executives in high positions.¹¹

One other aid that has been successfully used to help employees is to have them attend periodic safety conferences. Conferences of this nature are gaining in popularity particularly on the supervisory levels.

In addition to these usages the conference method is of value when used to:

1. exchange information and improve the communication channels within an organization
2. formulate and clarify organizational policies, contracts, and job responsibilities
3. supplement other methods of learning in the training program
4. aid in the overall coordination of activities
5. discuss and solve technical problems
6. analyze situations — especially those involving joint responsibilities — so as to increase the efficiency of the organization
7. pool the experiences of qualified individuals in order to secure superior results.

These seven points are not meant to be all inclusive, but to serve as guide-

posts in pointing out the varied uses of the conference method.

Advantages

The real merit of this method of learning may lie in its psychological benefits, in the results produced or in both. Consider first the social and psychological implications.

Learning is being promoted in an atmosphere most conducive to the "social animal." The conferee meets with his associates far removed from the stereotype of the traditional straight-laced classroom to discuss a topic concerning his daily experiences. In this situation ideas are polled and the scope of thinking is increased. This is group learning — he has an opportunity to learn how others feel and think about the topic. "It takes time, however, to learn to work together in a group, to have one's cherished opinions disagreed with, and to discuss them objectively."¹²

The learning in this situation involves more than a mere accumulating of facts, it is achieving the mature ability to control one's emotions. Only when this control is developed on the part of each conferee does group learning reach its greatest potential.

Possibly one of the greatest benefits to be derived from conferences is the development of analytical ability and a questioning attitude. . . . In the planned conference, every problem is analyzed; facts are assembled and studied; pros and cons considered; advantages and disadvantages discussed. Only then are attempts made to arrive at conclusions. This type of training demonstrated at many conferences over a

11. George D. Halsey, "Training Employees," p. 53.

12. Irene B. Needham, "The Uses and Limitations of the Discussion Method," *Journal of Home Economics*, Vol. 27, No. 8, Oct. 1935, p. 514.

period of time is bound to have a beneficial effect on every employee in attendance.¹³

The opportunity for self-expression and participation is another of the psychological advantages. Through the conference method each conferee is free to express himself as often as he has something to contribute to the discussion. He is not only free to do so, it is his duty as a conferee to do so. By accepting an active part in the discussion, one's prestige, thinking ability and social drives are all stimulated. Likewise, the speed of the learning or problem solving ability of the conferees is not imposed by someone outside the group, but is developed within by the members themselves. Since the conferees do most of the talking, this assures that the rate of learning is in direct relationship with the comprehensive ability of the individuals.

This method aids in improving morale among the conferees, since they can feel, and justly so, that they had an "in" with the planning. This, too, increases the feeling of accomplishment or success — success which is so important to our daily existence.

When one is interested in tangible results produced, in addition to those human factors mentioned, the conference method again has some advantages to offer.

The primary aspect is that the group as a whole has arrived at a decision of their own — not one passed down for their approval. As a result of this, any policy, plan, or procedure established will receive the full support of each con-

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13. Esso Training Center, "Conference Leadership," p. 5.

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ferree in putting it into action since it is partially "his baby."

Secondly, the conferees see to it that the discussion is limited to a practical plane — one on which they have had experience. Thus, should a person develop an idea that is good in theory only, the practical ability of the men in the conference will be apt to "spot" the fallacy in reasoning and cause it to be revised before costly time is spent in an actual work situation.

The conference method offers other advantages in varying degrees; the following would be included in this category:

1. It encourages self analysis on the part of the conferee and aids in the changing of personal attitudes.
2. It helps to clarify problems and eliminate misconceptions.
3. It appeals to those who are practical minded because of the informal way in which it operates.
4. It promotes teamwork and strengthens the democratic process.
5. It affords an opportunity for persons of similar interests to meet. This may also aid in the betterment of communications between different men and levels.
6. It is a useful means of assembling information that is best known by the conferees.
7. It may function just as successfully when the leader's knowledge of the subject content is limited.

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