

Effective Conference Leadership

The Content and Method of a Successful Program

James P. Dee

The purpose of this article is to describe a course in conference leadership conducted by the writer for a number of companies during the past few years. The course has been offered for such companies as General Electric, General Motors, Pennsylvania Power and Light Company, as well as for a number of smaller companies. It is reported here because

1. It has been eminently successful—at least if student evaluations and requests for repetitions of the course can be taken as a measure of success.
2. The course, described below, is the most recent revision and refinement, incorporating the suggestions

of, conservatively, some 500 “graduates.”

3. The course offers a number of marginal, but non-the-less very real, benefits both to the company and to the individual participant.

Course Description

Objectives. The course seeks to accomplish three major ends:

1. An awareness and an appreciation of the conference as a management tool,
2. An understanding of the basic concepts and principles of conference leadership, and
3. At least a minimal level of skill in such things as selecting and limit-

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ing the conference topic, selecting and preparing the conferees, preparing an agenda, the use of questions, listening, summarizing the conference, and follow-up.

Rationale. Recognizing that theory and guided practice are essential for a successful learning experience, the course attempts to provide both. The first three (of thirteen) sessions are devoted exclusively to lecture-discussion of substantive matters; sessions four and five provide an opportunity for the participants to observe and critically evaluate two conferences, one filmed and the other live; sessions six and seven are devoted to a "mix" of lecture-discussion and practice conferences led by selected class members; and sessions eight through thirteen are devoted exclusively to practice conferences.

By the end of the course, every member has designed and conducted one practice conference and has served also as an assistant leader and twice as an evaluator or critic of others' conferences.

Insofar as possible, these experiences are arranged in sequence so as to maximize their learning value.

Subject Matter

No text is used in the course. In place of a text, the class members are provided with a large amount of mimeographed materials selected and collected by this writer. Over the years, he has found a number of articles dealing with various aspects of conference leadership, drawn from various texts for specific materials, and in some instances he has drawn on his own experience and insights to develop original materials. The class members are thus provided with an eclectic but, hopefully, more meaningful textual treatment of the subject than is otherwise available. Too, these

materials are distributed piecemeal throughout the course so that the student reads and discusses each at the most appropriate time.

Various kinds of conferences are explored, but the course focuses on the problem-solving conference because it requires *all* of the principles and techniques found in the others. If the class members can learn to conduct the problem-solving conference successfully, they should be able to handle the other, simpler, kinds of conferences as well.

Finally, students select their own conference problems. The only restrictions placed upon them are (1) the problem must be a real one, (2) it must be one with which class members can identify (i.e., it cannot require class members to role-play), and (3) it must be susceptible to a meaningful treatment in a forty-minute conference. (The group is not expected to *solve* the problem in the conference—although that happens occasionally. It *is* expected to make significant progress toward a solution.)

In practice, ninety-five percent of the problems discussed are company problems and this results in an important by-product of the course: class members learn of many different kinds of company problems of which they would otherwise remain unaware; and because each group is deliberately mixed, the company and the conference leader get the benefit of many different (finance, legal, engineering, manufacturing, personnel, etc.) points of view on the problem under discussion.

Course Content

The following outlines and schedules offer an overview of the course. Specific information about materials and activities follow:

Effective Conference Leadership Course Outline and Schedule

<i>Session</i>	<i>Subject</i>	<i>Materials</i>	<i>Activity</i>
1	Organization & Orientation Rationale of the Conference	Course Outline Assignment II Leavitt Article Argyris Article	Class Discussion
2	The Conference Leader— his personality his functions his duties Preparing for the Conference	C.L.'s Attributes Task & Maintenance Functions Leading Group Dis- cussion C.L.'s Job Before & After	Class Discussion
3	The Use of Questions The Importance of Listening	C.L. Questions Evaluation Guides Listening to Others Improve Listening Habits Nathan Article	Class Discussion Class Discussion Stop-watch
4	Observing the Conference	Practice Conference Schedule	Film
5	Guest Conference		Evaluation
6	Practice Conference Resolving Conflicts	Resolving Conflicts	Evaluation Mediation
7	Practice Conference 2 The Discussion Process	Role of the C.L. Problem Solving P.S. Sequence Lindblom Article Hall Article	Evaluation
8	Practice Conferences 3, 4, 5		Evaluation
9	Practice Conferences 6, 7, 8		Evaluation
10	Practice Conferences 9, 10, 11		Evaluation
11	Practice Conferences 12, 13, 14		Evaluation
12	Practice Conferences 15, 16, 17		Evaluation
13	Summary and Evaluation		

Explanations

1. The course can be roughly divided into theory and practice. The theory part of the course, in turn,

treats of three broad subject areas: the rationale of the conference and its role in business and industry; the conference leader, his attributes and his responsibilities; and specific

Practice Conference Schedule

<i>Leader</i>	<i>Assistant Leader</i>	<i>Evaluator (L)</i>	<i>Evaluator (C)</i>
Eichhorn	Cole	Curtis	Ebner
Cole	Curtis	Ebner	Dussinger
Curtis	Harootunian	Hixson	Muncy
Ebner	Helvig	Kline	Schultz
Dussinger	Henritzky	Miles	Beisel
Harootunian	Hixson	Muncy	Potosnak
Helvig	Kline	Schultz	Repp
Henritzky	Miles	Beisel	Roth
Hixson	Muncy	Potosnak	Eichhorn
Kline	Schultz	Repp	Cole
Miles	Beisel	Roth	Curtis
Muncy	Potosnak	Eichhorn	Harootunian
Schultz	Repp	Cole	Helvig
Beisel	Roth	Dussinger	Henritzky
Potosnak	Eichhorn	Harootunian	Hixson
Repp	Ebner	Helvig	Kline
Roth	Dussinger	Henritzky	Miles

techniques of conference leadership.

2. Materials distributed include:

- A. Assignment II, in which members are asked to select a problem for their up-coming practice conference following the guide-lines mentioned above, and to indicate any date during the program when they know that they will have to be absent (so that the instructor will not assign them a specific duty on that date and to minimize subsequent schedule adjustments.)

- B. Five articles, reproduced and distributed with permission:

“Organizational Leadership and Participative Management,” Chris Argyris. *The Journal of Business*, Vol. 28, pp. 103-113.

“Small Groups in Large Or-

ganizations,” Harold J. Leavitt. *The Journal of Business*, Vol. 28, pp. 8-17.

“The Listening Spirit and the Conference Leader,” Ernest D. Nathan. *Training Director's Journal*, Jan., 1964.

“The Science of Muddling Through,” Charles E. Lindblom. *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 19, pp. 78-88.

The Decision-Making Grid: A Model of Decision-Making Styles,” Jay Hall, Vincent O’Leary, and Martha Williams. *California Management Review*, Winter, 1964.

- C. The other materials listed in the outline are original and composite materials drawn from a variety of sources, including the following:

"Group Leadership and Democratic Action," F. S. Haiman. Houghton Mifflin Company, 1951.

"Creative Discussion," Rupert L. Cartwright and George L. Hinds. Macmillan, 1959.

"How to Talk With People," Irving J. Lee. Harper and Bros., 1952.

"How to Hold a Better Meeting," Frank Snell. Harper and Bros., 1958.

"Successful Conference and Discussion Techniques," Harold P. Zelko. McGraw-Hill, 1957.

3. Techniques and exercises:

- A. The basic technique used throughout is, of course, the conference. Even in the substantive portions of the course, the instructor presents a short review of the topic and then leads a discussion about the material presented.
- B. In session four, the film, "All I Need Is a Conference!" (Henry Strauss & Company, New York) is presented, followed by a discussion of what the class members observed, and then shown again.
- C. Session five features a "guest led" conference, conducted by a colleague of the class members who has already graduated from the program. (The first time the course is offered, this conference is led by the instructor.) The conference may last no longer than one hour and is followed by a group evaluation session.
- D. Two exercises are used to emphasize particular technique suggestions. In the "stop watch" exercise (used to demonstrate the importance and difficulty of effective listening) one member is asked to make an opinion

statement. The others are asked to think about what was said for thirty seconds and then each, in turn, is asked to *restate* the original statement. The first person who can do this successfully then makes a statement of his own and the exercise continues.

The mediation exercise is used to illustrate techniques of resolving disagreements. The instructor selects one or more issues on which two members of the group honestly disagree (by pre-arrangement) and, using whichever technique is most appropriate, attempts to lead the two into agreement.

- E. In the practice session of the program, each class member leads a practice conference for forty minutes duration. One of his colleagues is designated to assist him in any way he wishes, although the leader is not *required* to use his assistant. Each conference is followed by a twenty-minute evaluation by the two class critics and the instructor.
- F. One other technique needs to be mentioned. At least once during the course, the instructor will *rerun* a conference that has just been concluded. When this is done, all evaluations are made at the end of the rerun. This has proved to be an extremely effective teaching device.

Evaluation

During the past three years, the writer has conducted this course ten times for a total of approximately 150 management personnel in a single company. At the end of each course, the participants have been asked to submit a confidential evaluation. Their

evaluations indicate that they found the course useful both on and off the job.

On the job, they reported using the course content in regular staff meetings, in interpersonal dealings with company colleagues and customers, in their own problem solving efforts, and working with union groups.

Off the job, they reported using the course content in solving family problems, in church, scout, and other community group activities, and in professional society meetings.

Specific techniques mentioned frequently include developing a logical approach to problem solving; designing and following an agenda, prepar-

ing conferees in advance, defining problems more carefully, drawing conferees out and handling "problem conferees" more effectively, more effective use of questions, and improved listening.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to describe a course in conference leadership conducted by this writer over a number of years. In developing the program, he drew on the experience, knowledge and insights of uncounted friends, colleagues, authors, and students. If this article helps someone else, this writer will have at least partially repaid his debt to them.

St. Louis Job Corps Center for Women

A contract agreement has been reached for the operation of a Job Corps Center for Women in St. Louis, Missouri. This will be the second Women's Center in Missouri. The agreement is with the Delta Education Corporation of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. The Center will be established and operated on the approximately 5.8 acre site of the former Missouri Baptist Hospital.

The Center can accommodate 606 young women 16 through 21 years of age, many of whom will be school dropouts who lack the education and work skills to find meaningful employment.

The contract is for 12 months at an estimated cost of \$3,024,000, including the cost of rehabilitating the facility for the new use, staff training and all other costs attendant to starting the new center.

The young women will receive basic education, work skill training, instruction in home and family life, health education, and training designed to develop citizenship responsibility.

Work skill training will be provided in six vocational areas: Business and office occupations, cosmetology, health occupations, food service occupations, graphic arts, and retailing and merchandising.