

# "The Supportive Environment"

a new dimension in meetings

Coleman L. Finkel

Five people had just completed a tour of The National Conference Center in East Windsor, N.J. We were at the end of two and one half hours of discussion. They were from a company that planned to convert part of an old building near their headquarters to a meeting center for in-house training programs. Two of the people were from the training department, two from purchasing and one was the company architect. We had talked about the philosophy of The Center, the design approaches taken to achieve a special environment to support learning goals, the ways in which the individual interacts with the environment during the typical meeting day. The architect, as he was leaving, said, "I have a completely different idea of what I must do. My preliminary plans are out the window. I can't be satisfied now with putting up some rooms and applying fresh paint on some walls. I see clearly that the design of a learning environment is a *whole new specialty*."

## "Whole New Specialty"

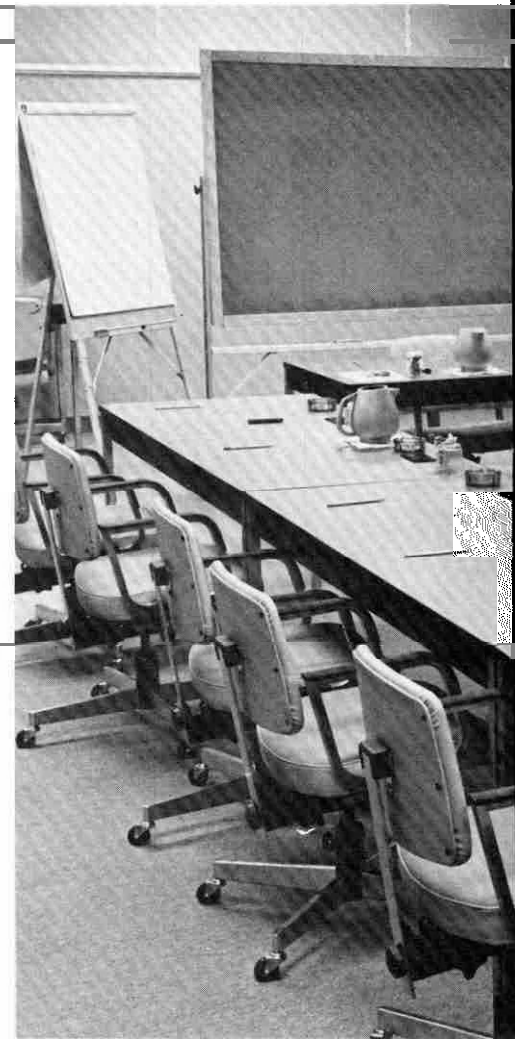
Indeed! After six years of research and two years of operation of a learning center, I am continually amazed at how much more there is to know about developing the special kind of facility that will support and extend the educational goals of meetings. I am also shocked to see the way companies are designing their own centers or

new commercial centers are being put on the market. The buildings are pretty, but the conference center is not being studied and designed as a "whole new specialty."

In this article, I will use the terms *learning*, *education* and *training* interchangeably. Any meeting should have a learning objective — that is, a goal of having people acquire and act on knowledge gained. Every element in a facility should be part of a support system to further that goal.

The word "meeting" will mean any kind of gathering of people for purposes of training, communicating information, problem solving, achieving interaction and understanding. The meetings may be called training programs, management conferences, sales meetings, planning sessions or seminars. My observations are directed primarily to the smaller, in-resident meeting with 10-200 persons, held for two days or longer, where there are more serious, business objectives than play or entertainment.

Training and conference planning professionals have not given sufficient attention and emphasis to the critical factors involved in the interrelationship and interaction between an individual and the meeting environment. It is essential that they do so to reach the full scope of learning potential in meet-



ings. For too long, trainers have been compromised, ignored, been indifferent to or used superficial criteria to judge the suitability of a meeting facility.

Maximum effectiveness cannot be achieved in a meeting unless more intelligent probing and thought are given to the many subtle elements in the total facility that have impact on the psychological, psychic and emotional reactions of an individual which, in turn, affect the degree to which an individual can optimally learn.

How can such a supportive meeting environment add a new dimension to meeting success? Conversely, in what ways, does the lack of consideration of such an essential ingredient become destructive to the achievement of maximum learning, motivation, information exchange and problem solving?



**"The properly designed meeting facility should do even more than provide the best learning environment. It should supply equipment, devices and systems that will challenge the trainer to innovate in developing the meeting design."**

Michel Beilis of the corporate education department of American Telephone and telegraph Corp., wrote an article on environment and meetings, appearing in the *Training and Development Journal*, stating that the environment in which a meeting is held can add 15-20 per cent to total program effectiveness. In discussions with training and development specialists and conference planning professionals, I have quoted this observation. There has been universal agreement with its premise.

#### **Totally Controlled Environment**

Surprisingly, though, the major disagreement is that most think the contribution to meeting success of the proper facility can be more than 15-20 per cent. The era

of the discotheques was a good example of the attempt to influence one's perceptions in a totally controlled environment. The flashing lights, fragrant incense, roaring sounds, small dance floor, fluid colors were all calculated and successfully integrated to assault our senses and produce an exciting, narcotic effect.

Disney World was the most carefully researched and designed environment in the United States. Disney management decided that people who entered this environment should feel that they had been transported, as the advertising promised, to a "magic kingdom." Each of five environments were separated and designed differently. The names suggest their intent — Fantasyland, Fron-

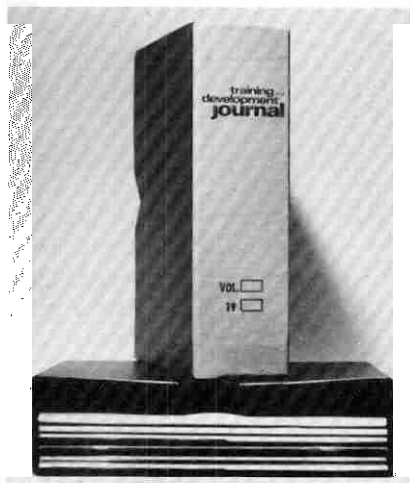
tierland, Fairyland, etc. They found, as we have at The National Conference Center, that there was no literature or body of experience to guide their work. So their people had to research and innovate new concepts, devices, equipment and procedures to create an environment controlled to achieve a mood, a flow, a unity, an attitude. Even adults are able to identify with the environment and to suspend their mature point of view for a momentary return to childhood feelings.

Beyond these experiences and observations lie lessons for the design of a meeting complex that will house, feed and sleep participants as well as provide meeting rooms, relaxation and recreational facilities for their group. One of the failures in the thinking of trainers and conference planners is to overlook the need to consider how all of the activities and environments to which the individual is exposed in 24 hours have impact on learning effectiveness.

For example, let us consider a meeting held in a company's office building. The office building represents the kind of environment the individual has just left. It is a world of business pressures, masses of people, crowded elevators, personnel going to work, street noises and executives with briefcases full of reading. With easy access to phones in the office, the individual will continue to conduct business. Hardly an environment conducive to quiet, reflective thinking!

Then, the lunch is held in the cafeteria where, once again, the learner is exposed to crowds and hubbub, sterile decor, fair food (though it is inexpensive). Hardly an environment to encourage thoughtful interchange of ideas! At the end of the day, back to a hotel with more street noises, crowds, elevators, impersonal service, a drab room like many others in which the individual has stayed on

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business trips.

Again, the hotel setting is not conducive to learning, to reading, to meditation and to homework. This entire learning experience, because of the changing and different environmental exposures, is not going to be as completely satisfactory or achieve the learning potential possible by placing the individual in another more relaxed and integrated environment.

### "Psychological Switch"

The meeting environment, ideally, should help the individual psychologically to move away from the pressures and loneliness of modern life; from the frustrations, fears, worries of the business world; from the problems of the home. There should be a concern by trainers both to prepare the participant and also to put him in a relaxed, open-minded, pressure-free frame of thinking. From the activist and the doer, the person must not become a thinker, learner, prober. It's a hard psychological switch. On vacation, how often have you experienced or have you heard someone say "It was great but it took me two days to unwind." The meeting site can be a prime factor in helping the participant to unwind and in making the psychic and emotional switch to the learner.

The impact of environment on emotions and attitudes is often independent of conscious recognition. We must look at the subtle, subconscious influences which affect each person in a learning environment. Because the influences may be subthreshold or subliminal, they are likely to be overlooked. For example, psychologists have discovered that the element of color alone will affect muscular tension, brain waves, heart rate, respiration and other functions of the automatic nervous system, arousing emotional and aesthetic reactions, likes and dislikes, pleasant and unpleasant associa-

tions, whether one thinks about it or not.

Since no one element in an environment is isolated but is present in conjunction with all other elements, and impressions are gained as a whole, it is essential that all of the environments to which the individual is exposed in a day be carefully examined, designed and integrated. In doing so, we can better achieve a total learning experience — one that supports rather than fights the training, communication and interaction processes.

### Environmental Psychology

Dr. Harold Proshansky, dean in the graduate school of New York University, has identified a discipline that he calls environmental psychology. Dr. Proshansky, in extension of the concept of a total environmental look, points out that every one of the environmental elements have impact on the individual because they all influence one's attitudes and actions.

Sir Charles Scott Sherrington, the great English pioneer in neurophysiology, has emphasized the same point in dealing with the impact of sensory stimuli on the total person. He observed that "all parts of the nervous system are connected together and no part is capable of reaction without affecting other parts. It is a system certainly never at rest."

Dr. Jerome Bruner of Harvard University, one of the country's leading authorities on learning theory, has said "The most characteristic thing about mental life is that one constantly goes beyond the information given." People will judge your learning expectations of them on the basis of the place, city or setting that you select for a meeting. If you hold a meeting in Las Vegas, you can expect that people will look forward to enjoying themselves. If you have some lofty educational goals, forget them. If you go to a Playboy Club, the name says it. Your people will

be "playing," and the entire environment is cleverly calculated to make them feel like kids again.

One must weigh whether the attendee's euphoria in a location is overwhelming the company's educational goals. I don't mean at all that a place must be monastic or that attention should not be given to the need for an environment and place for relaxation as well as an environment and place for recreation. But, frequently, there is an overemphasis on the fun element. Such an orientation often represents the desire on the part of a trainer or conference planner to please the boss or the registrants so that they will "enjoy" the meeting. Such a decision is a cop-out on the part of a trainer.

We must decide early if our meeting is a *merit* or *incentive* meeting. If it is, then the resort and the play-oriented sites are the correct choices. However, if the objectives are to reach learning and action goals, then it is essential, if the company is to maximize its investment return on the cost of the meeting, that the fun be minimized or, at least mixed in the proper amount and setting.

#### One Experience

One executive with whom I talked recently told me of a meeting experience that he had. It was related to the type of facility in which his meeting was held and the psychological factors in the setting that affected the results. He had a meeting of a group of his managers in a former monastery that had been turned into a meeting facility. The executive said it was the most unproductive meeting he had held with this group.

The architecture, stained glass windows, chapel and stone all spoke of piety, contemplation, spiritual serenity. He said that there was far less participation here than in his previous meetings. The participants were quieter, more serious and distracted during discussions. Although this may be

an extreme point of view, one of the participants said he thought it was sacrilegious to hold business meetings here. We must be more conscious of matching the educational goals of a meeting with the complex psychological factors in the environment that influence human feelings, reactions, emotions and moods. We are too easily led by our initial reaction to the beauty of a place.

The environment should be a primary force in helping the attendee to reprogram his or her mind to a learning mode. The environment must be so carefully and thoughtfully designed that the individual can maintain maximum concentration and interest when it is needed. Further, it should be designed so that the person can relax in a setting that permits quiet, informal exchange of ideas. Heightened consciousness, percep-

tion and thought can be encouraged by consideration of the different environments required within a facility.

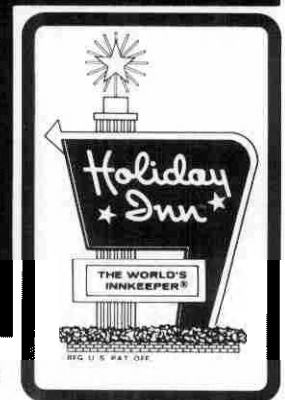
#### Sensory Deprivation

On the other hand, where there is a homogenous design treatment in a total facility, there is a state called, by physiologists, "sensory deprivation." At the University of McGill, an experiment was carried out to investigate the effects of keeping people in a homogenous and unvarying environment. After two days, most could not endure it. They became bored, restless and unable to concentrate.

It is difficult to expect people to spend long hours in an environment that is too similar, especially when the facility is isolated and in confined quarters. Concentration becomes more difficult and anxiety feelings may be subconsciously felt. A school represents that kind

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**Figure 1.**

**ENVIRONMENTS WITH WHICH EACH PARTICIPANT INTERACTS DURING ATTENDANCE AT A MEETING**

- A. Environment of the meeting room in which the principal instruction, talks, discussions take place.
- B. Environment of the "break-out" meeting room in which sub-group discussions and project work occurs.
- C. Environment of the room that represents the "home" of the participants — where they sleep, may meet with others, do individual study and work, where they can relax by themselves.
- D. Environment of the indoor and outdoor areas where the participant takes part in some individual or group sport or game.
- E. Environment of the places where each person can relax and informally socialize, drink, talk with other participants.
- F. Environment for the three meals.
- G. Environment where the "breaks" are held.
- H. Environment presented by the exterior building and the setting in which it is placed (immediate setting, neighborhood, city).

of environmental homogeneity and uniformity.

Let us look at the ten principal activities that occur in the 24 hour life of a participant. These activities have been related to the eight different environments in which they occur. Figure 1 outlines the environments. Figure 2 indicates typical activities. Each environment should be designed with consideration of how it can help to broaden each person's thinking, to encourage informal interaction among attendees, to offer a relaxed change of pace, to permit the attendee to find a quiet place to read, to study and to work.

In order to provide some criteria against which I believe one can measure facilities, I offer some observations on the requirements of each of the eight environments listed in Figure 1. In Figure 3, you can evaluate the importance of these environments for a specific meeting. To maximize their use, these environments should be under one "roof," within one learning complex. Consideration in design should also be given to the easy flow of people from one environment to the other.

The information detailed below borrows principles from the field of human engineering. This discipline deals with the design of an environment so that it matches human capacities and limitations with the accomplishment of specific work results. It draws from such fields as psychology, medicine, physiology, illuminating engineering and interior design.

To complicate the problem even further, we must consider two groups in the design of a facility: attendees and communicators (the trainers, speakers, chairpersons, discussion leaders). These groups have interrelated interests, but there are special needs that must be considered for each.

**Four Elements**

Let us look at how the facility can be put into perspective in con-

**Figure 2.**  
**ACTIVITIES OF A MEETING PARTICIPANT IN TYPICAL 24 HOURS**

Range of Time Devoted To Activity	Nature of Activity	Environment in Which Activity Takes Place
1. 4-6 hours	Participation in principal meeting room	A
2. 1-3 hours	Participation in smaller group discussions in break-out rooms	B
3. ¼-1 hour	At breaks	G
4. 1½-2 hours	At three meals	F
5. 1-2 hours	Washing, dressing, relaxing	C
6. 6-8 hours	Sleeping	C
7. 1-3 hours	Reading or performing work related to program	B, C, E
8. 1-3 hours	Informal socializing and discussions with other participants	E
9. 1-2 hours	Participating in outdoor or indoor recreation	D, E, H
10. 1-2 hours	Miscellaneous activities such as walking, telephoning, writing, waiting	C, E, G, H

text with all the other elements that go into the development, organization and operation of a successful meeting. There are four elements involved in every meeting. They are as follows:

1. *The program:* This element involves the identification and focus of subjects plus the meeting design.

2. *The communicators:* This element entails the effectiveness of the speakers, trainers, discussion leaders.

3. *Administrative work:* This element concerns material such as the workbooks, handouts, badges, place cards and pre-meeting instructions.

4. *The facility:* This element deals with every environment to which the attendee is exposed in the place where the meeting is held.

Attention should be given to all four of these elements to maximize the learning potential of a program. Organizations have control of the first three elements but must rely on others for the fourth item. This fact makes it even more important that careful attention be given to evaluating the design of a proper facility. In terms of its contribution to the success of a meeting, I would assign the following percentages of importance to each of the above elements.

- a. Program ..... 35%
- b. Communicators ..... 40%
- c. Administration ..... 5%
- d. Facility ..... 20%

Some observations on a few of the factors to be considered in each of the eight environments in the learning facility are as follows:

#### Meeting Room Environment

The main meeting room is the principle informational springboard for group learning. Concentration on its design is paramount. As an indication of some of the considerations to weigh, the following examples are illustrative:

- There should be no distracting

features in the room. Eliminate mirrors, pictures, carved wooden figures, windows, wall hangings, checkered drapes or rugs. The eye and mind will be distracted, if such things are present in the room.

- Rooms should be as square as possible to draw people together physically and psychologically. Long narrow rooms are unsatisfactory for encouraging group discussion.

- Dark colors are poor for the meeting. While woods such as walnut and mahogany are beautiful in a board room or library, they are bad for meeting rooms in which people will have to sit for long periods of time. These dark woods which do not reflect light, begin to close in after a time, and will induce drowsiness.

- Communicators need easy access to all the media used for com-

Figure 3.

### DETERMINING HOURS & ASSIGNING IMPORTANCE\* TO EACH ACTIVITY IN 24 HOURS OF PARTICIPANT LIFE AT SPECIFIC MEETING

\*Use this form to evaluate the time that participants spend, on the average, at each of the activities below. Then, in the right hand column, for each of the ten activities, place a percentage number — 10%, 25% — that you believe represents the contribution of that activity to reaching the educational goals for your meeting. This exercise will help you focus on the relative importance of each of the eight environments in which these ten activities occur.

Fill In Approximate Hours Devoted to Each Activity	Activity	Rating By Percentage of Importance of Each Activity to Educational Goal
1.	Participation in principal meeting room	
2.	Participation in smaller group discussions in break-out rooms	
3.	At breaks	
4.	At three meals	
5.	Washing, dressing, relaxing	
6.	Sleeping	
7.	Reading or performing work related to program	
8.	Informal socializing and discussions with other participants	
9.	Participating in outdoor or indoor recreation	
10.	Miscellaneous activities such as walking, telephoning, writing, waiting.	
TOTAL: 24 HOURS		TOTAL: 100%

municaton — chart pads, chalkboards, cork boards, flannel boards. We have found it necessary to design our own special system to make these tools part of the wall environment rather than using easels which become obstacle courses when stuck in the middle of a room.

• Easy interaction between the communicator and the group and also among the group is essential in the main meeting room. In the design of the general meeting environment, factors such as the following should be considered in addition: ceiling type and height, kind of tables, chairs, lighting, and floor surface. All have an influence on the way in which interaction is made possible and encouraged.

#### **Break-out Room Environment**

The same distractive-free decor is important here. The room should be specifically designed for the informal discussions that occur in this environment. The groups get a close identification with one another, evolving from the teamwork nature of their assignment. Good writing media are needed. Rooms should be small enough for the size group assigned to it.

I saw a team operating in one hotel, during a management grid program. The break-out room assigned was a hotel sleeping room with the beds piled on top of one another and the furniture shoved to one side. It was a shameful environment for the important kind of discussion going on and showed a woeful lack of sensitivity by the trainer to the relationship of environment to registrant attitudes and productivity.

#### **Coffee Break Environment**

The decor and furniture here can be as imaginative as you like. It should certainly be different than in the meeting room. We have found that a separate lounge is necessary for every meeting. The breaks should not be held in the same room as the meeting. Each

group wants to be by itself even if they are from the same company. They don't want to jostle with others at a common coffee bar in a corridor or in a general reception area.

The break should be considered part of the learning process. It gives each person a chance to digest and to compare ideas with others. Comfortable seating should be arranged in groups. The feeling should be one of informality where people can sit on chairs and put their feet up on the tables.

#### **Recreational Environment**

A variety of indoor and outdoor recreational activities are required. There should be enough activities and great enough diversity to take care of most attendees. Recreation offers an excellent change of pace to the program, if only for 10 or 15 minutes. It is a great relaxer. This environment should be separate from others.

#### **Dining Environment**

The environment here should be quiet and colorful. If the setting is attractive, the dining areas should look out on hills, water or trees. The place should be bright and cheerful with the feel of a fine restaurant rather than a short-order cafe with cafeteria tables and chairs.

#### **Environment for Relaxation of Groups**

The environment here should reflect a Union League Club atmosphere rather than a cocktail lounge with bar, bar stools and clatter. Fine stuffed chairs and well placed table groupings that can be moved about are desirable. Much fruitful discussion can go on in this setting. The serving of drinks should be unobtrusive. The fancier kind of cocktail set up with waitresses in skimpy dress will be reflected in the amount of drinking that goes on, the raucousness, and on the very nature of the discussions.

#### **The Sleeping Room**

Here is where a tremendous amount of work needs to be done. This room is the home of attendees. Special treatments should be considered to give less of a feel of living in a typical hotel room. One well known company center uses a sleeping room that is approximately 8'x12' with a stall shower. Their feeling is if the sleeping room is not too comfortable to stay in, then participants will stay out in the relaxation area where they will be forced to talk to other attendees. I believe this thinking is narrow and does not show a sufficient appreciation of the environmental role that the sleeping room plays in the life of a registrant.

People need to be and should be by themselves during part of the meeting. Their room represents their "island of repose." It should have excellent light in the three principle areas required by occupants — lighting for bed reading, for studying and for working. Attendees spend a lot of time in their rooms and they should be imaginatively designed for all the uses to which the individual does or should put it — sleeping, study, relaxing, meeting, toiletry. We have been working for a year on a completely new design for participants' rooms.

#### **Exterior Building & Environmental Setting**

It is from the emotional reactions here that most people are or are not impressed by a facility. It often provides the framework within which the rest of the facility is judged. If there are trees, rolling hills, lakes in a sylvan setting, such things are definite pluses. They provide a calming, relaxing identification with nature that is desirable.

It is nice to sit under a tree and to walk around on grass and among greenery. However, the value of this environment is overempha-

sized. To put this into perspective, if the facility is in an area with a winter season, people do not usually go out from December through March. When they do go out at other times, the amount of time spent outdoors is small compared to the time indoors.

The design considerations that should go into the development of a modern learning facility are innumerable. All the ones that I have used and seen throughout the United States and Europe, whether university halls, convention centers, converted mansions, company centers or hotels, are breaking no new paths, and in many cases, they seem to be going backwards.

Essentially, these facilities are merely providing space. Some are using the buzz words like environment and conference center, but they don't seem to understand the relationship of a specifically designed facility to the process of learning.

As an example of the kind of thinking that should be brought to focus on some elements in a meeting facility, let us look at two examples. We have found isolated, pieces of study going on in these two, as well as other environmental areas, with none, but ourselves trying to relate the findings to the meeting environment. As illustrations, we will look briefly at color and chairs. We could identify many other elements that we have researched such as lighting, tables, room sizes, noise control, crowd flow. We find that these and many other elements in the total environment must be continually studied if the conference center is to provide the ultimate atmosphere for a meeting.

**Color**

In 1973, the first report was published of a monumental study undertaken by a group of psychologists in Munich, Germany. Their research, begun in 1970, studied the impact of environment on mental growth. Although dealing

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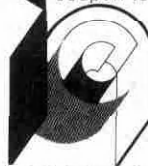
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with school children, there are lessons from the research to be learned for adult education. They found that colors have a decisive influence on a child's mental performance.

The children classified colors as beautiful — hues of blue, yellow, green, orange — and other colors the children called ugly — white, black and brown. With control groups, some in the "beautiful" environment and others in the "ugly," there was an average improvement of 15 I.Q. points for those in the "beautiful" environment. Positive social reactions improved also — friendly words, cooperation, smiles.

Tests have been made on the reactions of people to colors. One such test was made using 125 colors in 25 differently colored backgrounds. The colors were rated in nine categories with descriptive words starting with very, very pleasant to very pleasant, pleasant through very, very unpleasant. In time, the researchers found that the reactions to color combinations could not only be measured but predicted.

Kurt Goldstein, a psychologist, based on experience with patients, writes "red stimulation corresponds to the experience of being disrupted, thrown out, abnormally attracted to the outer world. Green corresponds to the withdrawal from the outer world and retreat to one's own quietness."

I received a call from an executive in Chicago who had been at The Center for a four-week program. He was going to build a conference room in his offices and wanted to know the colors that we used in our meeting rooms. He said "It's embarrassing to ask because I spent four weeks in that room, but the colors were so unobtrusive and comfortable that I've forgotten them. I can tell you all of the colors and wall hangings in our board room in New York." He concluded by saying, "I mean my request as a

compliment." I took it as the highest kind of praise.

Most values in color (warmth, coolness, excitement, tranquility) are psychological in quality. Where work or instruction and discussions take place, moderation in colors is better than excess. We do not use a blackboard, for example, because we felt the white chalk, black background contrast was fatiguing to the eyes. We experimented with 20 different colored surfaces for our chalkboard and decided on a soft blue.

B.J. Dourver, a Dutch authority on the emotional significance of color, has said, "color perception is not an art involving only the retina and consciousness but the body as a totality. The whole of man includes his body, mind, emotions and spirit."

Unfortunately, architects and

interior designers have not done a good job in their use of colors in meeting room environments. They have tended to use the same aesthetic approaches that are appropriate for such environments as homes, hotels, museums, etc.

### Chairs

The seats in most meeting rooms are a primary source of fatigue. Characteristically, chairs are chosen for the wrong reasons. They stack well or they're pretty or they are executive looking. A chair may be very comfortable if you try it for a minute or two. Try it, though, for six hours. On the other hand, the chair should not be too soft. After a time sitting in such a chair, the muscles in the lower lumbar region will begin to ache.

A seat should permit an individ-

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ual to maintain a posture that will not cause strain. A well designed and positioned back rest can relieve back muscles of a good deal of postural work. Seats should not press on thighs. It can restrict blood flow and cause limbs to go to sleep. The seat should be of sufficient depth to allow a person to move and change position but not so great that the seat cuts into the back of the knee. Chairs should be designed so that they are adjustable to suit individual body differences. The chair selected for The Center was chosen after four months of research.

### **"Extremely Adaptable"**

Can a meeting be successful in a facility without all the special considerations that I have described? Yes, it can. They are being held everyday in hotels, motels, company conference centers and old mansions. Individuals are extremely adaptable. We can put up with most anything. However, the professionals in training, convention and meeting planning would be failing to fulfill their responsibilities if they did not continuously seek ways to improve meeting effectiveness. While we have become increasingly sophisticated in our meeting design techniques, we have failed to develop any sophistication in our facilities. The contribution of such a facility to improved meeting effectiveness is enormous.

The emphasis so far has been primarily on developing an attractive setting and designing or buying a prestigious looking building. There is a great immediate emotional reaction to seeing a pretty face. We must look far beyond this environmental factor if the total facility is to contribute to more lasting results from meetings. It is paramount that the training and conference planning professionals look at such factors as how we can reduce the fatigue factors induced by the environment, and how we can increase concentration of at-

tendees. We must give greater attention to ways of eliminating the distractive factors in the environment.

Trainers work within so many inadequate facilities from day to day, they become used to the shortcomings and then take them for granted. People who live closely with a system become stereotypes in their thinking about it. Thus, they fail to consider bold and radically new approaches to developing breakthroughs.

### **"Perceived Challenge"**

John Gardner, former president of the Rockefeller Institute and Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, is now president of an organization called Common Cause. Common Cause is a citizen's group attempting to deal with some of the national problems facing our country — financing of political campaigns, tax reform, consumer protection. In an interview, he was asked why these problems had never been dealt with before, since they have been with us for a long time. He said that until a problem becomes a "perceived challenge" that it was difficult to get people concerned with doing anything about it. We are at the point where there is a growing appreciation of the way in which the properly designed environment can provide new dimensions and opportunities for meeting success. The "perceived challenge" with regard to facilities is coming.

The properly designed facility, operated with an understanding of the learning process, should do even more than provide the best learning environment. It should supply equipment, devices and systems that will challenge the trainer to innovate in developing the meeting design.

For example, at The National Conference Center, there are many such innovations: the audience response system that clients have used with groups as

small as 9-15 people; the unusual communication system that permits a trainer in his or her client office to communicate with each small meeting room and have anyone in the meeting room respond from his or her seat to the trainer; the special side table we have developed for groups of under 40 people, eliminating the conference table. Clients tell us the special table has improved interaction among participants.

### **Summary**

In summary, the characteristics of a supportive environment are as follows:

1. Concentration on the psychological influences of all the "environments" within a facility. Each contributes to the impact of attendees' attitudes, emotions and moods and consequently on the individual's desire, ability and opportunity to learn and to interact.

2. An understanding of the learning process involved in training, in management conferences, in sales meetings so that room sizes, room set ups, and facility layout can be tailored to provide a comfortable setting for each group and to maximize group interaction.

3. An appreciation of the role and work of the communicators (trainers, speakers, chairman) so that useful tools and equipment can be designed to give them maximum help in performing their jobs.

4. Development of innovative and practical equipment and devices that can challenge the trainers to try more imaginative meeting designs.

5. Selection and training of a support staff that is completely familiar and oriented to meetings so that there is not only an anticipation of meeting problems but a sympathetic response to the needs of trainers, meeting coordinators and attendees that permits problems to be handled with speed and effectiveness.

6. Concentration on the needs of the individual participant and the ways in which the individual studies, learns, interacts and relaxes so that the total system of environments supports every person and his or her requirements.

**"No 90-day Experts"**

There are no 90-day experts that can learn the complexities involved in the design of an imaginative meeting facility in the context that I have written. We continue to get a flow of visitors to our Center from companies who send their plant or facility engineers, architects and training people to talk to us. They are on a two or three week tour of other facilities so that they can go back to build their own. I admire their courage. I see them ending up perpetuating the same old approach to facility

design. It will be pretty.

Companies can be proud of its aesthetic appearance. But far more must be done to maximize the investment. A few companies are beginning to appreciate the unique specialization represented by the design and operation of such a conference center as I have described. Some have approached us to design, build and operate such a Center, adding such special requirements as they need. We are exploring these possibilities.

The editor of the *Training and Development Journal* of the American Society for Training and Development, in an article about The National Conference Center, wrote, "... The National Conference Center is probably the most carefully designed and staffed facility in existence today."

In the authoritative *Best's In-*

*urance Convention Guide* of last year, the editor described The National Conference Center as "embodying the concepts of the year 2001." As advanced as we are in our thinking, the lessons we have learned thus far will make our next Center 50 per cent different than the one we have today.

Increasing numbers of people who are planning small group meetings will develop a sensitivity and growing appreciation of the truly supportive elements in a facility, beyond the pretty facade. The "perceived challenge," appreciated more fully by trainers and conference planners, will cause those who are providing facilities and who want to serve companies and associations more fully to take a completely new look at their facilities.

When the change in orientation occurs and is translated into a facility, then meeting professionals will find that this new, supportive environment will permit them to achieve fresh and greater levels of effectiveness and productivity in their programs.

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Coleman Finkel is president of the National Conference Center, East Windsor, N.J. Before his affiliation with the center, he was associated with James O. Rice & Associates, Inc., New York, N.Y. and the American Management Associations. He is a specialist in meeting planning and is author of "How To Plan Meetings Like a Professional" (*SM/Sales Meetings* magazine, 1972). He is author of a regular column in *Sales Meetings* entitled "Meeting Clinic," in which he offers solutions to problems of general interest in any area of meeting design, conception, development, or management.



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