THE "TOTAL IMMERSION" MEETING ENVIRONMENT

BY COLEMAN FINKEL

There is a swelling chorus of dissatisfaction among both sponsors and participants with available meeting facilities. Facilities for *serious* meetings. Meetings attended, for purposes of this article, by a maximum of 100 participants — gathering to gain information, to broaden their thinking, to develop plans and make decisions, to improve their management skills. Meetings impose new social, intellectual, emotional, and physical demands on the individual and require a totally different environment to ensure maximum results.

Over the past 20 years, my work has included the planning of conferences and training programs, the design of meeting rooms, and the operation of meeting centers. I have visited both commercial and private facilities throughout the world. I have discussed meeting facilities with sales managers, top executives, trainers, architects, meeting planners, and managers who attend meetings. And I have seen a few examples of innovative

thinking, few approaches that do more than simply repeat what others have done.

The fact is that growing sophistication in training and development, group dynamics, and conference planning is not enough. It must be accompanied by greater insight into the positive effect, on learning, of a skillfully designed meeting environment.

The need is already acute and increasing steadily as more and more organizations undertake to renovate or build meeting quarters. Executives who plan meetings recognize that facility design cannot be approached superficially. They must realize, too, that their programs will never have maximum impact without an environment that will foster a sense of pride in participating, minimize fatigue and eliminate distraction, encourage increased interaction, and thereby enhance learning. (In this article, I use the words "learning," "education," and "training" synonymously.)

There are eight separate environments within which different meeting activities take place:

1. The environment of the principal meeting room.

2. The environment of the area to which participants adjourn for "breaks."

3. The environment of the areas in which participants work on team projects.

4. The environment of the sleeping rooms.

5. The environment of the areas available for socializing.

6. The environment of the rooms where meals are served.

7. The environment of the facility itself.

8. The environment of the areas provided for recreation and exercise.

All these environments — or all that are relevant to your needs — must be considered from the standpoint of decor, furnishings, equipment, layout, and the relationships of each of the eight to the others. All must be integrated into a total learning environment whose design makes the most of participants' valuable time. I am talking here about a facility with rooms for meetings, for eating and sleeping, where attendees will remain over-

night. Yet, the concepts and approaches I propose can readily be adapted to the design of a meeting area in office or plant.

Why do I attach such importance to meeting environment? To answer this question, we must consider key elements in meeting success. First, the skill with which the program identifies and defines the problems, needs, and interests of the participants and the organizations. Second, the effectiveness of the trainers, speakers, and chairpeople who provide leadership. Third, the administrative efficiency with which all logistics are handled. And, fourth, the total learning environment. Not only is this last factor vital in itself, but it adds an extra dimension of effectiveness to the first three.

There is growing recognition — which could hardly be better timed — of the specialized attention that must be given to the details of environment. The right questions are beginning to be raised. Until now, unfortunately, few right answers have been heard.

The Psychology of Meeting Attendance

The total meeting environment poses a psychological problem for executives. Typically, they have lost the discipline required for "classroom" learning. We must help them become learners again. From the time they arrive at the meeting site, we must encourage these busy, pressured, action-oriented men and women to relax; to forget about the difficult, competitive world of business; to become thinkers, listeners, probers. Here environment has a transitional role to play: arriving participants should immediately feel a difference. The mood that is engendered should be calming, reassuring, conducive to introspection, contemplation, and openness to new ideas.

Moreover, we must sustain this mood throughout the meeting program. To the degree possible, we must control each of the eight environments. This will be difficult if registrants encounter distractions — say poker tables or swinging discotheque — or if they must travel considerable distances from

conference room to motel to restaurant. Clearly, all eight environments should be contained within one integrated complex.

Even participants' sleeping rooms are important to the total meeting environment if overnight lodging is required. An individual needs this "island of repose," this opportunity for "battery recharging." Training-center planners delude themselves if they provide only a small bedroom on the dubious theory that cramped quarters will induce people to spend more time with the group.

On the other hand, it can readily be observed that each meeting group, once formed, develops into a new society. The environment should therefore be planned so that the members can be "alone together" as much as possible. They are sharing an important experience: maximum learning will result, not only from the security of being with familiar people, but also from the exchange of ideas, the clarification of points made, and the reinforcement of knowledge and skills produced by repeated exposure to other participants in the same meeting.

Contrast this approach with the confusion and malaise of coffee breaks in a corridor or other common area where several groups are congregating. I say "malaise" advisedly. People are reluctant to speak freely when they feel "strangers" may be listening. Also, when meeting registrants experience just one kind of environment over two or more days, a disquieting uneasiness can develop.

What physiological effects must designers consider in planning a total learning environment? They must, first of all, give thought to the ways in which facility design can help or hinder meeting participants in achieving learning effective levels of comfort and concentration. Executives are not, it must be remembered, accustomed to listening passively for extended periods. Because, often subconsciously, they will find excuses to let their minds wander, anything in a meeting room that might divert their attention should be eliminated.

Take windows, a principal cause

of distraction. Designers should not allow them in the main meeting room whose lighting should invariably be the same — morning, afternoon or evening. Nor, since meeting participants may become too tired to focus properly on the topic being discussed, should facility designers and planners permit such fatigue-inducers as uncomfortable seating.

Rather, it is the job of the facility specialists to encourage that major value of any meeting: easy, relaxed, comfortable "mixing" and discussion — including the informal exchange of information that occurs at breaks, over meals, during recreation. We have found, for instance, that at mealtimes people should be seated at tables not for two, four, or 10 but preferably for six to eight. Tables of this size make for a better balance of talkers, semitalkers, and quiet participants, so that meeting-related conversation is likely to develop and extend throughout the meal, the time in which additional learning can take place.

Finally, the speakers, trainers, and chairpeople who provide meeting leadership must be considered. Because the meeting's tone and direction will largely be dictated by their effectiveness, everything possible should be done, in designing the facility, to make their work easier.

Where the Problem Lies

Yes, professionals in the learning field know they must look beyond the mere construction of rooms casually provided with easels, chalkboards, and overhead projectors. Why, then, do facilities still make it difficult for a meeting to be optimally productive and realize the greatest possible return on time and money invested? Why is "total immersion" in the environment the exception rather than the rule? An immersion so complete that the arriving participants adjust — both mentally and emotionally, at once and for the meeting's duration — to the learning task and its goals?

The problem has several aspects. To begin with, architects and engineers are setting the specifications for our various learning environments. They seldom, if at all, are experienced in the special requirements of a learning center. These professionals obviously have a significant part to play in the design and construction of meeting facilities; however, their orientation is not often dictated by the fundamental goal of helping to achieve — through environment — better generation of information, improved skill development, or more effective problem solving.

In short, the learning professionals should set the parameters. Only then can the architects and the engineers design facilities that will imaginatively and efficiently fill the needs of those who use them.

The sponsoring organization must do far more than just decide what impression it wants to make on arriving participants. If the meeting facility is to be located in plant or office — and I don't mean to dismiss that as undesirable — they will probably be there for the entire eight-hour working day. If,

however, the company decides in favor of an outside facility, participants may face one or more 24-hour meeting days. And that facility must be designed to enhance the activities that will occupy those hours, whether formal or informal, and the learning they are expected to promote. For example:

• How can the layout of the facility provide easy, close access to all areas that participants will use?

• How can each of these environments be designed to maximize its particular learning value?

• What demands will meeting techniques make on the design of the facility?

Frequently, the approach taken is simplistic and superficial. Few company executives initially foresee that designing a meeting or training facility is a complex assignment, requiring a new perspective. The work is just beginning to be studied as a totally separate specialty.

Universities, which should be leading the way in developing facility innovations conducive to greater learning, have done little research in the field. In fact, it has seemed to us at The National Conference Center that any such research has been generally thin and that no other organization could match our own independent, extensive, and continuing studies. The relevant though isolated information accessible to us does offer some interesting possibilities:

• *Proxemics.* The work of Dr. Edward T. Hall at Northwestern University deals with the way in which people use space. His findings offer real potential for the layout of a meeting facility.

• *Environmental Psychology.* Dr. Harold Proshansky of New York University has considered the impact of every element of our environment on our actions and attitudes.

• *Strobe Hypnosis.* In its research on accident reduction in plants, one insurance company has studied the means by which light and the reflection of light can induce hypnosis, lowering people's concentration levels.

• *Cultural Deprivation.* Studies conducted by McGill University

have determined how anxiety and stress can be induced subconsciously by the wrong architecture, decor, and furnishings in one's environment.

• *Attention to Details.* In an excellent book, *A Home for the Heart*, eminent psychologist, Dr. Bruno Bettelheim, declares that a highly critical factor in the treatment of patients in his hospital has been the concentrated thought he gave to planning the smallest details of its total environment.

• *Colors.* A group of Munich psychologists, part of an organization called Gesellschaft fur Rationale Psychologie, studied the effect of colors in the classroom on the mental performance of students. Some, they concluded, stimulated mental activity and creativity, whereas others were depressing and lowered students' grades.

Typically, if an organization plans to build a facility, it will appoint a committee to study its needs. The members will be "instant experts" from engineering, real estate, training and develop-

ment, office management, finance, and the like. They will start work by touring other companies' facilities to investigate the "state of the art."

The companies visited, it generally turns out, have themselves followed a traditional approach in designing their facilities. Seldom have they taken an objective look at the role that environment should play in learning. So, old concepts are perpetuated as the visitors, building on this "advanced" thinking, act without incorporating it into an understanding of how a learning facility should contribute to program effectiveness. Even training and development professionals, expert in their own field, are dealing with new problems and concepts when they try to apply their knowledge to the design of facilities.

Another common mistake is planners' failure to explore the views and objectives of top management sufficiently. This can be fatal. In a recent example, one real estate department spent two

months checking facility sites before deciding tentatively on a beautiful old mansion with various other buildings on its grounds. The company's president, taken to inspect the place, left after two minutes. He didn't want land that already had been built on. His attitude may have been unreasonable, but it underlines the need to determine whatever ideas top executives may have about the proposed new facilities.

Top management may make no significant contributions to site selection or facility design. Even so, it is desirable to give the group a sense of real participation in the project and let any strong feelings surface early in the planning stages. There may be difficulties of course, if top management's chief concern is a "name" architect who will design an award winning structure. In this case, your first objective should still be to satisfy your key learning goals. Then a pleasing and even an award-winning facility can be designed that will achieve these goals.

The planning committee must investigate more thoroughly the needs of potential facility users. This is often done by questionnaire. The returns are tabulated and analyzed — and theoretically affect final plans. However, I have observed that often the questions asked do not go far enough; there are other areas in which information will be helpful. In any event, questions will be interpreted in various ways by the respondents, so that the attempted synthesis of information will lack a uniform base. To clear up misunderstandings, I find it best to review any such questionnaire and its objectives with all the people who will be developing information for use in planning a facility. Actually, in my experience, users' opinions are best gathered by interview rather than written questionnaire; but I have found, too, that users either do not know what they want or have only routine traditional opinions about what should go into a facility.

From the very start, organizations tend to concentrate on how much money they will save by operating their own meeting facility rather than what that facility will need to be more learning-effective. The principal costs of any meeting, by far, are the cost of the productive time lost while participants are away from the job and the total investment in salary and fringe benefits represented by the group. In comparison, the expense of room and board is small.

The wise committee — and this is important — will start with the number one question: How to design the meeting environment that will make the greatest learning impact on every person attending? Then it will compare the total cost of building and operating the requisite facility against the organization's current meeting expense — allowing, of course, for inflation. After which, to complete the picture, it will attempt the most difficult task of all: judging how much more effective the company's meetings might be in a new facility.

Expense aside, there is too much emphasis on incorporating the most sophisticated audio-visual systems into a facility. It is clearly advisable to keep abreast of advances in the audio-visual field. But, on my visits to company facilities, I have seen hundreds of thousands of dollars tied up in A-V equipment that is not being used and, invariably, is neither needed nor wanted by the professionals who conduct meetings there. For example, companies appear to reason that meeting rooms must have rear-screen projection. With this, the facility will automatically be considered "modern." And so, to my personal knowledge, there are facilities with rear screens that should never have been installed, and, in fact, they are *not* being used.

For the smaller meetings, 90 percent of the time, all that's necessary is chartpad, chalkboard, and overhead projector. Once again, the learning professionals should set the objectives and decide what equipment may be justified. They should have the

final word on recommendations made by audio-visual consultants.

Judgments about the learning-effectiveness of a facility are frequently based on emotional reactions to aesthetics rather than careful evaluation of details that will have a far greater impact on learning. People are affected by the tiniest detail of a physical setting; therefore, the facility planner or designer should consider such questions as these:

- How can this detail reduce fatigue levels among participants?
- In what ways can it increase interaction among them?
- Will it help to provide the best environment for individual study?
- Will it help to eliminate distractions?
- Will it make the work of trainers, discussion leaders, speakers, and meeting coordinators easier and more productive?

Aesthetics, in short, is important; but it is no more than the normal by-product of weighing the eight meeting environments separately in terms of the essential decor, furnishings and equipment, layout, and interrelationships of the total setting in which learning will take place.

Design Elements and Learning Modes

In designing our environments, we must also remember the eight to 24 hours — or more — in which our meeting participants will move, study, work, relax, and interact in the areas provided. There are four learning modes that can change attitudes, develop skills, and increase knowledge during those hours:

1. The information communicated and the discussion generated in the principal meeting room.
2. The interaction produced by team assignments.
3. The interaction that results from socializing at breaks, over meals — whenever informality is the rule.
4. Individual work and study.

I believe that learning will be enhanced by all these learning modes. I believe further that facility layout and space design can do much to ensure that the eight environments will support them pro-

ductively — the least by reducing fatigue and heightening concentration.

We at The National Conference Center have been forced to do much original design work in planning both the main meeting room and the team-project areas. Because the products available commercially did not satisfy us, we have researched and written our own detailed specifications. To illustrate:

Meeting-Room Chair. No commercial chair would answer our requirements. Though aesthetically acceptable, many seemed built to induce fatigue and discomfort. Working with a manufacturer, we came up with what meeting goers continually tell us is the most functional, comfortable meeting-room chair they have ever used.

Meeting-Room Table. Before settling on a table design, we determined the amount of space each person should have for psychological comfort, working ease, and maximum interaction not only with speaker or trainer but with other participants.

Meeting-Room Carpet. A carpet must be neither too hard nor too soft, neither too light nor too dark, single-toned rather than patterned. It should have a low burn coefficient, it should not create static electricity, and it should be easily cleaned. Again we worked with a manufacturer to develop the best pile height, type of material, and color.

Lighting. We have experimented with different colors and intensities of light, with methods of placing fixtures, with a variety of fixture covers. We now know there should be no high or low shadows on the walls, that light should be spread evenly throughout the room, that a warm light is preferable, and that glare must and can be reduced.

Walls. Mahogany or walnut paneling, however prestigious, is not suitable for meeting-room walls. It does not reflect light and will induce drowsiness. Nor is white or any dark color — much less patterned wallpaper — desirable. We have selected colors that are happy, bright — like certain
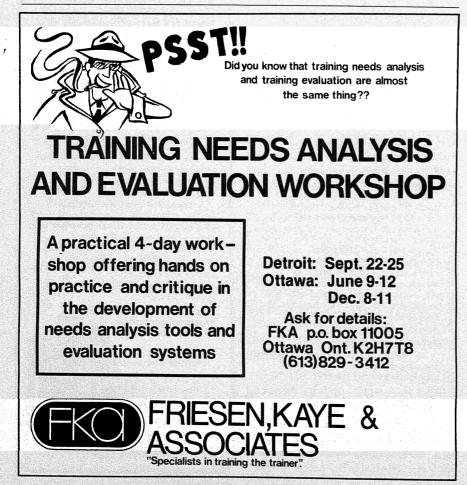
shades of orange, yellow, blue, and green.

Factors like room shape, ceiling height, air control, and the presence or absence of extraneous noise also affect both fatigue and concentration. Attention to such details keeps meeting participants alert. They listen more closely, more actively join in discussions and projects, and engage their minds and emotions more completely.

The meeting atmosphere — the *learning* atmosphere — should remove each participant from the noise, excitement, bustle, and stress of everyday work life. The various facility environments should meet the needs — intellectual, physical, emotional, and psychic — of the whole person. The principal meeting room must be given priority, but what about each of the seven other environments of the modern facility? To provide a thoroughly modern setting for meetings, we must develop not just one design concept

— that is, one appropriate to the prncipal room — but a variety of environments. This variety will be both aesthetically stimulating and mentally rewarding. The facility that offers it will make provision for all the learning and recreational activities that offer a change of pace and allow the participant to experience many dimensions of the training meeting.

Facility designers, in short, should utilize devices, equipment, and systems that will stimulate trainers, instructors, and speakers to develop and conduct more creative meetings. They should never make innovations merely because they sound "exciting," and may draw attention. However, there should be a continuous search for new ideas that can make a meeting more effective, even at the cost of special design and manufacture. For instance:

Instructor's Chair. Instructors, trainers, and speakers customarily stand. If, to avoid fatigue, they sit in the same type of chair as the

group, they lose their dominating position. If they sit on the edge of a table, they look — and are — uncomfortable. Our specially designed instructor's chair has wheels, arms, a footrest, and a back. Its height is adjustable, permitting the person using it to sit higher than the meeting participants and maintain psychological leadership.

Audience Response System. At The National Conference Center we have a portable response system that can be moved and set up in any room. Throughout the meeting, the leader can ask for opinions on a variety of questions — including "How am I doing?" The participants respond, and the leader gets instant feedback.

Chartpads and Chalkboards. We save easel space and avoid the obstacle course of easel legs by using a special magnetic stripping on the four meeting room walls. Chartpad holders and chalkboards hook onto it.

Closed-Circuit TV in Sleeping Rooms. For a change of program pace, the leader can project a film, give a talk, or assign work through our closed-circuit TV system. Participants watch and listen on a private channel.

Enclosed Box for Slide and Movie Projectors. To reduce the noise of projection equipment in our smaller meeting rooms, we designed a soundproof box on a cart wheeled in and out as needed. Although the equipment is plugged in at the back of the room, the leader can turn it on and operate it from the front.

Work Station for trainers. Trainers use a variety of papers, books, materials, and other supplies. Typically, they spread these out on every available surface but still have trouble finding what they want when they need it. We identified 15 different items for incorporation into a compact, attractive, accessible work station which we are building. After testing by trainers, the final improved model will be placed in each of our meeting rooms.

This process of study, research, and development is never-ending. But it is part of the continuing

effort a modern facility must make to upgrade its services and thereby contribute even more importantly to cost- and learning-effective meetings.

The soul of a meeting facility is the staff with its knowledge of the meeting process. This staff must be carefully trained, and its effectiveness must be supervised regularly.

Whether the facility is company-owned or independent, the people who service the meetings must understand what the learning process involves. They must know how to anticipate problems and provide immediate support for both participants and leaders. Policies and procedures must be spelled out in detail to ensure efficient, courteous handling of every meeting and its participants — both before and during the program.

Once it is clear that the staff is carrying out its share of the work with the sort of understanding and interest that eliminates logistical concerns, the meeting leaders can concentrate fully on their professional responsibilities.

A true learning environment, successfully achieved, is no mere declaration of an ideal. The statement that a meeting facility makes must be flat and strong: participants must be able to say to themselves, "We are here to learn, to think, to communicate with others in a relaxed, pressure-free environment conducive to maximum learning during every waking hour of the day." This is why no one concerned with meetings and meeting facilities should underestimate the importance to meeting success of the eight environments integrated into a logical whole.

If thoroughly qualified people are essential to the direction and change in an organization, if information is the lifeblood of any business, then it must be recognized that the meeting is a principal force through which these critical goals can be achieved.

As an extension, therefore, the critical importance and contribution growth of the properly designed meeting facility. It should be a place where participants gain greater knowledge and insight, where they can free themselves from inflexible ways of thinking. However, the meeting must make use of that environment in combination with the three other elements necessary for greatest impact — program, communicators, logistics. Only in this way can it maximize the opportunity for achieving its goals: whether they resolve conflict, improve skills, or develop a sound information base for problem solving and decision making.

The intelligently planned meeting conducted in the "total immersion meeting environment" can be a primary factor in helping management to overcome the enormous difficulties that face business today and in the tough years ahead.

Coleman Finkel is considered to be a leading authority in the United States in the design of learning environments and conference rooms. He is both an operator and an owner of hotels/conference centers.