

How do you design a working conference?

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Today, the changing and renewing of organizations is no longer done at the drawing table of a specialized organizational expert. Managers and employees work together on the development of a vision and on plans for change and implementation, and they are often advised in this process by internal and/or external consultants. Working conferences are a valuable instrument through which the parties involved, work together towards concrete results within a framework of change. In the article: *What is a working conference and how can you use it in a change process?* we describe the characteristics of a working conference and guidelines for its use as a method of intervention. In this article we discuss the issue of how to design an appealing and effective programme.

The city of Castlewood has decided to privatize its operational tasks in the field of Sanitation, Greenspace and Public Works. The organization will work as a kind of contractor's agency' and while it will stay under the municipal flag, it will operate independently in the marketplace. The new Department of City Contracting (DCC) will start formally soon. There are a number of important aspects to be considered: efficient management, short and ready lines, a formation that is in line with a structural supply of work rather than peaks, multi-employability of personnel, the shift in independence (now at about 80%) on the main client (the city) to the increase of opportunities in the semi-public sector. The managers of the new DCC are motivated but also somewhat unsure: What do they expect from us? How does one sell one's product? Is the city council just trying to get rid of us? And: being professional is fine, but it shouldn't go over the top!

The DCC director asked us to organize a two-day working conference as the start of the organization.

How do you design a working conference for the issue described above?

1. Design model for working conferences

How can we design a working conference in such a way as to achieve results that have been determined in advance? Working conferences can be regarded as a playing field on which all participants are active together. That field has both a content dimension and a dimension that indicates an orientation in time.

The content dimension has two poles: the what and the who (see figure 1).

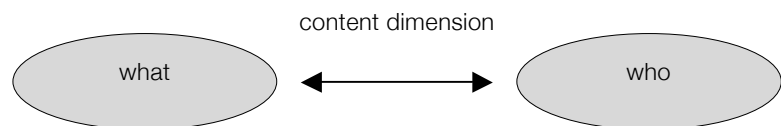


Figure 1: The content dimension

The what is the 'cool' side and refers to the business aspects of a change; that which is visible, can be described, examined and measured. For example business concepts such as revenue and loss, results, budgets, costs, developments in the marketplace, etc., that can be made visible in figures that can indicate trends.

To discuss these is a cognitive action: people analyse, list all issues, and explore alternatives. They consider the current state of things, use models and hypotheses about cause and effect, and think of possible solutions to problems.

The who is the 'warm side' and refers to the people who are involved in a change. People stand in a certain relation to issues: they can feel responsible or the opposite. Sometimes they see they themselves do not do things perfectly, sometimes they feel others let things slide; they often disagree about what exactly happened. The communication usually runs along fixed patterns that are sometimes productive and sometimes they are not. The assessment and interpretation of 'facts' differ.

Judgments of content can also be connected to the dynamics in a group: you feel more connected with some people than with others, and you may be inclined to go along with the first in his or her argumentation. The what and the who cannot be regarded as separate.

The dimension that indicates orientation in time also has two poles: future-oriented or past/present-oriented (see figure 2).

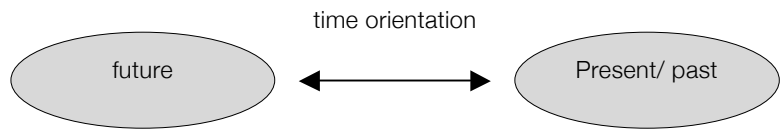


Figure 2: Time orientation

Present and past refer to looking back, reflecting, understanding, analysing and examining. Curiosity can be a driving factor: comparing one's own situation with that of others, experiencing differences, or wanting to solve puzzles. Another factor can be dissatisfaction or concern: discomfort with a situation and wanting to get to the bottom of it. Future orientation means that people do what they want to do or what they think will become necessary. They start to explore, work from their ambitions or ideals or they work on a vision. They explore possibilities and limitations and consider alternatives.

On this dimension also, the extremes cannot be regarded as separate. Images about the future are often embedded in opinions about how things have come about. Regarding something as a problem often comes from beliefs about what a more desirable situation looks like.

By connecting these two dimensions, a field is created on which the conference takes place. The four corners represent the four basic functions a conference can have (see figure 3).

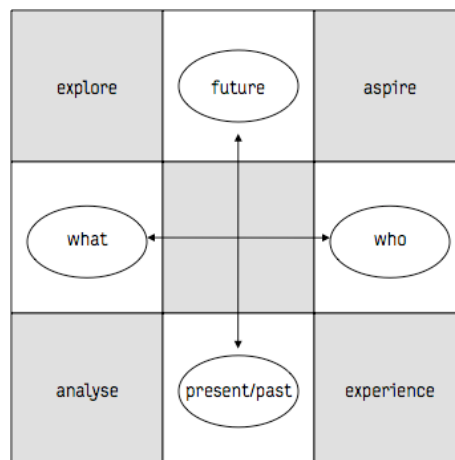


Figure 3: The functions in a working conference

The use of these functions renders a certain result.

<i>Function</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Result</i>
Explore	Looking for possibilities and alternatives, finding applications elsewhere, describing scenario's, extrapolating trends	Alternatives
Analyse	Considering the actual situation, what goes well and what does not, arranging material, evaluating	Insight
Experience	Discussing feelings, examining own relation to situations, reflecting on patterns, bringing up consequences of behaviour	Awareness
Aspire	Discussing ideals and dreams, taking inventory of what people want to stand for, what they want to go for	Aspirations

It is the combination of these functions that creates the special value of working conferences. A combination decreases the danger of one-sidedness and getting off balance.

A conference at which people discuss only their ambitions runs the risk of unrealizable dreams arising, which is also known as fantasizing.

Limiting participants to analysing only does not lead to movement, but can lead to gloominess if you are not careful, where is the future perspective?

Discussing alternatives is a good thing, but how do you arrive at a choice, and who will commit him/herself to it? An alternative without an owner is like a lost wallet no one claims.

And is experiencing things not often associated with 'navel-gazing', practised by psychologists and the like? "Are we even talking about anything real?" is what people will wonder.

Each of the functions has some value, but on their own, they also have a weakness. That is why the connection of functions is so important. This can be achieved as follows:

<i>Connect</i>	<i>Features</i>	<i>Result</i>
Analyse and Experience	Determining position: building a picture by connecting one's own role and behaviour to issues and taking responsibility for them	Picture
Explore and Aspire	Determining significance: if this is what can be done, what will be of significance to us?	Vision
Explore and Analyse	Determining choice: recognizing a situation, considering alternatives, choosing based on criteria and then plotting a route of action	Plan
Aspire and Experience	Determining intentions: what the teamwork should be like in comparison to existing practices and patterns, formulating intentions for personal behavioural change, practising	Movement

In figure 4, we have summarised the above.

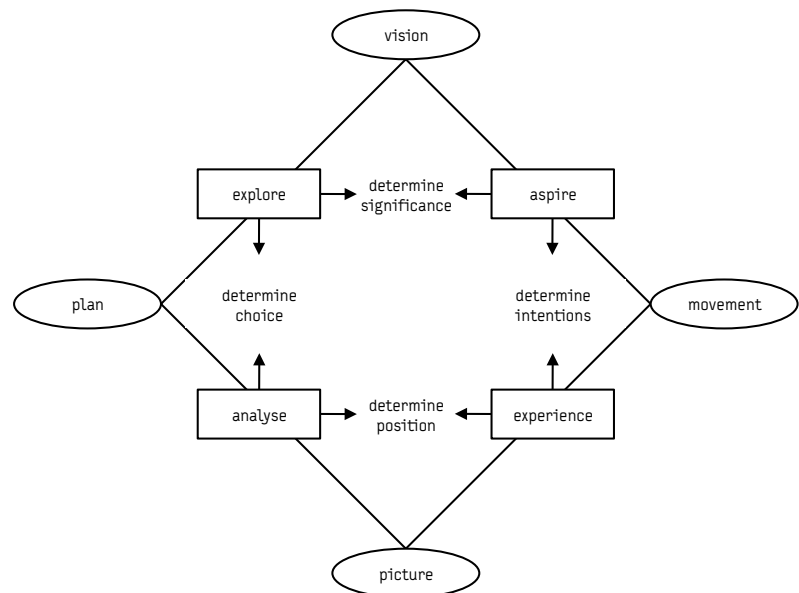


Figure 4: Functions and results of a conference

2. Preparing a working conference

'Let's do a conference' doesn't usually lead to too much. Greater results can be expected if the conference fits the organization and the change process. The conference has to be embedded in the organization. This starts with a sound preparation and intensive involvement of the client and the other colleagues, right from the start.

A sound preparation involves five steps.

Step 1. Orientation on the context and the issue

Questions that need to be discussed are:

- > What is the reason for the conference?
- > What are the intended changes in the organization?
- > What developments in the environment influence this process?
- > What issues are under discussion?
- > What results should the conference have?
- > What opportunities are there to start working with the results after the conference?

Tip: check feasibility:

- > Is a conference the appropriate instrument for this issue?
- > Purely technical issues are usually not suitable for conferences.
- > Personal conflicts that are too substantial, can lead to a great deal of misery in a group.

Step 2. An overall design

Now an overall design should be set up. It consists of:

- > The formulation of conference results in terms of the design model.
- > A decision about the participants in the conference.
- > A decision about potential temporary visitors (manager, client, etc.)
- > A good location.
- > The order of themes.

Tip: Rhythm and dynamics.

Make sure you vary the rhythm and dynamics. An active start with interaction alternated with time for reflection.

Alternate exciting topics with relaxation and/or a walk. Use the time to gain momentum or stop for contemplation.

Step 3. The scenario

Translate the overall design into a scenario.

- > A time schedule for each programme part.
- > Choice of working methods.
- > Instructions per theme and exercise.

Tip: Use stimulating methods of working and expression.

Do not only use language, but also images or collages, or have a discussion in the shape of a law suit, ask for presentations in the form of a one-act play, or a flip-over exhibit.

Offer surprising perspectives. Ask participants to neglect their role of controller for once, and to contribute from a different position (for instance the client of the company), from a different time horizon (what will this problem look like ten years from now?) or a different organizational setting (how do they handle this in a jail?).

Step 4. Invitation

For the right embedment of the results, it is important that participants prepare for what is to come. This starts with a clear invitation in which you direct the expectations: what should they expect and what shouldn't they expect?

Tip: A preparatory assignment.

A preparatory assignment to be made by individual participants or teams helps to create involvement even before the start of the conference.

Step 5. Preparation on location

The organizer is present at the location long before the participants, to get everything ready. You will be surprised at how much still needs to be done to make the participants feel welcome and have the conference run smoothly. The set-up in the rooms, instructions ready, tools operational, the organization of the catering, instructing of fellow-trainers, music, etc.

Tip: Choose the right location.

The location is preferably away from the regular meeting place. A circus tent, a theatre, or a villa in a woody area.

Make sure you have a meeting room that is at least three times as big as the one for a regular meeting with a group this size.

You can choose a set-up for the rooms that gives them a special atmosphere. Small things are important. Sitting in a circle has a different effect from sitting behind tables.

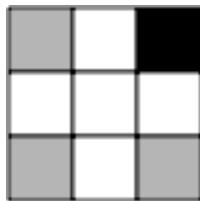
3. After the conference

After the conference, it is time to harvest. Agreements are worked out, progress is monitored, obstacles are overcome and successes are celebrated. In this phase, special attention needs to be paid to communication with those who did not attend the conference.

The better the conference is embedded - during the preparation phase - in the organization's change process, and the more participants are involved prior to the start of the conference, the more successful the embedment will turn out in practice. The same holds for the method used in the conference. After a conference that resonates with positive stories and good intentions, practice can be disappointing. However, if the participants have thoroughly experienced both the beckoning perspective and the possible downsides, the chance of the conference getting a successful follow-up in practice increases.

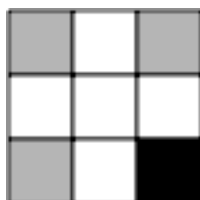
4. Back to the conference in Castlewood

We built the programme with the help of the design model.



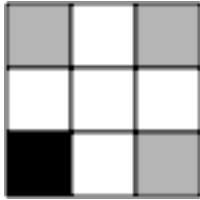
Wishes for the future

The mission and the new structure of the organization were already known. But what were the dreams of this management team? We chose an exhibit as our working method. Participants formed small teams and prepared to have a booth at the exhibit 'Services 2011' where the MT members could sell DCC. They thus pictured their ambitions in a practical way.



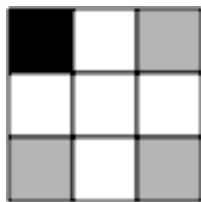
Reflection on work experience

Members of the organization and the MT had a shared concern: do 'they' want to get rid of us? We invited the responsible alderman to become a member of the jury which was to judge the various booths at the exhibit. Afterwards, we discussed the board's motives, had the MT members voice their concern, and let the people involved declare themselves in favour of regular communication on progress, necessary adjustment and support within the department.



In the light of the ambitions expressed and the organization's parameters, we examined the current package of services through an analysis of strengths and weaknesses. What can we deliver, at what cost prize, how about our personnel structure and available competences, where are the risks in our operations? This resulted in insight into: where are we now professionally speaking?

Current package of services



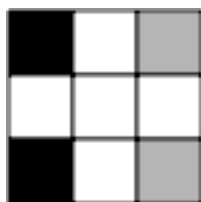
wishes for the future

What can we offer? To inspire participants, we invited three speakers, each of whom had gone through a similar process in their own city, and also in the field of public works. They openly spoke of the results, the pleasures and obstacles they had encountered. The MT members were given a good overview of the various opportunities and threats and the choices they could still make, the alternatives they had.

Many of these activities need to be prepared. For the exhibit, the MT members prepared a booth in small teams, for which they had a limited budget. The alderman and the guest speakers were briefed. As a preparation for the analysis, the facts and figures were collected and were arranged in an orderly fashion and were brought to the table during the conference.

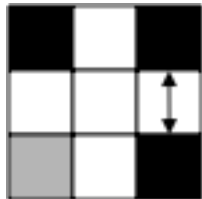
By making connections between the functional activities as described above, valuable insights and conclusions originate.

Two examples:



First steps

Based on a strengths-weaknesses analysis and the available options, the participants worked on a list of priorities and activities. What are the most important operational processes that need to work in the short term? What do we want to examine further to arrive at concrete improvements? And how do we translate this into a business plan for each unit as well as the entire department?



Movement by inspiration

The MT started working enthusiastically upon completion of the conference and inspired their own departments. By leaving room for personal concerns and issues in the talk with the alderman and guest speakers, and by providing an image of future opportunities and the connection with their own dreams and wishes, a great deal of energy and involvement arose.

After the conference, we further supported the MT members in the communication with their employees and the writing of a plan for the department.

5. Literature and internet references

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