What is a working conference and how can you use it in a change process

Freerk Wortelboer en Adrie van den Berge

Working conferences are increasingly used as a means to accelerate change processes and simultaneously bring about broad participation. However, one cannot take for granted that such meetings will automatically be successful. Why would such a meeting have greater result than the regular meetings people have within their companies anyway? In this article, we discuss the question of what exactly a working conference is and how it can add value to change processes. In a second article we will outline a method to design a programme for such a working conference.

A Human Resources department in a large hospital wants – and has been asked by the Executive Board – to reflect on its services to its customers. The department has found that their clients increasingly have questions that are not always related to personnel issues. Efficiency issues, for instance, or the problem of how to create a better design for the processes involved in running a group of operating rooms. The human resources department notices that more and more external consultants are asked to help out. "Shouldn't we be able to do this?" is what the human resources consultants would like to know. And: if so, what would we need to learn? What competences do we need? Besides, the department's staff members have another reason to contemplate their services. They feel theirs is mainly managerial work and they are given a large number of operational tasks. They wonder what the added value of this work is and if this work could not be done just as well by their clients or through the strengthening of their own back office. They wonder if they should not be doing more development-oriented work instead. Not just filling vacancies for that one department that has a high level of turnover, but rather finding out why the turnover stays so high. Does it have to do with the type of work? Do we keep hiring the wrong type of people? Or does it have to do with the way the department is managed? How could we establish conditions that create greater continuity? And, another thing the Human Resources consultants are wondering, if we want to work in a development-oriented manner, what would we need in the way of knowledge and skills?

How could we tackle this question with a working conference?

1. What is a working conference?

There are various ideas of what a working conference consists of, ranging from a brief meeting at which a consultant presents his findings to the members of the management team, who, in turn, can ask a few questions, to a large-scale conference with hundreds of participants from various organizations who all participate intensively in the discussions about future developments in their field.

In our view, working conferences are meetings with groups of participants who work towards a demarcated result. That result adds to a change of the current situation towards a desired future. We sometimes speak of a 'cultural island' in the development process an organization goes through.

1.1 Working conferences as a means to break the routine

The conference differs from meetings such as the monthly department meeting, the weekly management team meeting, or a team of clients the members of which meet on a regular basis. A great deal of that type of consultation is aimed at current issues such as reacting to disruptions, monitoring operations and such. That is why many such meetings appear to be a routine. This also becomes clear from the daily events which often turn into the repetition of a fixed pattern:
> A permanent group of participants with each of them speaking from his own perspective;
> Often the same agenda of topics;
> An identical way of working and people always riding their hobby horses;
> The same room in which people have their own seat;
> Often running late.

The function of such consultation is aimed at routine, on keeping the going concern running, on ensuring stability and rest. This way of working is usually less appropriate for change issues.

Change issues require a different type of meeting, a context that allows for liveliness and unrest, in which people let go of fixed routines, and with space for wild ideas, where surprising insights are offered, and people let their emotions do the talking. They do not require a meeting but rather a working conference.

1.2 A working conference as context

Behaviour is partly determined by context. A context exists because patterns develop in time, or have developed. From a certain context, situations are regarded as a problem. Often

people present solutions from the same context: this limits the room for solutions. Taking the client's perspective can make the bottlenecks and necessary priorities look very different.

Working conferences offer an opportunity to play with the context. A context can be created that is different at that particular moment, in that particular place. A context which, as mentioned, facilitates liveliness, invites the proposing of new perspectives, stimulates creativity, and broadens the time horizon, etc.

2. What can you do with working conferences in a change process?

In this paragraph, we zoom in on the way in which working conferences can contribute to change processes, based on four questions:
1. How do you steer for results?
2. Whom do you bring?
3. How do you integrate working conferences into the change process?
4. What are large group interventions?

2.1 How do you steer for results?

In a working conference, you aim to create an acceleration in (what may be a stuck) change process; an acceleration which is not as easily established in regular meetings held within the organization. That is why it is important to determine desired results for that conference. Results that help the actual implementation of change after the conference. This is in contrast to what happens with many conferences: they get stuck in good intentions: "We toasted each other, went our separate ways, and everything remained the same!"

During the conference, work towards different types of results, to be divided into two dimensions. The first dimension is a content dimension: from *what* to *who.*
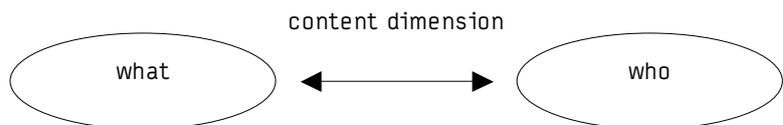
content dimension

what ⬅➡ who

Figure 1: The content dimension

What refers to the business aspects, such as figures, budgets, revenue and loss, market developments. Discussions about these issues result in a rational analysis and a plan of approach. *Who*

refers to the people involved in the changes. How willing are they to change, what are the dreams and ambitions they hold, etc. In these discussions, you try to work on your commitment and shared inspiration.

The second dimension is the time dimension: future-oriented or present/past-oriented?

time orientation

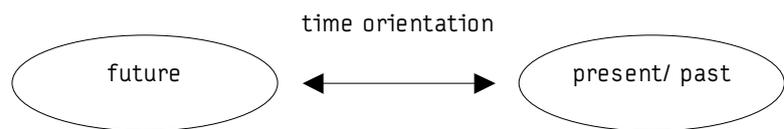future   ←——————→   present/ past

Figure 2: Time orientation

Work together with the participants to get a clear picture of the starting situation, as well as insight into the present and the past. Where are we now, what are the facts that we base our plans on, what about the qualities of our personnel? These dialogues result in a shared picture of the starting position of the change process. Work on the images of the future also: what are the trends and developments; in what area do we want to excel, etc. This will lead to a vision.

It is the combination of results that secures successful conferences: talking about the future without having a clear picture of the present often only leads to dreams, a strictly professional rational analysis of problems and solutions usually turns into a paper document that has no support and does not lead to changes being implemented, etc. In the article *How do you design a working conference?* we elaborate on this train of thought and arrive at a concrete method for design and programming.

2.2 Whom do you bring?

Another important factor in result-oriented working is the group of participants. All too often, a group of managers, with or without the help of a consultant and policymakers, will determine the outline and make plans. It then often proves difficult to get everybody to become committed and actually implement changes. That is why the group of participants needs to be composed very carefully. Who should be part of this group that is to create an inspirational and creative vision? And also, who should be included to realize support for the process?

It is worth the effort to look outside the known group of managers for opinion leaders, creative minds, people who are known for their

critical attitude. And sometimes it is worth it to involve everybody in a so-called *large-group intervention* (see below).

2.3 How do you integrate working conferences into the change process?

In the introduction, we called the working conference a 'cultural island', a meeting that is 'different from other meetings', through which we want to accelerate the change process. That image creates space for the use of conferences at various points in the process.

A much-used application can be found in the shape of retreats for management teams and departments. People retreat to 'the heath' to take stock; where are we now and what do we want to work on in the years to come? This can give impetus to the development route of this team/this department.

Conferences work well when planned at the start of a change process to develop a vision and make plans. This usually involves sessions that last several days in which the input from participants from outside the organization is called for (e.g. clients, experts).

A special version of this is the *start-up* conference in which a project team retreats to work - often together with the commissioning party - towards quickly setting up a large project and make a flying start.

Follow-up conferences that monitor progress and ultimately evaluate and celebrate the results of the process are the logical next step. These do not necessarily have to include extensive retreat sessions. A cycle of mini conferences or lunch meetings to discuss a series of themes from the change process can also be very useful.

To successfully bridge the gap between conferences and practice (embedment) you have to pay a great deal of attention to sound preparation and completion. A conference is preferably prepared together *with* your client, rather than *for* your client. A preparatory group with key players (both from the top and the floor) design the programme and collect relevant information. You ask the participants to prepare by way of concrete assignments and you prepare the organization for the conference by using common media such as the intranet. During the conference, you work towards agreements, you get people to personally commit themselves to desired results and you compose workgroups that work out aspects. It is often helpful to set a date for a follow-up conference for three months later for example, at which meeting progress information will be shared.

2.4 What is a large group intervention?

The past years have shown an increasing number of organizations using *large group interventions* as a method to reach and consult large groups in a limited amount of time. We also refer to this as *the whole system in the room* with the underlying idea being that having everyone there enables you to get major results in a very short time. The nature of these conferences can differ greatly, ranging from large-scale motivation events to an *Open Space* approach.

Large group interventions can be divided into three types, depending on the space a conference offers the participants to exert influence and to be influenced.

Explaining proposals	Improving proposals	Developing proposals

Space for individual contribution and collaborative action

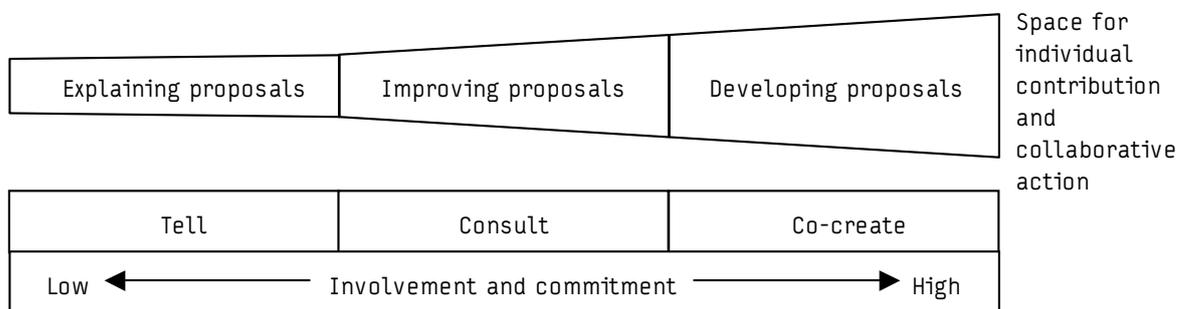| Tell	Consult	Co-create

Low ← Involvement and commitment → High

Figure 3: Types of large group interventions (source: Martin Leith)

In the conference on the left, groups of people gather to listen to the story, the inspirational message from the leader. This may simply involve a soapbox in the corporate restaurant, yet these days organizations have been known to rent an entire football stadium for their enthusing motivation events, often involving a lot of singing, dancing and other entertainment. Such meetings no doubt create a team spirit in one's own organization, but one can wonder about the level of involvement and commitment to the message itself. It does not necessarily get people to move.

In consulting conferences, participants are offered a framework or vision in which they can think along and talk about feasibility, obstacles, and their own contribution and implementation steps. An example of this is the *Real Time Strategic Change* approach. These conferences comprise a presentation of ideas, plans and intentions by the management. As the conference evolves, management will adjust these as a result of listening to the reactions of the participants. For the rest, the approach is strongly focused on the implementation. The conference is strictly programmed.

On the right hand side, there are the open conference types. Together, the participants co-create proposals and solutions for the issues at hand. Sometimes, organizers offer a programme structure that has phases running from analysis to action, as in the *Search* approach. As part of this structure, the participants have a self-steering responsibility to deliver results. The *Open Space* approach lets go of that too. The participants themselves design the programme during the conference and organize groups for which they bring up topics. There are only a few rules of conduct that are mainly intended to have you do what you find important.

Such open conference forms are often inspirational meetings and they generate great involvement on the part of the participants in the issues at hand. After all, the participants usually determine the themes and they exert maximum influence on the output. On the other hand, these conferences are sometimes marked by a lack of direction. It is difficult to distil concrete guidelines and action plans from such conferences.

In our book *Werkconferenties. Ontmoetingsplaatsen voor verandering.* (Working Conferences. Meeting places for change) we present an extensive overview of the various conference approaches and the reader is invited to read twenty stories about conferences that are very different from each other: from psychological meetings to business process stimulations, from story telling conferences to virtual conferences.

3. Back to the hospital

How did things develop at the hospital's human resources department the staff of which produced a working conference together with us, their consultants?

As the first step in the development process of the department, we help them with setting up a conference at which we will work on the areas discussed above:
> A rational analysis of the current package of services (quantity, quality) and what competences staff members have;
> An exploration for the future of potential competences in addition to the existing ones (among others by inviting clients and by investigating experiences in other organizations);
> What personal meaning does the regular work have for the staff members?;
> What ambitions and directions for development do they see for themselves?

The connection of insights in particular offers valuable results. The combination of analysis and exploration, for instance.

Clients would like an extension of their package of services, but they also appear to be worried that this will take away from the work that they value so much (the high-quality HR work). The participants link this to conclusions about the pace of the development they are about to start to ensure current quality.

The reflection on the importance of the regular work and the making explicit of ambitions makes clear that not everyone is enthusiastic about the change of course. This leads to the idea that the internal organization of the Human Resources department should be further differentiated: whereas all the staff members do the same work now, this could be different in the future.

4. Literature and internet addresses

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