BECAUSE WE'VE ALWAYS DONE IT THAT WAY: EXPLORING VARIATIONS IN CONFERENCE DESIGN AND STRUCTURE

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The development of this presentation began when the authors each separately sent in very similar proposals for consideration for the 2003 AKRI Scientific Meeting. Both proposals were accepted and grouped by the Program Committee in one session. When we were notified of acceptance and of the grouping, we were in contact with each other and decided to combine our two proposals into one. While discussing the topic and how we wanted to proceed, we decided to contact people who had directed AKRI conferences to ask them to let us know what variations and innovations they had used when designing and directing group relations conferences. Approximately 1 month before the meeting, we emailed 50 individuals whom we had identified as conference directors. We received 16 rich and varied responses. Most included specific information which we added to our growing list. Many expressed interest in the topic, encouragement for the project, and gratitude for our work. Responses came from very senior members of AKRI who are no longer actively involved in directing as well as from newer, and still active, directors. Not surprisingly, some responders emphasized the importance of deep experience of our traditional methodology as prerequisite for any innovation or variation. Others suggested that, even in the early days of group relations work, experimentation with design and structure has been ongoing and advised skepticism about the idea of a specific proper conference design. During the presentation itself, there was lively and enthusiastic discussion which generated additional variations and innovations and which left many wishing for ways to learn more about experiences with particular modifications in structure and design. As presenters, we are very grateful for the collaboration of everyone who sent responses, participated in the presentation, and asked for more.

Our intention for this compilation of information is to briefly describe variations and innovations in aspects of the design and structure of group relations conferences. This information has come from responses to our request to AKRI members who have directed conferences, from our reading, from our own experience and knowledge, and from participants' discussion during our presentation at the September 2003 AKRI Scientific Meeting in Boston. Where we already know of specific individuals who have incorporated a particular variation, we have included their names in parenthesis. We hope to expand this list as we learn more from those who are designing and directing conferences. We consider this enterprise a "work in progress" that we hope will be of use.

Pre-conference

- chat room for administrative team and director

- pre-conference work with staff

Conference Opening

- expanded "joining" discussion

- power point presentation (Mary McRae)

- no prepared remarks by director

- less time on opening and more time for joining

- pre-opening orientation, preparation, longer Q&A

- consciousness altering mode: toning, drumming, effigies – large objects that can be used as visual interpretations or statements (Arthur Coleman)

Small Group

- members select their SGs after instruction by staff instead of being assigned by the director (Ken Eisold, Bob Baxter, Nancy Wilson, Bernard Gertler, Jan Lower, René Molenkamp)

- task shift to 'there and then'

- single consultants

- pairs (junior/senior)

- chair arrangement – anything other than a circle?

- chairs not arranged by staff – stacked and members can arrange (French conferences)

Large Group

- chair arrangement - anything other than concentric circles, a spiral, an infinity shape?

- no large group

- chairs arranged in shape of Star of David, yin-yang, dollar sign

- random distribution of chairs

Intergroup & Institutional Event

- use of an IG format for part of the event with consultants deployed to some available rooms (Bob Baxter, Charla Hayden, Nancy Wilson)

- bridger dual task exercise - writing a case study to promote creating groups and working across boundaries on a common task (Linda Powell Pruitt)

- doing only intergroup in weekend conference and providing opportunity for small study groups that were formed by members to then explore intergroup relations, rather than form new groups (Mary McRae)

- when arranging the public staff work room, not setting out specific chairs facing the staff for members to sit in when coming to talk to the director and/or staff (Bob Baxter)

- dividing the IE into longer blocks of time with staff break times announced (Ernest Frugé)

- separating conference management and consulting components of the IE and locating them in different places (Terry Hugg, Bob Baxter)

- including one or more consultants to the staff-member boundary (Terry Hugg, Ed Shapiro)

- reserve one or more seats with staff in the public work space for members for one or more sessions (Faith Gabelnick, Bernard Gertler)

- open IE without plans

- arrange seats for each IE group labeled in different areas of the room for IE plenary (Bob Baxter)

- in IE plenary, staff arrange chairs for staff but leave other chairs stacked randomly for members to arrange (French conferences, Faith Gabelnick)

- staff do not explain/use terminology of "delegate" and "plenipotentiary" but do discuss issue of levels of representation in IE opening; also boundary manager addresses level of authorization/representation with members who come to the boundary (Bob Baxter, Terri Monroe, some NYC conferences)

- regular staff work room served as staff room for IE; staff members continued to sit in their regular configuration, but made room for "ambassadors" (or plenipotentiaries) to sit at the same table; surrounding chairs available for members who were observers (Terri Monroe)

RAG Group

- assign members based on similarity of back-home roles (traditional), have members select their own RAG groups within given parameters (Faith Gabelnick), assign based on experience in group relations work (Bob Baxter)

- how many to include, when to schedule then, when to emphasize role analysis, review, and/or back-home application

- ask the other members of the group to propose a metaphor suggesting their experience of the member presenting his or her experience (Jan Lower, René Molenkamp)

Conference Discussion

- configuration of chairs

- two sets of three rows of chairs facing each other, staff sit anywhere, director in front row

- do staff sit together facing members (traditional) or scattered among the members (Bob Baxter, Ernest Frugé, Nancy Wilson)

Inclusion of Didactic, Orientation, or Follow-up Component

- offering a pre-conference orientation

- including one or more lectures on various concepts (Ernest Frugé, Sam Solway, Nancy Wilson)

- offering a post-conference follow-up event for members (Boston Center)

- post-conference review chat room

Theme Conferences and Special Focus Conferences

- explicitly stated themes such as diversity, gender, change, succession, and others

- movies to emphasize theme

- weekend conference with just IE and Application

- conference with LG, RAG, and IE only

- seminars (two - one hour each)

- conference for two consecutive weekends - 1st NTL and 2nd Tavistock

- special focus conferences such as spirituality (René Molenkamp), health care (Charla Hayden), substance abuse (Jeffrey Roth), race, culture, research based (Mary McRae), or specially-designed "in-house" conferences for a specific membership or to target a particular market (Ernest Frugé) which would entail:
    - modifying/designing/adding events to be consistent with focus
    - staff roles, staff behavior in role, and staff selection to be consistent with focus
    - research team who sat in separate place in conference opening, head of team that met with admin team, videotaping of SSG and LSG, collect survey data (Mary McRae)

Conferences with Training Component

- pairing of consultants-in-training with experienced consultants (many directors have done this)

- including a separate group experience within a conference for trainees (Bob Baxter)

- explicitly incorporating attention to learning needs of staff-in-training by authorizing time and/or staff roles

- range of actual consultation work, independently or as part of a pair or team, that trainees do with conference members

- training group with evaluation of competency to consult within national conference al la Leicester (Ed Shapiro)

Staff Selection and Deployment Variations

- have an associate director or not and for what reason - mentoring a new director, gaining experience to work in the role in the future (many directors; traditionally done for some conferences such as national, Holyoke)

- tradition of including staff from a different center (many directors), from a foreign country (Faith Gabelnick), a certain number of first-time consultants (now as an alternative to including consultants-in-training, an expectation of directors of AKRI conferences)

- team leaders selected by teams (Bob Baxter) or by the director

- diversity, range of experience, consistency with theme/focus, sentience factors

- training - always invite a "new consultant" who had not done previous conference work (Nancy Adams)

- staff deployment without assignments

Conference Membership

- extremely diverse populations, with half being publicly funded members who are Latino, Native Americans, African Americans and Caucasians working in Juvenile Protection homes and the other half being less diverse professionals who are more familiar with group relations conferences stimulated question of what is legitimate material for discussion at a conference (Vivian Gold)

- Conferences connected with graduate courses or in universities where 1/3 or ½ of the membership are students who are required to write a paper about their experience in the conference (Mary McRae)

- "in-house" conference or significant portion of membership from a co-sponsoring organization

- re last 2 items as well as other situations where people "have to attend" the conference – any design, structural, or other variations been used to address this

Additional Variations

- incorporating a social dreaming component into a group relations conference (Ed Klein)

- including a praxis event

- expanded application component in national conference (Charla Hayden, Bob Baxter)

- conference funding, ½ public & ½ private (Vivian Gold).

- director opening staff meeting with a prayer that he composed (Jeffrey Roth)

- individual consultations with staff rather that RAG

- staff fishbowl in plenary

- use of foreign language interpreters (Arthur Coleman) or sign language

- use of A/B group, like at Leicester

- observer/researcher development role

- program evaluator role

- conferences which omit a traditional component such as SG (Ed Shapiro) or IE (Sam Solway)

- not having administrators but dividing up administrative tasks both pre-conference and during the conference among consulting staff and the director (Nancy Wilson); this was the design for the January 2003 Texas Center conference which was cancelled because of low enrollment – the pre-conference planning and work went well, and there is interest in trying this again

- introduced role of "observer" to allow people without conference experience, but for whom participation in the role of member was not appropriate (for example, because many of their students were in the membership or they held a senior position of authority in the sponsoring institution); these individuals "observed" the large group (they were seated outside the spiral) and met as a separate small group with a consultant during many of the small group sessions, but also observed and participated at appropriate points in staff meetings (Terri Monroe)

- inclusion of "silent event" originally used in spirituality conference with task for members and staff to silently reconnect with their spiritual tradition; plan to use similar event in fruture conferences for staff and members to reflect on conference as a whole and its parts (René Molenkamp)