



Engage All the Knowledge in the Room

An alternative way to run a conference that inspires participants and conference creators alike

By Maureen K. McCarthy

I flipped by an episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* the other night. In the opening, a group of officers are returning to the ship after spending a week at a space conference. They were complaining that Dr. Florck (not his real name) bored them to tears with his monotonous lecture on the theory of transpectral anomalies. And I thought, "This show is supposed to take place, what, 3000 years from now? Life will not be worth living if we're still holding conferences in the same old style that far into the future!"

There is an assumption about meetings and gatherings that's so old it's almost genetic. Conferences ask people to come as passive information gatherers. We're drawn by big name speakers and then sit and wait for information to flow downwards. Yet when you ask people where they learned and contributed the most, they'll inevitably say it was dinner with Tom or a passionate discussion over drinks with Katie and Jack. We need to reevaluate how we create large group events to take advantage of the way we're beginning to see, create and connect the world today. Our old style hierarchical models just aren't as effective anymore, and current conferences are still based on them. When we sit in classroom or theater-style seating, the premise says the person at the front of the room has the most knowledge and power, he's the leader. And once we're there, we might find we're stuck listening to the boring lecture of Dr. So and So...no escape.

Take a look at our definitions of leadership over time. Two thousand years before Christ, leadership was characterized by physical domination. "If I conquer you, you follow me." Then we moved into the last 2000 years up till today, which has largely been leadership through intellectual domination. "I have the information and I'll let you know when it's time for you to know." It's what our corporations, religious institutions and governments are based on. The hierarchical business models all stem from this thought process and hence our conferences.

But, like it or not, we're moving into a new model of leadership and interaction. It is one based on what I call a Wisdom Web. We're currently living in an age of information overload. If I want to continue to be a hierarchical leader, I'm fooling myself to believe I can contain and control all the information and decision-making that is required to run a business today. I need to know when to lead and when to step back and encourage others to lead. And the only way for me to do this is to better know myself and where my strengths and passions lie, and then to ask the pertinent questions to better know and understand others. My knowledge is no longer contained in my head, but in the web of people I connect with as well. That's true power.

It's the difference between giving a classroom of 10-year-olds three weeks to do a paper on Martin Luther King in 1975 versus today. In 1975 they went to the library, combed through the encyclopedias, Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature and the card file and used the last few days to write the paper. Today a kid goes home the first night, logs onto the internet and suddenly has 2,700,000 entries on Martin Luther King. She now has three weeks to sift through the information, which is a different skill altogether than the gathering of information we grew up with. Classroom style learning is hierarchical and says the teacher knows the most. Imagine if the teacher of today discounted the email that a student received from Martin

Luther King's great grandson because it was a piece of information she didn't possess? Business is no different. Leaving someone out of the mix because they don't sit high enough on the hierarchical org chart will only hurt you and the organization. There's way too much information out there to sift through all of it yourself.

Four areas to consider to better harness the Wisdom Web in large group settings.

1. INVITE Start with the invitation. Rather than invite and entice by publicizing the names of "important" speakers or workshop facilitators, we need to show every person the entire participant list. Similar to the way works, share the invite list electronically so people can know who's coming. Like a high school reunion, the catalyst to come is often someone you want to see. People can be asked to answer questions in the RSVP about issues that are top of mind, areas of discussion that would be beneficial, and stories to tell in relation to the purpose of the gathering. That way if I'm trying to decide whether or not to come, the entire knowledge base available can be considered. I may see that Mary, whom I've never met before, is passionate about or frustrated by the same thing and it's important for me to meet her. Or maybe Daniel is someone I know and trust and if I see that he's coming I might be more apt to join in.

The traditional "big name" speakers become "one of the guys" in the invite list. Promote everyone as the expert, because we are. That's certainly been the power of the internet. Let's now use that power to create face-to-face conversations that throw status out the window and create a level playing field according to knowledge and passions. There is a wealth of knowledge within all of us and we miss out when we believe only a chosen few have something significant to say. Now I might be enticed to attend because an industry thought leader or favorite author will be there, but it's not the sole reason. It also helps me to come prepared to give rather than just receive.

2. INVOLVE Storytelling v. Keynote Speaking.

A lecture or keynote speech is interesting when someone is sharing knowledge you don't already possess or your mind is opened to something new. Rather than an individual or committee choosing speakers for the gathering, create a Storytelling Arena. Designate a particular area of the gathering for people to sit in theater style seating. It becomes the stage that anyone can take by signing up to an allotted time. People come and go as their interest is piqued, so the audience ebbs and flows, but it offers an opportunity for anyone to share in a one-way form of communication. We need storytellers, researchers, cutting edge thinkers to inspire our conversations. Set aside time to hear the latest research or innovative idea, but use it as a way to spark conversation and action among the rest of the participants. The room may be overflowing when the industry leader speaks, certain people do draw a crowd, but everyone has the opportunity to be the "keynote speaker" if they choose. Tell us about what you're currently working on; what works for you; your latest book, workshop, or paper; sing a song, share a poem, tell a tale . . . whatever will get the juices flowing. Then we can weave it back into the rest of the gathering and use it as a conversation starter for even more momentum.

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3. COMMUNICATE Creating multiple, organic discussions. Have you ever heard an author or speaker talking about something you're really interested in? Chances are there's a lot of other people in the audience who share the same passion. Yet we walk out of the speech without sharing what's going on in our heads or connecting with one or many people present to build on the initial ideas. The friend who came with you might hear how inspired you are, but it's not the same as 10, 25 or 500 of those people in the room beginning a passionate discussion while it's top of mind. When these conversations start, the dividing line between who's leading and who's following is quite blurred, and the speaker can take part to whatever level he or she is interested as well. The speaker/expert becomes the catalyst for the rest to do the dance of leader and follower.

Open Space and The World Café are two examples of large group conversation approaches that address this. **Open Space** begins with an invitation drawing people to talk about an overarching topic; like what is the future of our industry or innovation in technology. In other words, whatever you want the conference theme to be. After that, no agenda is set till the people arrive and create it themselves. Five to a thousand people are seated in concentric circles because no one is at the head or foot of this gathering. Participants are asked to take flipchart paper and marker to post discussion topics regarding their thoughts, ideas, conversations, solutions, frustrations etc. they have related to the theme of the invitation. In a matter of 20 minutes, an entire 5-day conference agenda is on the wall and has become the Marketplace of Ideas. Meeting place and time are arranged via Post-it Note on the flipchart page, so anyone can join the discussion at any time. When you post a topic you don't have to be an expert or give a speech, you just open the conversation and make sure notes are taken. Notes from all conversations are shared with all participants at the end of each day via photocopying or webpage. The power of Open Space comes from the Law of Two Feet. It states that if you're not learning and/or contributing in a conversation, use your two feet and go elsewhere. Sit in on another conversation, have coffee with Sue or make a phone call. Never stay where you don't want to be because it drains the energy of people wanting to be present. Staying unwillingly is actually rude, versus getting up and leaving. Open Space is passion bounded by responsibility. You're responsible for your own experience, so if something you want to talk about never gets talked about, you only have yourself to blame.

The World Café is similar to Open Space, but is a little more structured. People are invited to the large group conversation based on a theme or invitation. This time the room is set up like a café. Tables seating no more than 4 or 5 are covered with tablecloths and flowers. Music is playing, people come in, grab a drink or a snack, sit down wherever they like and conversation naturally begins. There's a familiarity about the café setting that makes facilitation virtually unnecessary. You begin by asking an overarching question related to the invitation, allow people talk for 45 minutes or an hour and then ask them to switch tables. One person remains at each table as the host, and as new people sit down, they take a few minutes to relay what each of the other tables touched on. Now you ask a deeper level question and let people chat again and so on and so on, depending on the amount of time you have. There are also large sheets of paper and markers on the tables for people to draw and write colorful notes as they go along. I often place a stack of 5x7 colorful index cards on each table and ask people to write large and capture one thought per card

as the conversation is taking place. These cards are then tacked to a large white poster paper mural on the wall so everyone can see the threads of the conversations. Sometimes we group the cards into like topics, photograph them, and place them on a web page for people to share and further the conversations after the gathering.

4. CONNECT Electronically connecting follow-up and on-going conversation. Have you noticed that the energy of a conference dies down when we get home? But when you encourage people to take responsibility for their learning and contribution, they inevitably take responsibility for their follow-up and action. When you use Open Space Technology or World Café there is an element of conversation capturing that rarely goes on at traditional conferences. The conversation topics, bullet-pointed notes and list of participants are shared online or via email. This gives us an open line for further communication and a way to take part in something we missed, even at a later date. It's also important to share the contact information of everyone who attended. We often exchange business cards with a few people at a conference, but what about the people we didn't get a chance to connect with, or the contact info we misplace? Gone are the days when people hide behind a secretary as a sign of power. The Wisdom Web insists that we are accessible and open to sharing. As an example, I like the way Fast Company Magazine has the contact information of the writer and the subject matter and the end of every article. It takes the reading experience to a new level because you can connect for further conversation.

We can keep the momentum of large group gatherings going after we've boarded the plane when we invite, involve, communicate and connect without the ties of hierarchical structure. I'm ready to reinvent the conference, so much so that it's not even called a conference anymore. The term conference, which comes from the root "to confer," means to bestow information, as in a parent teacher conference. I believe that if we start gathering instead of conferring, maybe, just maybe, we can rewrite the future. And the next generation of Star Trek won't have to be subjected to the ho-hum of the conference.

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