

## DUTIES OF A CONFERENCE LEADER

BY

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The function of the conference leader is to serve as a guide to the discussion, to keep it moving, and moving in the right direction. He helps define the problem at the start of the conference, keeps the discussion pertinent to the subject, summarizes the discussion at key points, and at the conclusion of the conference, he assists the group in developing a plan of action to implement the decisions reached.

Skill and tact are required of the conference leader to lead the discussion without dominating it. All participants at a conference enjoy equal status for the purpose of discussions, and they must be made to feel uninhibited. Rather than serving as an authority on the subject who seeks acceptance of his own ideas, the leader stimulates the thinking and discussion of the participants. Instead of making positive statements, he asks pertinent questions designed to draw out ideas and opinions. He creates an atmosphere that is conducive to free expression, and keeps his own ideas and opinions in the background.

There are 8 major duties of a conference leader:

- I. Identifies the situation that requires a conference.- The manager is confronted with a problem in which he feels several opinions are needed to arrive at a decision. Thus, the leaders role is to prepare for the conference through planning.
- II. Plan the conference
  - 1) Outlines the plan of the meeting - This includes the place, time, agenda, scope and personnel.
  - 2) Prepare himself - The leader should know the individuals who will participate in the discussion. He should familiarize himself with the subject and the objectives which may be achieved, and then outline the topics to be discussed, with a time allotment for each.

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- 3) Prepare the members for effective participation - A manager must decide whether to present an outline or agenda and any other materials he feels appropriate at the beginning of the meeting. He may also direct certain members to prepare data he feels vital to the problem.
- 4) Provide for a comfortable and quiet meeting place - The meeting room should be quiet, comfortable, large enough to provide space for all participants without crowding, and be adequately lighted and ventilated. If possible, provide a round conference table at which each participant can see the faces of others, and speak directly to them.
- 5) Organize the group for effective work - This should be used when dealing with a complex or a technical problem. Every conference should have a secretary who knows how to record the more important contributions and results. The secretary can also see that the materials are on hand and properly distributed according to the instructions from the leader. Preparation of reference material can be referred to small committees or even to individuals in order to save time.

III. Start the Conference - To set the stage for a lively discussion, "warm up" the group to put participants at ease and in the right frame of mind to participate actively in the conference. Several factors will contribute to this objective, but one of the most important is to start on time.

Next the leader should clarify the objective of the conference. Write it on the blackboard, if possible so that it remains in view throughout the meeting. Interpret the objective to the participants in terms of their self interest. Make them realize how important the proper solution is to them as individuals. Use the "we" approach. Make it clear that the conference is a group participation effort.

Upon completion of defining the problem, the leader should explain his function. That he is a guide and stimulator, not a judge or dictator. This is particularly important at a first meeting, or when new members are present for the first time.

Explain to the participants their role. Establish the authority and responsibility limits of participants. They should know whether they are to reach a group decision or report individual experiences and opinions, or develop new ideas.

IV. Stimulate free expression (discussion) - Encourage the exchange of ideas, opinions, and experiences. Make it clear that you are confident that through free expression the group will come up with a satisfactory solution to the problem under discussion. Express the hope that everyone will participate, that each will respect the other's opinion, and that no one individual will attempt to dominate the conference.

There are two basic methods the leader may want to use in order to get everyone to take part:

- 1) General questions addressed to the group as a whole, in the expectation that the best informed person will respond with his experience and thinking. But, often the best informed is hesitant, or doesn't realize it is his responsibility to speak and the leader must use the second method.
- 2) You address a specific question to an individual.

V. Guide the Discussion - Do not try to do the thinking for the group, but help to keep it moving ahead in an organized manner. Help participants see where they have been, where they are now, and where they are going in relation to the problem. To do this an occasional up-to-the-minute summary of the discussion is helpful. Such a summary serves to show the progress in relation to the stated objective.

The leader must also keep the limitations of time in mind by doing his best to minimize unimportant and trivial discussions, and haggling over minor points. It is important that the group have the feeling that it is moving ahead and getting somewhere.

During the discussion, the leader must be aware of certain milestones in a conference.

- 1) The point at which the main boundaries of the problem have been defined and agreed with all concerned.
- 2) The point at which a definite commitment is made on the main analytical techniques which are to be used.
- 3) The point at which no significant further collection of descriptive data takes place.
- 4) The point at which no further significant thinking takes place.
- 5) The point at which the final solution has to be presented.

VI. Discipline and avoidance of intra-group conflict - The leader faces more than the normal problems of a conference. Certain persons may become problem members. Then too, certain topics arouse emotions which tend to get in the way of the objective thinking. These might be called "ticklish topics".

There are three principle ways in which a leader prepares himself to meet possible difficulties and to exercise appropriate control:

- 1) He must know the kinds of trends or actions which delay, handicap, or wreck a conference, and be able to sense their approach before they materialize.

- 2) He anticipates the kinds of problems members and "ticklish topics" he is likely to meet in the conference and prepares himself for them.
- 3) He develops skillful and tactful handling of these situations through practice.

Discipline is used as a method of influencing and encouraging each person to discipline himself. When the leader feels a bit of discipline is needed he encourages members to discipline themselves by asking questions or making statements directly to the individual or to the group.

- VII. Summing up - One of the important functions of the conference leader is the final summing up with a view to future action. He attempts to reflect the true findings of the group, the agreements, disagreements, decisions, and plans of action.

Usually, the solving of problems, planning of action, and the evaluation of the results of that action is a continuing process. It is important that members of the group continue their interest, and the leader should stress the progress that has been made, and assure them of later meetings and action toward the full achievement of the objective. He should give them a "forward look" and finish "on time".

- VIII. Follow up - Following the conference, prepare a brief summary of the discussion, and send a copy to each participant asking him to review it for possible errors to implement decisions which were made in order that the group will feel that its time was well spent. This is important, not only in the interest of this particular, but for future conferences.