

Problems of Old-Style Conferences

When was the last time you heard anyone come up with a radically new and unconventional idea in an old-style conference or committee meeting? I can't remember one. Conferences are supposed to stimulate thought, but, as we all know, they usually stifle it.

You know the saying, "A camel is an animal which looks like it was made by a committee." Committee meetings in almost every case are the place for compromise, diplomacy, or careful one-upmanship. The members spend ten minutes analyzing the problem, fifty minutes arguing about it.

There are good reasons why the conference or committee usually breaks down. Generally the man running it is the boss. He knows it, and you know it. He is judging you. Your promotion, pay raise, or even your security depends in part on the showing you make in conference. One doesn't dare to do anything daring, does one? At least, not unless it is well calculated. Spontaneity is decidedly not cricket. Yet spontaneous ideas are usually the ones which make a difference.

Then there is nothing democratic about committee meetings. Ideas can't be discussed openly in a dictatorship. In the usual conference the ideas of the boss carry more weight than anyone else. He has his prejudices, and his preferences are well known. It's easy to step on the toes of other committee members too; to seem to hint that Joe's project is bogging down, or that Pete really should have come up with your idea. It's better to shut up than to start a feud.

Most of us are oh so very civilized in committee, and therefore the meeting deteriorates into a sort of hen session in which everyone praises everyone else while trying to get the knife between his neighbor's ribs, quickly and deeply. First, "That's a real great idea, Joe, you can sure come up with them." And then the lunge, "Remember old zipper shoe promotion?" The company lost \$876,000,000 on that one, and good old Joe was responsible.

Then, of course, there are the feuds. Committee members often take to the battle lines ready to take pot shots as soon as anyone has a new idea. If not on principle, then certainly for sport. It's easy to be clever when negative, and after all, if you didn't get money for your spring promotion, why should Pete get his?

There are many more solid reasons why the conference rarely produces new ideas. It is usually called for reasons of judgment or coordination. The atmosphere is judicial. Company policy, finances and other such essentially negative matters are of prime concern. Often they should be, but add to this man's natural tendency to turn down ideas, and you get the usual negative conference.

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