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ABSTRACT

Due to their increasing complexity, modern organizations require more effective integrating mechanisms. The conference, which can be a very positive thing for an organization as it provides rewards for members while performing a crucial communication function for the whole, is one possible mechanism. Communication is not only an inherent part of the integration process; it is, in fact, the primary means by which integration is achieved. To be successful, a conference must have clearly defined goals and an organizational climate that encourages participation. Similarly, conferees must have enough background in common to ensure a minimal level of understanding, as well as a willingness to work toward attaining conference goals. A successful conference increases understanding, agreement, and interaction among conferees, and thus more effective integration. Increased integration, in turn, heightens coordination and control, assists in maintaining organizational cultures, and facilitates the flow of information within the organization. (RBW)

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ON THE CONFERENCE AS AN
INTEGRATING MECHANISM

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ABSTRACT

ON THE CONFERENCE AS AN INTEGRATING MECHANISM

Due to their increasing complexity, modern organizations require more effective and novel integrating mechanisms. This paper argues that the conference is one possible means of achieving more effective integration. It describes the organizational circumstances that necessitate the use of the conference as an integrating mechanism, including a high level of differentiation, a high need to maintain an organizational culture, a highly dynamic environment, and a large size. Next, four conditions necessary for conference success are specified: homophily, interest, participative communication climate, and clear conference goals. Once a conference is underway, three process variables (effective communication, formal involvement, and informal interaction) are identified as particularly important for conference success. Three outcomes of a successful conference (understanding, agreement, and interaction) are then argued to be antecedents of integrating mechanism effectiveness. Finally, consequences of effective integration are discussed under the general rubrics of systemic effects, human relations, and the flow of information within the organization.

ON THE CONFERENCE AS

AN INTEGRATING MECHANISM

Introduction

Effective integration has become a considerable source of concern as a direct consequence of increased organizational diversity resulting from greater technological challenges facing modern organizations (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Among other effects, increased differentiation decreases system effectiveness, hinders the development of strong values and appropriate climates, and impedes the diffusion of innovations within the firm, unless there is also a concomitant increase in integration (Rogers & Agarwala-Rogers, 1976). As a result of its increasing complexity, integration can no longer be handled by a single individual or by top management alone (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967b). The conference can be seen as a key strategic tool to be used in linking a diverse array of participants, through communicative processes, to achieve the level of integration required by modern firms.

The principle integrating mechanisms traditionally employed to achieve integration have included line management structure, cross organizational teams and committees, individual coordinators, coordinating departments, and plans and procedures, all of which communicatively link organizational groupings together for the purposes of achieving coordination toward common organizational goals (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967c; Moynihan, 1982). However, today's organization faces more complicated problems that, in turn, require more complex integrating mechanisms. The conference represents perhaps the most complex of these tools available to modern management.

In recent years, the conference industry has experienced tremendous growth, with \$20-\$30 billion spent annually (Coeyman, 1981; Hosansky, 1984). Such rapid growth indicates not only a substantial interest in attending conferences, but also a growing need for the services conferences provide to both organizations and their members. The purpose of this essay is to discuss the use of the conference as an integrating mechanism that is uniquely suited to the most complex and difficult challenges facing today's organizations.

Conferences can be seen as being analogous to the traditional integrating mechanisms of temporary committees and work teams (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967c), although at a much

higher level of complexity and expense. For use in the present discussion, a conference will be defined as a formal meeting of individuals, from various organizational groupings, temporarily called together away from the organizational setting, for the purposes of increasing understanding, agreement, and interaction related to common organizational goals. The remainder of this paper will focus on the organizational contingencies that affect conference success, necessary prior conditions, conference process variables, outcomes of a successful conference that promote effective integration and, finally, consequences of effective integration for an organization. Figure 1 depicts the relationships among the aforementioned variables that ultimately determine the effectiveness of a conference as an integrating mechanism.




Figure 1 about here

Organizational Contingencies

Conferences are exceedingly expensive and only in special circumstances will their use as integrating mechanisms be justified. As Lawrence and Lorsch (1967a,b,c) have established in their ground breaking research, there are circumstances where too much integration becomes a bad thing for the company. Not all conferences are effective integrating mechanisms. What follows is a description of the contingent conditions under which a conference can serve as a successful integrating mechanism, especially in terms of their relative efficacy.

Organizations which could successfully utilize a conference will be faced with one or another of the following circumstances: a high level of differentiation, with many functional subunits; a high need to maintain an organizational culture; a highly dynamic environment; and, finally, a large size. Naturally, many of these factors interact with each other. For example, highly dynamic environments often provide the need for differentiation and, in turn, increased differentiation results in the need for increased integration. Thus, a production oriented company would tend to have greater needs for conferences than organizations operating in more placid environments, such as government bureaucracies (Emery & Trist, 1965). This is, in part, evidenced by the sorts of organizations that use conferences

most effectively, such as consumer product companies like Amway.

The nature of an organizational culture can influence the necessity for a conference and its chances for success. For example, a national organization, as opposed to an international one, would tend to have members with similar cultural backgrounds and symbol systems, promoting greater understanding between members at a conference. On the other hand, multinational companies may have a greater need for conferences for the opposite reason; they are likely to be less successful organizations because of their increased heterogeneity. Indeed many companies, such as national cosmetic firms like Mary Kay Cosmetics, use regularly scheduled conferences quite successfully to maintain and enhance already strong cultures.

In terms of size, the organization must be large enough so that other forms of integration, such as those stated earlier, would be less effective. Indik's (1965) discussion of the relationship between organization size and member participation emphasizes the applicability of the conference as an effective integrating mechanism in large organizations. Larger organizations require more communication linkages between members, to insure individual member integration, than do smaller organizations. Unfortunately, the larger the number of organizational members and the greater

the degree of job specialization, the lower the levels of interpersonal attractiveness (Indik, 1965) and the lower the morale (Allen & Stephenson, 1983). This results in a decline in member participation rates, rather than the increase needed to meet organizational demands. Therefore, a large organization has a greater need to utilize a mechanism which increases face-to-face communication between organizational members.

Size and geographic dispersion may also interact together to produce a threshold where conferences become necessary. As more and more companies realize the benefits of small scale focused operations concentrating on individual projects (Peters & Waterman, 1982), more macro level integrating mechanisms are necessary to maintain the overall goals of the larger organization.

Size also plays a crucial role in determining the number of people necessary for an effective conference. An upper limit is more difficult to assign, but consideration must be given to Indik's (1965) observations of reduced participation accompanying increased size, and the more general belief that increased size heightens the chances for conflict (Allen & Stephenson, 1983). With too large a conference, participation will decrease and its effectiveness as a potential integrating mechanism will also diminish. The organizational change literature suggests that there must be

sufficient regular members of the organizational unit who are exposed to the change effort simultaneously for effects to endure (Katz & Kahn, 1973). Thus, the conference must be large enough so that attendees can sustain its outcomes once they return to their regular positions. For very large companies, this may influence the scope of potential conferences; with greater numbers either reducing the potential scope of the conference, or the diversity in hierarchical levels of its conferees, to produce optimal conference size. Therefore, it follows that the size of the conference is, of course, dependent upon the size of the organization.

Necessary Prior Conditions

Four conditions that have a direct impact on conference success must be considered in conference planning: homophily, interest, participative communication climate, and clear conference goals. Conference success is determined by the degree to which there is increased understanding, agreement, and interaction toward the common organizational goals upon completion of the conference.

In the context of this discussion, homophily will refer to the degree to which individuals are similar to one another.

er in beliefs, attitudes, and values, and the extent to which they share a common symbol system related to organizational goals (Rogers & Bohnik, 1971; Rogers & Shoemaker, 1971). Homophily is necessary for a successful conference for a variety of reasons. First, individuals tend to interact with similar individuals in situations of choice. Second, when source and receiver share common meanings, beliefs, attitudes, values, and a mutual language, communication is more likely to be effective. Third, effective communication will be more rewarding to those involved. In a sense, homophily and effective communication breed one another. As communication between individuals increases, so does homophily. In turn, increased homophily results in increased communication effectiveness, which is rewarding and encourages increased communication.

Thus, homophily is a necessary prior condition for effective organizational communication in general (Farace, Taylor, & Stewart, 1978) and conference success in particular. However, homophily will only be a positive attribute up to a certain point, too great a level of homophily inhibits the exchange of new ideas and reduces the requisite variety needed for innovations to occur. In fact, the positive benefits of increased differentiation and heterophily are often overlooked. The crucial area where homophily is needed is in shared codes that promote understanding, and in shared

perspectives on appropriate organizational goals and means of attaining them. Thus, the following proposition:

P1: Conferees must be sufficiently homophilous to insure a minimal level of understanding, if a conference is to be successful.

Interest, the second condition likely to affect conference success, can encompass such broad concepts as curiosity, fascination, and concern. To be more specific, interest will be defined as an individual's intent to participate in the formal and informal interactions that are the raison d'être of the conference. A conferee with little or no interest would bring few insights, a lack of enthusiasm, and little participation to the conference. It would even be possible for such a conferee to interfere with the efforts of interested conferees, through the expression of negative attitudes and actions. On the other hand, a highly interested conferee would most likely be an avid and enthusiastic participant working toward attaining conference goals. Therefore, it follows that:

P2: A high level of conferee interest is a necessary prior condition for conference success.

The third variable necessary for conference success is a participative communication climate. Climate generally can be used to express the overall gestalt of an organization, characterizing the internal environment of the organization as experienced by an insider (Tajluri, 1968). For the pur-

poses at hand, a participative communication climate will be defined as an individual's perception of how receptive the organization is to employee involvement in formal and informal interactions within his/her normal work environment. An individual's perception of climate will affect his/her willingness to participate. Perceived low receptivity will ultimately interfere with the success of the conference by inhibiting attendance, and by carrying over into the climate of the conference. Another important factor affecting individuals in communication relationships is their level of trust, which is directly related to such factors as a participative communication climate (Gibb, 1976; Jablin, 1979), the willingness of individuals to participate openly and honestly in formal communication relationships (O'Reilly, 1978), and the emergence of individuals in organizational integrating roles (Reynolds & Johnson, 1982). Perceived high receptivity to employee participation should increase willingness and motivation to become involved and interact during the conference, resulting in greater tolerance for conflict, more individual responsibility, and greater tolerance for risk taking (Ireland, Van Auken, & Lewis, 1978).

The overall organizational communication climate provides the medium in which the conference will occur (Gibb, 1976). A participative communication climate, encompassing the organization as a whole, will promote a similar climate within

the conference itself. Therefore, the following proposition:

P3: An overall organizational climate which encourages participation is a necessary prior condition for conference success.

The fourth and final variable critical to conference success is clear conference goals. These goals must be identified by the organization as the first step in developing the conference. Clear and attainable conference goals, which relate meaningfully to overarching organizational goals or a few well developed cultural themes, pave the way for a successful conference that meets the organization's expectations. Clear goals are also easily relayed to those organizational members who attend the conference, giving them an advantage in preparation and guiding their interaction and activities throughout the conference. Thus, it can be proposed:

P4: Clearly established goals are a necessary prior condition for conference success.

Conference Process Variables

Once the conference is underway, three key process variables will also determine its ultimate success: effective communication, formal involvement, and informal interaction. In general, effective communication will be considered to be the degree to which a receiver's response is consonant with the overall objectives of the sender (Farace et al, 1978). For a conference, effective communication becomes associated with the goals established by the conference planner(s). For example, some conference planners may choose to follow the practice of most successful companies and focus on a few well developed themes relating to their strong organizational cultures (Peters & Waterman, 1982). With regard to the specific messages presented at the conference, care must also be taken to reduce vocabulary differences and the semantic information distance between conferees, which is crucial to reducing communication problems in interpersonal relations generally (Jablin, 1979). It is also useful to follow other principles for effective communication during actual conference sessions, such as promoting feedback and using credible speakers. Therefore, it follows that:

p5: Effective communication during conference sessions is crucial for conference success.

Formal involvement is characterized by conferee participation in the structured sessions of the conference. For example, scheduling of "break-down" sessions led by one or a panel of speakers, and dealing with a minimum number of topics, provides opportunities for more direct conferee involvement. Speakers can call on conferees to participate, and can answer questions in a more immediate fashion. Participation and personal recognition in the "break-down" sessions is one method of rewarding the conferees. The conference itself can also become the annual reward for behavior that promotes the sharing, seeking, and utilizing of information within the day-to-day life of the organization, which is crucial to the innovating organization (Goldhar, Bragaw, & Schwartz, 1976). To the greatest extent possible, formal sessions should have the low structure necessary for an achievement oriented organizational climate (Ireland et al, 1978). This low structure should promote accessibility, thus reducing distortion, involving people more fully in decision making, and increasing the timeliness of information transfer (Farace et al, 1973). This sort of formal involvement produces a number of beneficial effects, such as an increased commitment to decisions or to goals expressed in the conference (Fidler & Johnson, 1934). In light of the importance of formal involvement, the following can be proposed:

P6: The higher the levels of formal involvement of the conferees, the greater the likelihood of conference success.

In addition to formal involvement, there must also be ample opportunity for informal interaction to occur, both during the formal sessions and during designated "free-time". It is during this time that conferees get to discuss ideas, attitudes, and issues, and also become better acquainted with each other. An atmosphere favoring intense, informal communication and a free flow of information characteristic of successful innovative companies (Peters & Waterman, 1982; Goldhar et al, 1976) and innovation implementation generally (Fidler & Johnson, 1984), must be established. Thus, a further demonstration of the necessity of an overall participative communication climate within the organization, which facilitates informal interaction in settings such as a conference. It therefore follows that:

- > P7: A high level of informal interaction during the conference is necessary for conference success.

Crucial Outcomes

Conference success serves as a moderator or antecedent to the effectiveness of a conference as an integrating mechanism. In this section, three direct outcomes of conference success crucial to its effectiveness as an integrating mechanisms will be discussed: understanding, agreement, and interaction.

Increased understanding is one crucial outcome of a conference that affects the maintenance of organizational cultures, the effective flow of information, and successful control and coordination of day to day organizational activities. The very act of calling a conference on a particular theme heightens its salience and reemphasizes the understanding of organizational members as to its importance. Another benefit of conferences, in terms of understanding, is the tendency of large organizations to generate disparate groupings that develop stereotyped views of each other (Allen & Stephenson, 1983). The informal interaction inherent in the conference provides an opportunity to break down these stereotypes. Further, the exchange of views occurring during a conference should produce increased understanding of the operation of other organizational units, which is crucial to the development of shared perspectives within the organization. The smaller scale of a conference also offers an opportunity for increased understanding, since understanding tends to diminish as organizational size increases (Allen & Stephenson, 1983). Therefore, it follows that:

P8: Increased understanding ensuing from a conference results in heightened integration throughout the organization.

Understanding in turn lays the groundwork for agreement between conferees. Through the exchange of views inherent in conference activities, conferees can develop a more em-

pathic understanding of others. They can also see where conferees can benefit from mutual, rather than purely selfish, courses of action. Of course, some conferences may want to heighten this particular outcome by focusing on developing mutual agreements between all concerned conferees that are officially adopted at the conclusion of the conference. Any resulting peer group consensus will be a major factor in determining willingness to change and later acceptance of change (Deal & Kennedy, 1983). Thus, a conference can produce a feeling among conferees of heightened involvement in decision making, which is usually directly related to decreased resistance to organizational change efforts. A conference can also be an ideal setting for the confrontational style of conflict resolution most frequently associated with successful organizational operations (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967c; Peters & Waterman, 1982). Based upon the positive outcomes related to agreement among conferees:

P9: The increased possibility of agreement between the conferees attending a conference increases the likelihood that a conference will result in heightened integration throughout the organization.

To maintain understanding and agreement once the conference is over, a continual pattern of interaction between the conferees must be an additional outcome of the conference. The conference itself legitimates interaction between the conferees, demonstrating that the organization sees rela-

tionships between them is important. The conference will also produce a feeling in conferees that collective action is crucial to organizational success. Thus, individual's will see there is a possibility of organizational rewards attached to continued interaction. Finally, the conferees should feel that the recognition often provided by the conference, and their involvement in important organizational activities, enhances their feelings of perceived influence within the organization. All of these factors have been identified as crucial to the success of more traditional integrating mechanisms (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967a), resulting in the final proposition:

P10: The continued interaction between conferees fostered by the conference will heighten integration within the organization.

Organizational Consequences

This discussion has focused on the role of the conference as a potential new tool for achieving integration within the organization. The organizational contingencies, necessary conditions, conference processes, and conference outcomes associated with effective integration have been identified. What follows is a discussion of the consequences of effective integration, resulting from a conference in terms of

systemic effects, human relations impacts, and enhanced information flow.

At the systemic level, one measure of integrating mechanism effectiveness is the degree to which the mechanism provides for greater cooperation, coordination, and control associated with organizational goals. If there is to be increased coordination within the organization, there must first be increased understanding of the goal itself, increased agreement as to its feasibility and worthiness as a goal, and increased interaction among organizational members toward that goal. All of these factors are associated with successful conferences.

The successful conference also provides an opportunity for the organization to exert greater control over its members. An organization can exert more influence over members when they are in smaller numbers and away from their daily organizational settings. This is in addition to the greater understanding conferees have of organizational requirements, which may be a sufficient condition for control for many organizational members and results in more effective direction by management of organizational activities.

With regard to the effects upon the human side of the organization, one could view a conference as a maintenance structure similar to those described by Katz and Kahn (1978), useful in creating stability and predictability in

the organization. It provides a greater feeling of involvement for employees and a potential for recognition of their achievements. The increased conferee involvement characteristic of successful conferences also should result in more favorable attitudes toward the organization.

The conference also provides the organization with an opportunity for reiterating customs and strengthening cultural ties among members, thus playing a critical role in maintaining organizational cultures. Somewhat relatedly, the conference aids in socializing organizational members, especially "old-timers", who need to be made aware and reminded of organizational goals, values, and expectations.

Finally, the conference serves to reduce the information load on the organizational hierarchy and top management by bringing decisions closer to the locus of organizational problems (Galbraith, 1974). A further benefit of a successful conference are its implications for diffusion of information, particularly its implications for ~~loose~~ coupling (Weick, 1976) and the notion of the strength of weak ties (Granovetter, 1973). Weak ties provide for a greater exchange of knowledge and ideas because of the novel nature of these contacts. Conferees can form contacts in other departments who will allow them to obtain information they need in their normal organizational positions. Organiza-

tional members will also have clearer ideas of the perspectives of other units and their role in the larger organization and, thus, will be able to coact with them more successfully.

In summary, a conference can be a very positive thing for an organization. It provides rewards for organizational members while performing a crucial communicative function for the organization. Communication is an inherent part of the integration process. In fact, it is the primary means by which integration is achieved. A successful conference increases understanding, agreement, and interaction among conferees, which further promotes effective integration. Increased integration, in turn, tightens coordination and control, assists in maintaining organizational cultures, and facilitates the flow of information within the organization.

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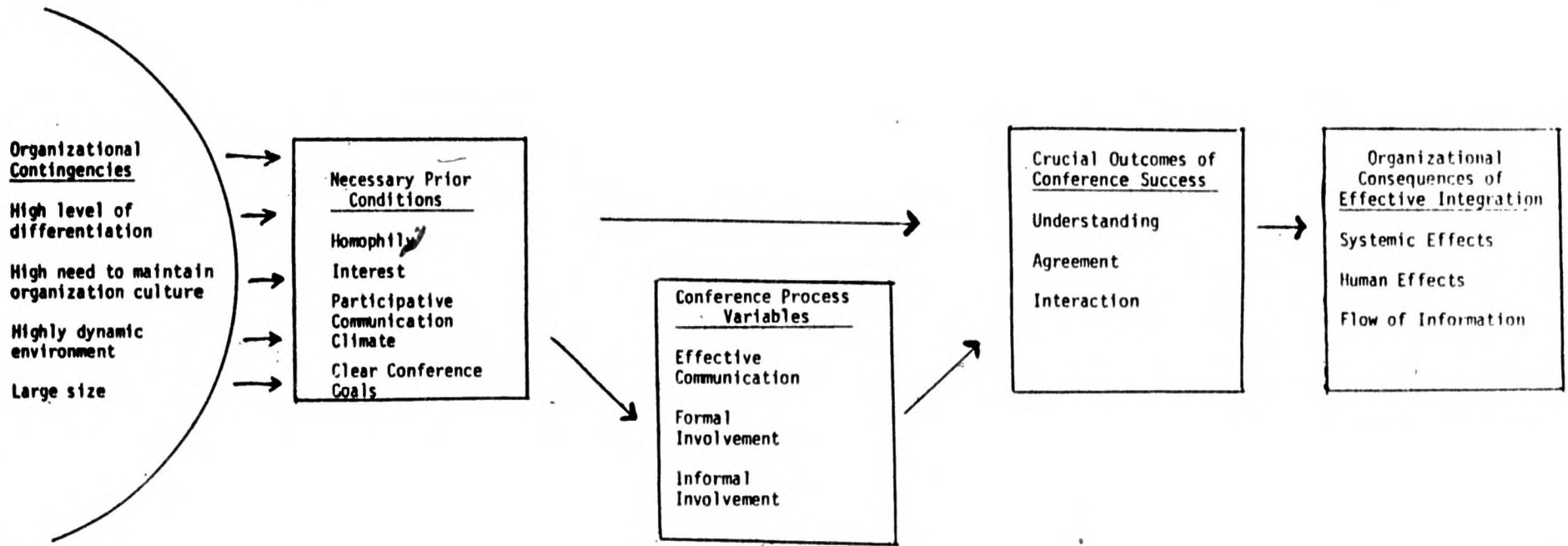


Figure 1. Factors relating to the conference as an integrating mechanism