PUBLIC SECTOR STAFF CONFERENCES

Designing more engaging and innovative public sector staff conferences to raise productivity, improve service and enhance collaboration.

White Paper 1.0

Written by Ed Bernacki, The Idea Factory™

Public Sector Idea Factory www.PSIdeaFactory.com

Create more return on your investment (ROI) in staff conferences.

This White Paper explores the idea of half-day staff conferences designed for productivity, collaboration and innovation. This tactic is useful for all levels of government; from local government to federal agencies. Four conference designs are provided. Each has a different focus:

1. Greater individual success
2. Greater team collaboration
3. Identifying new opportunities
4. Solving a business challenge
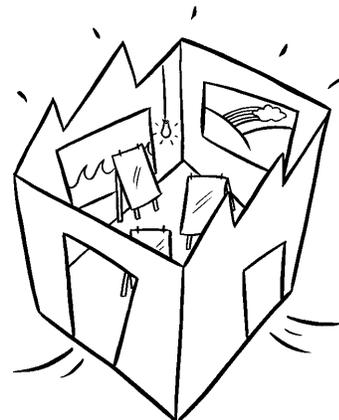
DEMAND MORE ROI FROM YOUR CONFERENCES — PLEASE!

Summary by Ed Bernacki, The Idea Factory™

I was once asked by *Inc.* Magazine in the USA to create ideas to make its conferences more effective. We started by defining what would make a conference effective. We decided that people acting on the ideas they created at a conference would make it effective. This implies they are engaged with the speakers, content and other participants. Four observations fuelled this work:

1. For all of the technology and sophistication of conferences, many people take notes and never look at them again.

2. As a speaker at 250 conferences I saw the expertise of the audience that was often ignored. Too few conferences made any attempt to harness the expertise.

3. Co-creation and collaboration are crucial. I wondered how events could focus on collaboration.

4. Many private sector conference design concepts have great potential for government events.

It was obvious that this would require a new way of designing a conference. I applied innovation tools to shape recommendations. These became a book, *Seven Rules for Designing More Innovative Conferences.* The 'rules' prompt a different conversation to explore what is possible when people and ideas come together.

Most conferences start with three objectives:

1. **learning**

2. **networking**

3. **motivation**

I suggest adding two objectives to use the expertise of participants.

4. **collaboration** – the most effective way to network is to collaborate with people to solve a real challenge.

5. **innovation** – what can we create if we harness the brain power of people on specific challenges during the conference?

I worked with the Bank of Canada and City Of Ottawa to design a four-hour staff conference focused on building a culture of ideas and creativity. I then experimented with this format with other public sector events. This White Paper offers four models designed to achieve a specific result. You can modify these templates to fit your situation. You can enhance your understanding of conference design by reading *Seven Rules for Designing More Innovative Conferences.* See **www.InnovativeConferences.com**

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PUBLIC SECTOR STAFF CONFERENCE DESIGN INNOVATION

A new approach for designing more engaging and innovative staff conferences at all levels of public service to raise productivity, improve service and enhance collaboration.

It's time to revisit the idea of staff conferences. They can encourage productivity, collaboration and even innovation. Staff events are ideal for local government or national agencies. With our focus on co-creation, we must expand on our thinking on events. Four hours is enough for a meaningful event.

Most conferences are designed in the same way: *opening keynote, workshops, lunch keynote, workshops, and closing keynote*. There are other options. *Unconferences* (which is a version of *Open Space Technology*) is one approach. There are many others.

Ignore any bad experiences you had with conferences. Also, ignore any criticism of public sector conferences as being wasteful. In 2011 the Business Events Council of Australia published a highly insightful guide to the future of conferences. It suggested that conference outcomes be defined in two ways:

1. **creating innovation** – How can an event solve problems or create opportunities?

2. **disseminating innovation** – This may include communicating new technologies, policies and 'ideas' created during the event.

Clearly these activities go beyond a day of learning and networking. This is why good design leads to productivity gains. All levels of public service organizations want to improve productivity.

When the Bank of Canada Currency Department wanted to enhance its focus on staff ideas for excellence, it used a half-day *Ideas Expo.*

I helped design the event. About 300 people would attend and it would be 'broadcast' to staff in two other locations.

The department would host an idea competition with the top six ideas being presented at the event. The original conference design had staff selecting the top idea. In a planning meeting I said what needed to be said; this design leads to having one winner and five losers. I suggested a different format. *What if…*

- ◉ Staff sit at round tables in teams. This makes it easy to brainstorm.

- ◉ We introduce *Six Thinking Hats* (a team collaboration tool designed by Edward de Bono) as a tool to explore these ideas.

- ◉ Each team is assigned three ideas to explore and expand. I would facilitate each round of Six Thinking Hats (15 minutes). A local facilitator was used in the other cities.

The format of this short conference became:

Time	Conference element
10 min	Introduction by the Department Head.
20 min	Department news and updates
30 min	I presented on innovative thinking.
40 min	Six staff presented their ideas. I helped each design a four-minute presentation to explain a problem and how their idea solved it.
15 min	I introduced Edward de Bono's Six Thinking Hats tool.
60 min	Teams expanded on three ideas using Six Thinking Hats. After each idea they discussed how they improve the use of Six Thinking Hats as a process.
40 min	Volunteers presented these expanded ideas back to whole audience.
10 min	The Director closed the event.

To engage staff with the event, a communication plan was put into place to distribute articles weekly for three months on problem solving and creativity. These encouraged people to submit ideas to improve the department in some way. At the start of the event, staff received a journal / note book that prompted them to think in new ways at the Ideas Expo.

Collaboration is the future of conferences.

This white paper introduces an idea of four-hour staff conferences. From experience, this seems a useful length of time. It is easy to adjust each to match the available time. Start your design thinking with one of these objectives:

1. Staff conference for greater individual success

Prompt people to review what made them successful in the past year and to look forward to define strategies to be successful next year.

2. Staff conference for greater team collaboration

Provide people with opportunities to collaborate with people they do not normally work with on meaningful challenges important to the organization.

3. Staff conference for identifying new opportunities

Harness the expertise, observations and insights of staff to create new opportunities for change and improvement.

4. Staff conference to solve a challenge

Solve a challenge or 'wicked' problem with the expertise in the room.

INTRODUCTION TO DESIGNING MORE INNOVATIVE CONFERENCES

I have a particular interest in the design of meetings, conferences and other ways people collaborate to achieve results.

This interest does not involve the physical design of a conference, the venue or any related tangible aspect of the conference. The focus of 'conference design' is what people do, hear, explore and learn inside our conference and meeting rooms. While many conferences have sophisticated plans to manage the most detailed aspects of logistics, when you explore how the content or theme of an event was conceived, you see much less sophistication. In fact, some conferences have few if any objectives for what the event is designed to achieve.

Based on my observation of many conferences, most seem to start with a 'to do action' list of what must be accomplished to host a conference. Not nearly enough time was spent on exploring what can be accomplished when people and ideas come together. This starts by putting participants in the middle of the experience. It reflects a determined effort to understand how you want staff to experience the conference.

◉ What can they learn? How important is it to the participant (recognizing that participants have different backgrounds and different reasons for attending the conference)?

◉ Is there anything that might stop them from learning and acting on their ideas after the event?

◉ Who can they meet?

◉ What should participants do when they meet other participants?

◉ How can they engage with other participants?

◉ What tools (notebooks or journals) would help them get more value from the event?

◉ How will they define whether the event was an effective and useful conference?

These types of questions led to a book on conference design called *Seven Rules for Designing More Innovative Conferences*. The rules are my attempt to prompt those planning conferences to step back and do some design thinking to better understand the opportunity that can be created.

This work was then extended in Europe by Belgian writer Maarteen Vanneste in his book, *Meeting Architecture.* We share the same message – there is great value to be gained in designing a conference based around the experience we want people to have.

The idea behind *meeting architecture* is the same as conference design; we benefit by creating a design or blueprint for an event before we focus on logistics. Much like the way an architect creates a blueprint to show how resources are used to design a building; a good conference designer creates a plan to reveal how the resources are invested to shape the experience the event will create for participants.

According to Vanneste, *"Meeting architecture is the task of designing the content and format of meetings in order to achieve the desired participant behavior."* What do we want participants to do and experience at the event and in the future? Here lies the secret to a more effective conference design: defining what these desired behaviors are.

What's the problem with staff conferences?

As I explored staff conferences it became clear that many people feel these events are unnecessary, unproductive, or worse, a waste of time. Having been a speaker at over 250 conferences it is obvious which events engage participants and which do not. All too often speakers are expected to rescue poorly designed events by virtue of their speaking skills. This should not be the case.

In a meeting with the editor of *Inc.* Magazine in the USA (Inc. is a magazine for entrepreneurs), he expressed his frustration about speaking at *Inc.* conferences.

He noticed that few people act on their ideas from conferences. We were then asked to help make these conferences more effective. Being a speaker on innovative thinking, I starting asking audiences, *"How many people come to conferences, take notes and never look at them again?"* At first this seems funny. People laugh and then put up their hands. Typically 75 per cent of people freely admit that they do not look at their notes again. If they are not looking at their notes, it is highly unlikely they are acting on their ideas after a conference. What does this say about future performance? Technology will not change this.

This led to a challenge to make conferences more effective. We started by working on a definition of this challenge. The most practical definition became: *people learning at a conference, converting these insights into ideas, and then acting on these ideas after the event.* This was a very challenging definition as it forced a major rethink of the design of a conference.

This work led to many ideas for the design of a conference that focused on the experience people would have at a conference. Yet this was not enough to prompt action after a conference. For this reason, our thinking then focused on how we could engage participants before the event and after the event.

It is the same type of logic that I am proposing to change the way we design staff events.

If you study conference planning models in Australia, the USA or Europe, virtually all make the same suggestion that conferences have the three basic objectives:

1. **Learning**
2. **Networking**
3. **Motivation**

While these objectives are useful and valid, they limit the potential of our events to create results for participants and their organizations.

Collaboration is a fourth objective

Add a fourth objective, *collaboration.* People have experience and expertise.

If we recognize this expertise, should we not harness it to help participants be more successful in the future? People are very happy to contribute their expertise on important challenges when this contribution is meaningful.

These contributions can be ideas, connections or insights that lead to new opportunities or solutions to difficult challenges.

Innovation is a fifth objective

The *Business Events Council of Australia* published recommendations that align with this vision of events to create more value (defined in terms of ideas and innovation). It suggested that conference outcomes should be focused on two categories of results:

1. **Creating innovation**—the raw materials of innovation are people, ideas and time. Focus on the ideas that can be created when these resources come together to collaborate, solve problems, and create new opportunities.

2. **Disseminating innovation**—this may include communicating new technologies and approaches and those 'innovative ideas' that are created by people during the business event.

A simple example of 'disseminating innovation' can be to prompt people to highlight the most successful action or tactic they used last year. Those from other regions can then try this action in their own region. Knowing who used this approach allows for a network to be established should participants want to discuss or collaborate on this specific tactic.

BECA says that in order to accomplish these objectives, our meeting designs can include these activities:

1. Collaborating on new product or service ideas
2. Problem solving focused on the key challenges of the organization or industry
3. Corporate planning to develop these strategies and plans
4. Team building to focus on team effectiveness
5. Work skills training focused on creative Thinking

6. Improving organizational performance

7. Improving individual performance

Many of these outcomes involve behavior changes, a key objective of meeting architecture. Every organization can benefit and profit from improvements and enhancements in these key conference design elements.

Case Studies of harnessing the brainpower of the audience

The common design objectives are:

1. They engage people's imagination and experiences for more engagement between participants.
2. They achieve a result: ideas, recommendations or solutions for personal or organizational use.
3. They plan to use the results in some way.

1. Staff conference – What's your idea to make this a more successful company?

A staff conference used thirty minutes of a longer event to ask a simple question: "What is your idea to make this a more successful company? A facilitator talked for five minutes about the importance of new ideas. Staff had 20 minutes to collaborate or suggest an idea on their own. People were encouraged to explain the problem or why it creates a strong opportunity.

Over 160 ideas were collected during this session from 120 staff. These ideas were distilled into 40 unique themes. Some ideas were basic; *add more bookcases for product manuals to prevent the office from looking messy.* Others were profound; *have managers better explain the long-term vision of the organization*. The CEO found tremendous value in these ideas and committed to turning these ideas into results.

2. Executive conference – Harnessing the insights of executives

Being offered an opportunity to be the fifth speaker of five on innovation, I said no. I suggested an 'idea factory' for executives to use what they learned during the day. About 230 people were seated at round tables. Each table was given a one page overview of one issue (of ten) to discuss related to making a business more innovative.

Participants were challenged to offer recommendations. This led to 40 pages of ideas and strategies. Organisers then published a booklet of these recommendations. It was then sent to all participants after the event. (For details, see option two.)

3. Association conference – From workshops to idea factories

This event proposed eight three-hour workshops on important issues facing the industry. Participants could participate in two workshops. The rest of the conference involved keynote and

workshop presentations. These eight workshops were then reshaped into eight brainstorming sessions designed to *solve* challenges. Each opened with a 'thought provocateur' who outlined the problem and challenged the audience to focus on finding solutions for everyone in the industry, not just those in the room. Each workshop used 2 or 3 speakers giving short 20-minute presentations to add new ideas to the discussions. People then had 90 minutes to discuss the challenge and conclude with recommendations. Each session had one person make notes of the discussions and recommendations. All workshop reports were combined to create an 80-page book that was distributed to participants and the entire industry.

Technologies to capture staff ideas

Technology could enhance your results if your objective is to capture many ideas, insights or observations. With people sitting at tables, technologies like Zing™ put a keyboard on each table. One person can enter ideas generated by the group. With 10 or 50 groups, it is clear that you can capture many ideas or observations quickly. These can be seen on a big screen and then used for many purposes. This can be about research, problem solving or creating new opportunities. There are many possibilities for systems like this. It can be a small group with each individual using a keyboard. It can be used in pairs or in a large format of a table. Important to the use of such technologies is how you use the results.

Whether you use technology or a note pad, what becomes obvious is how passionate people can be about their future.

Have an idea management process

Your design should also include how you will manage your ideas after the event. In the first case study above, an idea management process was used to ensure all ideas were read, developed and evaluated. Those ideas which were similar were distilled into one overall concept. Overall 40 ideas were brought forward. It was obvious that they fell into categories in terms of scope and importance. The CEO was committed to act on as many ideas as possible for the next conference.

Do not ask for ideas if you have no intention of doing anything with them.

THE CHALLENGE FOR STAFF CONFERENCES

This paper introduces four planning models to start your planning discussions. Timetables and planning elements are suggestions that should be modified to fit your events.

Potential Objectives	Background detail
Learning for greater individual success	Prompt staff to review the factors that made them successful in the past year and to look forward to define the strategies and actions needed to be successful in the upcoming year.
Learning for greater team collaboration	Provide participants with opportunities to work on real issues with people who they do not normally work with. This builds links between people for the success of all in the future.
Learning for identifying new opportunities	Research shows that many successful ideas come from front line staff. This option is designed to harness the observations and insight of staff to share, learn and create opportunities.
Learning to solve a challenge	Harnesses the expertise, insights and ideas of staff help solve a real problem(s). At minimum, this gives staff time to explore the problems in greater depth.

Explore the following models to see how they could be applied to your group or organization. Consider:

The challenges your organization faces over the next year that could be advanced through the use of a staff conference:

1

2

3

4

The objectives that must be set to tackle these challenges (linked to the conference models):

1

2

3

4

OPTION ONE: LEARNING FOR GREATER INDIVIDUAL SUCCESS

The first option is designed to prompt participants to review the factors that made them successful in the past, share these with others, and then set or define some goals or strategies for their success in the coming year. This strategy makes learning more effective by helping participants to:

1. **Review their past success.**

2. **Plan for their future success.**

A key to the success of this option is providing participants with a model plan for success. This can be as simple as identifying three or four areas that you want participants to focus on. These can be identified and then prepared as handouts or higher quality materials for participants.

I worked with a large US insurance company to design an annual meeting for 150 Vice Presidents. This was designed in collaboration with the Learning and Development department. The event was designed for personal development, growth and setting goals for the following year. The event opened with a discussion on these five challenges for participants and their engagement during the event. They could be modified or used to create similar challenges for your event:

Based on your experiences at this VP Summit, consider some of these overall challenges.

1. *What can you do to get the most additional mileage out of your new knowledge and skills?*

2. *What would it take to advance to the next level of knowledge or skill? Is it necessary? Is it worth it?*

3. *Are there opportunities to "share the wealth" by teaching others?*

4. *How can your manager, mentor, coach, and/or other development partners help you at this point?*

5. *What can you do to stay passionate about your ongoing personal development?"*

The final part prompted participants to define personal actions. These are the five areas which were used for the event. A special idea journal was published for the event. It provided a tool for participants for their notes and ideas. It included pages with this 'action' section. A version of these questions could be useful challenges for any large organization:

Action leadership summit

Review the VP Summit from the perspective of the many ideas, questions, insights and actions that you identified. Begin to capture the significant ideas that are important for your success and define the actions needed to achieve each.

1. *What are your primary action items inspired by the summit that will advance your personal performance, prepare you for the future, and/or contribute to desired business results?*

2. *What are the most significant insights or messages from the summit that stand out in your mind?*

3. *How did the summit impact your thinking and behaviour?*

4. *How did the summit add value to you as a leader?*

5. *What can we do differently in future summits that will aid your critical thinking skills and have a greater impact on your personal growth and development?"*

CONFERENCE FOR GREATER INDIVIDUAL SUCCESS

Conference Element	Time	Detail / Suggestions
Welcome to the day	15 min	The Director will want to be part of the opening. Keep it short and focused on recognizing the achievements of the past year and anticipating greater success next year.
Objective of the day: challenge the audience for greater success	10 min	Provide an overview of the day – how it will help people achieve more next year. Prompt and challenge participants to reflect on their success and create a sense of urgency to achieve again next year.
New thinking, new ideas – prompt and provoke new thinking and ideas	70 min	New Content: two options 1. Use a single speaker if you feel their contribution takes a full 60 to 70 minutes. 2. Split the time with two or three speakers providing a short and sharp presentation of 20-25 minutes each. Each should contribute background research, insight or success stories. They can be outside speakers or from within the organization. If you use outside speakers, ensure they are briefed properly. to understand how there are to contribute to the event.
Build in a break	15 min	
Collaboration as a group	30 min	You want participants to think about the big picture. With people seated around tables, pick a challenge for groups to discuss. It must be relevant and engaging. For example, What would it take to be more successful next year? What contributed most to your success last year?
Reports back	20 min	Depending on the size of the group, you can have people report to the others. Encourage short presentations of the key ideas or insights that are worth sharing.
Speaker – more new ideas	30 min	Select a topic that engages your audience. By keeping the presentations short, speakers are forced to be highly focused on the key two or three messages.
Individual planning	20 min	Have people work on their own to define a series of personal goals that are meaningful to them. People can work in pairs to talk about setting meaningful goals or plans for action. Use this time to have people talk about their goals for the upcoming year. Get them to write these down.
Closing Options:	30 min	Close the conference by having people talk about their goals in front of the whole group. Use a good facilitator who ensures a positive feeling and mood. You could also pick a closing speaker who provides insight or motivation that focuses on the coming year. This would be a short speech lasting only 15 minutes or less. You want people to leave on a positive note with a call to action.

OPTION TWO: LEARNING FOR GREATER TEAM COLLABORATION

Provide participants with the opportunity to work with people they do not see on a regular basis. The objective is to have participants learn something new and then collaborate on new ideas. When designing this type of conference, there are two types of planning challenges:

1. *What theme / question / issue can you use to prompt collaboration?*
2. *How can we enhance their understanding for collaborating effectively?*

We often focus on the first part and miss the second. The key to the approach is to select a topic or theme that will engage participants. The only criterion is meaningful to participants. While the focus is on the experience of collaboration, the topic or topics for discussion must engage the imagination of participants.

Improving your collaboration: do your participants think alike?

The answer is obvious. It is common sense that it is easier to work with people who think like you. It is more challenging to work with people who do not think like you. It is also obvious that every organization is filled with people with different thinking styles. Your event should allow people to express these differences.

Everyone knows the differences between introverts and extroverts. It is said that a way to define your style is to consider this question: *When you go into a room of strangers to network, does this energize you or does this drain your energy?*

Both are completely normal reactions. From the outside, people's behavior can sometimes fool us. Very introverted people can seem like extroverts in social events but this does not mean they are comfortable in these settings. When you seek feedback from your participants about the draft design of your event, ask them about these differences.

This difference can also be seen with people who need to start each day with a goal and a 'to do' list. A practical example is a goal setting model used by many speakers at conferences known as *S.M.A.R.T. goal setting* (see below). This is a perfect approach for those who are quite structured, but what about those who find that this structured approach gets in the way of achieving important things? One group offered a second model called *H.A.R.D goal setting.* This is an ideal conversation to have with participants to achieve greater team collaboration. Make it acceptable to use either approach, and more importantly, recognize that others may not agree with their choice. One approach is not better than the other; it is about the results people achieve using the system that best fits their style of thinking.

SMART goal setting:	HARD goal setting:
S—Specific and significant	H—Heartfelt: My goals will enrich others besides me.
M—Measurable and meaningful	A—Animated: I can vividly picture how great it will feel when I achieve my goals.
A—Action-oriented and achievable	R—Required: My goals are necessary to help this company.
R—Realistic and relevant, achievable	D—Difficult: I will have to learn new skills and leave my comfort zone to achieve my goals.
T—Time-bound and tangible	

Some like everything to be structured around them while others feel being too structured and organized gets in the way.

The best way to build teams is to focus on a common challenge

Once we understand that people think differently, we can design a conference to make the most of these differences. A useful way to structure this event is to include two issues:

1. Define a number of topics or themes for people to collaborate on. These can vary from topics important to their job or be completely neutral in terms of topics such as, 'How could our organization help a charity raise more funds for the cause? Your participants should feel it is important to invest their time.

2. Remind people of the basics for collaborating effectively. Some people are intro- verts while others are extroverts.

CONFERENCE FOR GREATER TEAM COLLABORATION

Conference Element	Time	Detail / Suggestions
Welcome to the day	15 min	The Director will likely want to be part of the opening. Keep it short and focused on recognizing the achievements of the past year and the importance of collaboration.
Objective of the day – challenge the audience for greater sharing and collaboration	10 min	Provide an overview of the day – it has been designed to encourage new thinking on collaboration by harnessing the brain power of participants. This overview is designed to prompt participants to expand their thinking on collaboration and explore questions like: 1. Why do I get along with some people and not others? 2. How can I build stronger relationships with people who do not think like me?
New thinking, new ideas – prompt and provoke new thinking and ideas on collaboration, team working and working with people who do not think like you.	60 min (or less)	Based on the themes or challenges you use for collaboration, select about two or three speakers to provide short, sharp presentations of 20 minutes or so. Each should contribute background research, perspectives or insights. There are many speakers who focus on thinking styles, personality differences, and so on. A useful model to introduce is the SMART vs. HARD approaches. Prompt a discussion on how people see the differences.
Collaboration round one. – 5-10 minutes on 'how to collaborate more effectively?' – Reminder of time – collaboration to solve the challenge	30 min	This section can be longer if useful. Start the first session with two elements: 1. What challenge is the group to collaborate on? The objective is to provide a clear understanding to everyone. 2. How can we collaborate more effectively?
Build in a break	15 min	
Group discussion – how effectively did we collaborate?	10 min	Groups now step back from the collaboration to evaluate the effectiveness of their collaboration. Groups can answer two questions: 1. What worked well for us as a group? 2. When we work together in the future, what should we improve or change?

Collaboration round two: 5-10 minutes on 'how to collaborate more effectively' People may comment based on the first session. Then collaboration to solve the challenge	30 min	Have participants change to different tables for round two. Start the second session with the same two elements: 1. The second challenge for the group to collaborate on. 2. How can we collaborate more effectively?
Reports back	20 min	Depending on the size of group, allow for some reporting: In smaller groups, you can have one person from each group summarize their results in terms of adding any insights that had not already been raised. If your challenges were to be used afterward (i.e. how to help a charity) ensure that these ideas are collected.
Closing Options:	30 min	Close the conference by having people talk about what they learned or experienced. This requires a good facilitator who ensures a positive feeling and mood. You could also pick a closing speaker who provides insight or motivation on working together, collaboration, styles of thinking, and so on. This could be short, perhaps 30 minutes or less.

Detailed Case Study – 60 minutes of collaboration

The Professional Institute of Engineers Queensland Innovation Forum offers a useful model to prompt collaboration. I was asked to speak on innovation as the fifth speaker of five. After wondering what I could add that the first four speakers did not already present, I decided to engage people at their tables in an idea factory. About 230 participants were seated in groups of 6 or 7 people at round tables. By the time I spoke, each participant would have listened to 6 hours of presentations with little time to discuss the issues or network.

Ten factors predict the success of corporate innovation. I allocated one factor to each of the 38 tables. This factor

was printed on a form that included basic instructions for the brain storm:

- Pick one person to lead the group.

- Prompt a discussion on the factor allocated to the table.

- Encourage comments from all participants.

- Conclude the session with five specific ideas or recommendations that would support the factor.

The session opened with a ten minute overview of key themes on innovation. I started the collaboration with a short overview of the process. I stressed the need to conclude with written recommendations to share with

everyone. Groups were given 45 minutes for introductions at the table, discussions and recommendations. Organizers circulated around the tables to ensure people understood the process. At the end, recommendations were collected from each table.

It was obvious that executives took this exercise seriously. There was great energy in the room; 40 pages of ideas were collected. These were edited, printed as a booklet, and mailed to participants after the event.

Big ACME Toy Company: Idea Factory Simulation

An option for building collaboration is an Idea Factory simulation. About 100 groups in the public sector have used the Big ACME Toy Company. This is a four-hour staff conference focused on ideas, creativity and collaboration. Participants are placed on *'CreataToy Design Teams'* which must create a marketable toy idea to save the Big ACME Toy Company. This Idea Factory starts with 60 minutes of innovation insights and ideas for collaboration, brainstorming and managing ideas. The simulation then puts these skills to work, opening with a scene from the movie, "BIG" in which executives brainstorm a concept for a new toy. Groups use an Idea Box to create a new toy idea.

Each must convince the Company's Board it has the best idea. A series of debriefs capture the lessons from this Idea Factory.

Design locally – Make locally – Sell Globally
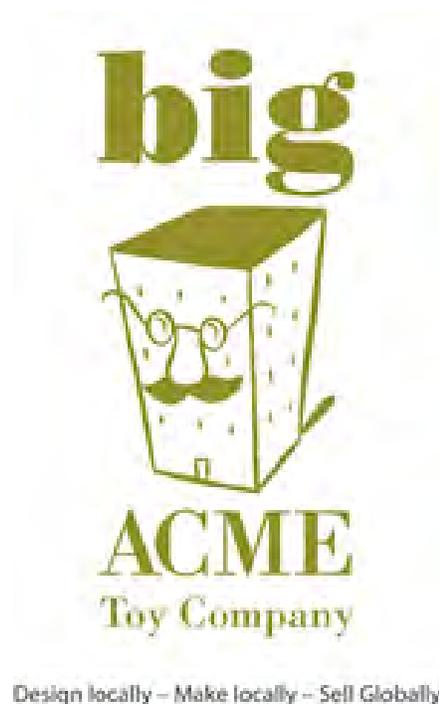
OPTION THREE: LEARNING FOR IDENTIFYING NEW OPPORTUNITIES

The essence of this design is starting many conversations that uncover ways people have created opportunities for change. Perhaps it is useful to start with the definitions of this interesting concept:

Opportun-ity *n good chance, favorable occurrence.*

Opportune *a. well selected and timed, occurring by design*

In combination, consider an opportunity to be a favorable occurrence that is well selected, well timed, and designed to happen. Many organizations are better at solving problems than they are at creating opportunities. There are two reasons for this:

1. There is a sense of urgency for solving problems. People are complaining and you need to react. It is an immediate problem and takes over any long-term planning. We call this 'fire fighting'.

2. To create something new takes initiative, energy and time, something most organizations believe they have little to spare. It also involves a challenge to the status quo, something most managers want to avoid.

The irony is obvious - had they developed their opportunities, the fire fighting may have been avoided by some fire prevention.

Secondly, highly innovative organizations create value by selling this 'fire prevention' to less innovative organization. This is a modified version of the collaboration session (Option One). The difference is the focus on identifying and creating new opportunities. You can define these in a number of ways:

1. Opportunities for new products or services to serve the public.

2. Opportunities to promote to new markets offerings.

3. Opportunities to improve the effectiveness of the organization.

How can you harness the expertise, experience and success of your participants? The objective is to engage your participants. This can be as simple as, "Based on your success last year, can you share one opportunity that can provide ideas for others?" You could use these opportunities to prompt the thinking of your participants. Perhaps set a target of creating about five ideas or strategies in each area.

CONFERENCE FOR IDENTIFYING NEW OPPORTUNITIES USING THE EXPERTISE AND INSIGHT OF PARTICIPANTS

Conference Element	Time	Detail / Suggestions
Welcome to the day	15 min	The Director will likely want to be part of the opening. Keep it short and focused on recognizing the achievements of the past year and anticipating greater success next year.
Objective of the day: challenge to create new opportunities for future success	10 min	Provide an overview of the day – how it will help our organization creates new opportunities. Prompts and challenge the participants to reflect on their success and create a sense of urgency to achieve again next year.
New thinking, new ideas – prompt and provoke new thinking and ideas	70 min	One or more speakers can prompt people to think in new ways about their work, organization or industry. This can focus on new technologies, future issues, and so on. They can be outside speakers or from within the organization. If you use outside speakers, ensure they are briefed properly to understand how they are to contribute to the event on identifying opportunities. A speaker on innovation or a content expert who looks at trends could be useful.
Build in a break	15 min	
Collaboration as a group – define your process.	60 to 70 min	The session starts with a general brainstorm as outlined above. With people seated around tables, the challenge could be to explore this topic: "Based on your success last year, can you share one type of opportunity that you created that can provide ideas for others?" Have each person around the table suggest one or more. If you use the five themes mentioned above you could assign different themes to each table. Part one: define a list of potential opportunities for the group to discuss in the future. Part two: pick one or two opportunities and then engaging deeply with each for participants to discuss and create new ideas
Reports back	20 min	Depending on the size of the group, you can have people report to the other groups. Encourage short presentations of the key ideas or insights that are worth sharing.
Individual planning	20 min	Have people work on their own to define a series of personal opportunities that are meaningful to them. People may also work in pairs to talk about setting meaningful goals or plans for action to work on this opportunity. Use this time to have people talk about their goals for the upcoming year. Get them to write these down.
Closing Options:	30 min	You could also pick a closing speaker who provides insight or motivation that focuses on the coming year. This can be someone within the company or an outsider. The focus is on using our opportunities. You want people to leave on a positive note.

OPTION FOUR: LEARNING TO SOLVE A CHALLENGE

Option four is much like option three. Instead of identifying opportunities, option four harnesses the expertise of staff to solve challenges or problems facing the organization. When you have this expertise in one room at the same time, it is the ideal time to solve challenges. This approach has been used by many groups in different settings. To start, the dictionary defines problems this way.

Pro'blem n. difficult task or question, thing hard to understand, arrangement in which one is challenged to accomplish a specific result.

Problems tend to look much harder from a distance. When we can avoid it, we procrastinate. When we are prompted to solve a problem, an answer is found. You can help your participants by introducing some research on flaws in how teams make decisions to solve different challenges.

1. Getting the definition of the problem wrong the first time

The most common mistake in solving problems is that too little thought was put into understanding the original problem. Often what appears to be the problem is a symptom of the problem. The solution is to brain storm the problem before you look for solutions. For example, a scenario is used below to discuss a realistic problem:

Some staff are threatening to leave. This is not yet suitable problem definition. Useful questions to brain storm the problem can be:

- ◉ What are some of the factors that we believe are prompting staff to leave?

- ◉ Of these factors, do we have any research to expand on these factors?

- ◉ Which of the factors are most meaningful?

- ◉ How do we solve the most meaningful factors?

Reword the problems from 'some staff are threatening to leave' to something specific like 'staff are threatening to leave because of our inability use their expertise on the job. How can we solve this?'
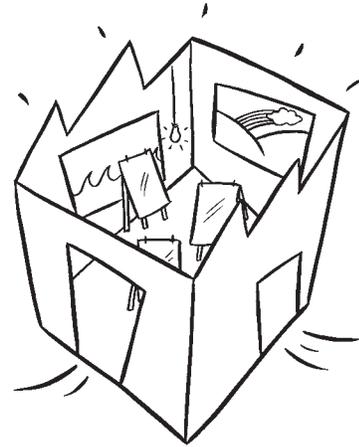
2. Jumping to solutions

This can be called the 'curse of the expert.' A team starts to explore solutions when the expert says, "I have the answer. This is what we did before…." Perhaps this person has the answer. The research suggests that assuming that this is the best solution stops the search for better options.

3. Waiting for the crisis

Most often we wait for a crisis that forced us to find an immediate solution. The most common reason is that we lack the time to solve the problem. Once the crisis is about to happen, it is amazing how we find the time and money to solve the problem. This could finally resolve an issue in a way that can be very useful to the future of the organization.

For assistance with defining challenges or problem, email info@psideafactory.com

CONFERENCE TO SOLVE A BUSINESS CHALLENGE

Conference Element	Time	Detail / Suggestions
Welcome to the day	15 min	The Director will likely want to be part of the opening. Keep it short and focused on recognizing the achievements of the past year and anticipating greater success next year.
Objective of the day: provide an overview of the challenge or challenges that the group will focus on during the day.	10 min	Provide an overview of the day – how it will help our organization achieve more next year by helping to solve a difficult challenge. You can use the idea of a thought provocateur to spend 10 or event 15 minutes to outline the challenge, and its implications.
New thinking, new ideas – prompt and provoke new thinking and ideas	70 min	It is useful to have one or more speakers who can prompt people to think in new ways about this challenge. They can be outside speakers or from within the organization. If you use an outside speaker, ensure they are briefed properly to understand how they are to contribute to the event on solving this challenge. A speaker on innovative thinking could help with the process.
Build in a break	15 min	
Collaboration as a group – define your process.	60 to 70 mins	Part One – The session can start with a general brainstorm as outlined above. With people seated around tables, the challenge could be explored in small groups. Part two - After 20 minutes or so, open the discussion for each table to present their findings to the overall group. If possible, your thought provocateur or assistant can write down some of the important potential solutions to the challenge. Part three – Using your list of potential solutions, you can extend the conversation by summarizing each potential solution and assigning it to individual table(s) to discuss and brainstorm further. Some useful questions to guide this include: • What is weak about this solution? • How can the weaknesses be managed? • What is good about this solution?
Reports back	20 min	Depending on the size of the group, you can have people report their results to the whole group. Encourage short presentations of the key ideas or insights that are worth sharing.
Individual planning	20 min	Have people work on their own to define a series of personal goals that are meaning to them. People could also work in pairs to talk about meaningful goals or plans for action. Get them to write these down.
Closing Options	30 min	You could also pick a closing speaker who provides insight or motivation that focuses on the coming year. The focus is on using what we learned about collaborating to solve challenges. You want people to leave on a positive note.

Creativity, design thinking, problem solving and conferences

When Alex Osborn explored processes to improve the quality of ideas generated by his staff to solve the challenges of his advertising clients in the 1930s, he felt it was important to create an event, a specific time and place to harness the ideas of his staff. He called these *'brain storm'* sessions as the objective was to harness the brains of staff to storm through the creative problem. Brainstorming, which often involves 5 to 10 people, can be scaled up to a large conference as long as people work in small groups. Many events have done this quite effectively. For example, the Bank of Canada case study had 300 staff sitting around tables in groups of 7 to 10 people around tables.

Design Thinking is a popular process at the moment for solving difficult challenges. The structure of design thinking prompts people to think in new ways by changing the way we engage with a problem. Design thinking is project based and brings people together. Most sessions are three to four hours. As such, this is another option for a four-hour meeting or conference. This White Paper can help to design more effective design thinking sessions. Think of design thinking as being a small staff conference. Using the model conceived by the Stanford Design School, you can design a staff conference to focus on the process to solve a real problem. This engages staff in the process while working toward creating a real result.

Tremendous results are possible when people, time and ideas come together.

Introduction *Times need to be considered*	Welcome and introduction of the issue, starting challenge, provide an overview to improve collaboration and explain the overall process
1. Empathize	To design solutions for your *users*, you must build empathy for who they are and what is important to them by: Observing their behaviour; Engaging with users and Immersion to experience what your user experiences.
2. Define	The define mode is when you unpack and synthesize your empathy findings into compelling needs and insights, and scope a specific and meaningful challenge.
3. Ideate	Ideate is the mode in which you focus on idea generation.
4. Prototype	Prototyping is getting ideas out of your head and into the physical world.
5. Test	Testing is the chance to refine our solutions and make them better.
Debrief	Next stage in solving the challenge; what did we learn in the process?

Stanford provides useful resources for design thinking. www.dschool.stanford.edu

HOW DO STAFF 'PARTICIPATE' IN CONFERENCES?

Do they take notes and never look at them again?

When working with Inc. Magazine to make its conferences more effective, its editor stated something obvious – too many people go to conferences, take notes and never look at them. It's unlikely they will act on their ideas if they do not look at their notes.

Our first effort was to solve the obvious problem – *weak conference design.*

Our second effort was to solve the non-obvious wicked problem – *what stops people from taking notes that lead to ideas they will act on afterward?*

Our effort to innovate led us to ask, do people have the skills to be effective conference participants? That was an intriguing problem to explore.

What skills do participants need to effectively participate?

Clearly a skill would be the ability to capture useful notes. To better understand this issue, we talked to a dozen people at a conference about the way they participate. I discovered most people use lessons learned in school; they summarize what speakers say, as they summarized what teachers said in school. This led to a new approach based on people capturing different types of knowledge:

1. *Insights:* insights are the 'Aha' moments. 'That's interesting.' Capture these in one or two sentences.

2. *Ideas:* an insight leads to an idea if you challenge yourself to say, 'Wouldn't it be great if…' Des*cribe the idea you see.*

3. *Questions:* You may not have time to create ideas during the event. Turn some into questions to answer in the future: 'how can our team use this strategy?'

4. Quotes: This can be a reference to a book, website, twitter or whatever technology appears tomorrow.

5. *Actions:* what can do to create change? How can you use this information?

In the same way, we identified other skills and developed them. The Idea Factory is collaborating with the Conference App Company to create a new generation of conference apps that engage people before, during and after the event.

Paradox of technology

There is a battle ranging about the use of Apps, iPads and computers at conferences: are they better than a notebook? So far, the answer is no. Academic research tested people listening to TED talks.

Psychological Science published *The Pen Is Mightier than the Keyboard: Advantages of Longhand over Laptop Note Taking* by Pam

Mueller, Princeton University and Daniel Oppenheimer, University of California. It tested tech-savvy students for learning and retention as they listen to the same presentations. Some used a note book while others used a computer. Findings include:

1. Many researchers have suggested that laptop note taking is less effective than longhand note taking for learning.

2. The present research suggests that even when laptops are used solely to take notes, they may still be impairing learning because their use results in shallower processing.

3. Students who took notes on laptops performed worse on conceptual questions than students who took notes longhand.

4. We show that whereas taking more notes can be beneficial, laptop note takers' tendency to transcribe lectures verbatim rather than processing information is detrimental to learning.

The research concluded with; *"Laptop use in classrooms should be viewed with a healthy dose of caution; despite their growing popularity, laptops may be doing more harm in classrooms than good."* A quality note book or journal is still a powerful form of technology to capture content and create new insights and ideas.

ABOUT ED BERNACKI, THE IDEA FACTORY

Ed Bernacki believes that all conferences have the potential to engage people in ways that lead to new ideas and opportunities for success. Conferences typically have objectives for learning, networking and motivation. These are important but we should also consider collaboration.

To start, all conference designers must develop a learning strategy to expand the learning and development possibilities. This book is a practical guide on developing a learning strategy for conferences. It provides tips, ideas, and case studies to prompt new ideas for designing conferences.

Seven Rules for Designing More Innovative Conferences

Ed Bernacki defined seven rules to prompt your thinking in new directions. Canada's Globe and Mail newspaper nominated the book on its list of Top Management Books of the year. Each rule is a chapter in the book that comes with lots of idea-provoking insights. They will help you develop a learning strategy for your conference. They are:

1. The experts at your conference are in the audience, not on the stage.
2. Think Return on Investment: even though it is hard to measure.

3. Design your conference with Logistics and Learning.
4. Learning drives all objectives and the design of your event.
5. Always use the brainpower of an audience to create something.
6. Put structure into your networking and mingling opportunities.
7. Assume your conference participants have weak skills for participating in a conference.

Each rule is expanded for your learning benefit at **www.InnovativeConferences.com**

The book includes planning templates, examples and tips to help you design a more innovative conference. Ed Bernacki can provide advisory services for public service conference strategies, training in conference design or specific ideas on shaping innovation themed conferences.

The Idea Factory also produces a range of unique idea journals for events. These note books help to engage staff with new ideas from the conference and back at work.

Ed Bernacki created the Idea Factory to help people and organizations develop their capacity to innovate. He has been part of many public sector innovation projects in various countries.

◉ Innovation Learning Partner for Canadian Centre for Management Development, now called, Canada School of Public Sector.

◉ Wrote an innovation guide to help the Singapore Prime Minister's Office launch a national innovation skills development program. Copies went to 20,000 managers.

◉ Worked for New Zealand Post in its Total Quality Service group contributing to various programmes to improve the quality of services.

◉ Writing innovation articles for New Zealand Trade and Enterprise publications for 12 years.

He has delivered about 200 innovation training workshops in the public sector. He has also spoken at 250 conferences including public sector conferences in Canada, Australia, Singapore and the USA.

He recently completed a book on public service innovation.

REFERENCES AND LINKS

1. Meeting Architecture www.meetingsupport.org

2. Seven Rules for Designing More Innovative Conferences by Ed Bernacki www.InnovativeConferences.com

3. USA Society of Government Meeting Planners www.SGMP.org

4. For more public sector idea meetings / fairs see 'The Idea Driven Organization' by Allan Robinson and Dean Schroeder. www.idea-driven.com

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www.PSIdeaFactory.com

7 Rules for Designing MORE INNOVATIVE CONFERENCES

RULE 1
YOUR PARTICIPANTS AS THE EXPERTS

Who are the experts in your audience?

What expertise do they have?

RULE 2
HOW CAN THE CONFERENCE ADD TO THEIR BOTTOM LINE?

Who are your stakeholders at your conference?
Whose 'stake' is being measured by your conference evaluations?
What do participants, staff or members need to know, learn, or experience to be more successful next year?
1.
2.
3.

What is your process for developing the learning side of your event? What expertise is needed?

RULE 3
LOGISTICS AND LEARNING CREATE LEVERAGE

How will you explore for new ideas for:
• Learning, exploring and sharing?
• Creating change?
• Creating ideas and solutions?

Turn this into a 500 word editorial article to show the value of the conference.

RULE 4
LEARNING DRIVES THE DESIGN OF YOUR CONTENT

1. How do you want to involve people in the event?
2. What do you want people to achieve or create at the event?
• How can you enhance the quality of learning?
• How will people participate?
• How much engagement do you want?

Define your objectives for each stakeholder:
1. For organisers, directors or the CEO
   Our conference is designed to achieve...

2. For participants
   By attending this conference, you will ...

3. Speakers
   We require speakers who can help our participants to...

RULE 5
USE THE BRAINPOWER IN THE AUDIENCE

What are your objectives for collaboration? *
• Collaborating on new product or service ideas
• Problem solving focused on the key challenges
• Planning to develop these strategies and plans
• Team building to focus on team effectiveness
• Work skills training focused on creative thinking
• Improving organizational performance
• Improving individual performance

Objectives for Innovation
What can be created if you harness the brain power of people on specific challenges during the conference?

RULE 6
YOUR NETWORKING STRATEGY

Objectives for networking
• Who needs to meet whom?
• How can you make this happen?
• What do you want people to do when they meet?

RULE 7
PARTICIPANTS: BRIDGING THE CRUCIAL GAP

How can you improve the way participants to 'bridge the crucial gap' and act on their ideas after the event? From experience are there any obvious 'bad' behaviors of people at your events? What skills do conference participants need to participate effectively?