

Conference Model

Background: The Conference Model was developed by Dick Axelrod, president of The Axelrod Group and his wife, Emily Axelrod, as a type of large-scale intervention first used in 1991. Since this initial implementation, hundreds of similar events have been conducted at schools, churches, companies and government agencies.

In addition to lessons learned from their consulting practice, the Axelrods developed the Conference Model based on the ideas and experiments of Eric Trist and Fred Emery, creators of the Search Conference; Marvin Weisbord, creator of Future Search; and the theories and techniques developed for team-based organizations, adult learning and family therapy.

The History of the Conference Model

Leading up to the years 1988 through 1991, The Axelrod Group worked as external consultants to companies such as the auto manufacturer Ford that were undergoing major change initiatives. To assist companies in transitioning, say, to a team-based approach or redesigning organizational structures, Dick Axelrod would help create internal, cross-functional teams that would spearhead these undertakings.

While these cross-functional teams represented an "important step away from top-down management," Axelrod says, "there was still an engagement gap between the teams and the rest of the organization." Those not serving on these small teams were

left to worry about how they would be negatively impacted by these pending changes.

Not only was senior management put in the challenging position of having to sell the benefits of such initiatives to employees who were not part of the cross-functional teams, but it simply took way too much time to implement these change efforts.



While working with clients, Axelrod would overhear team participants say in frustration, "What if everybody knew what we knew." Then fellow colleagues might start to embrace their recommendations instead of resisting such efforts.

With this new insight in mind coupled with the chronic roadblocks encountered by many change initiatives, Axelrod began to implement what evolved into the Conference Model. Working with a large printing division of R. R. Donnelley & Sons in 1991, a series of interconnected, large conferences were created that sought to expedite a change management effort while dramatically improving the level of buy-in from all constituents.

Here is a brief overview of how the Conference Model is implemented:

A series of 5 integrated conferences with a core team co-coordinating actions

Facilitator's Body of Knowledge Research Project

between and throughout - visioning, customer/supplier, technical (work flow and variances), design and implementation are held. Each conference is two to three-days each, with anywhere from 80 to hundreds of people - but usually each event is capped off at about 200 participants. Different groups of constituents are invited to the conferences, each of which has different goals and objectives. For instance, the boilerplate approach, which is almost always adjusted to meet specific customer requirements, consists of a visioning, customer, technical, initial design and implementation conference.

After this series of conferences is conducted, Data Assist Teams conduct brief "walk-through" mini-conferences are held throughout a company so that employees who were unable to attend one of the larger events can be kept up-to-speed about the upcoming change effort and pose any questions that they have about the process.

"What we found," explains Axelrod, "is that the powerful combination of large-group conferences and walk-throughs helped us create a critical mass of people who supported the change effort."

Within each conference, an emphasis is placed on ensuring extensive dialogue among small groups of both cross-functional and cross-hierarchical teams so that all viewpoints within an organization are acknowledged. In recognition of the different learning styles of participants, both text-based and visual approaches are implemented for capturing ideas and facilitating discussions. And, in terms of the agenda, delegates collaborate by sharing their ideas and images of the past, present and future of their organization in order to work toward consensus on how to proceed with their change efforts. Since all of the key

players are in the room during each conference, action plans, which usually garner high-levels of buy-in, are created before the end of each event. Collectively, the approach of these conferences helps change management efforts get underway quickly and without a hitch.

The analysis of the past, present and future of an organization is similar to the approach developed for the Future Search conferences. But there are some differences between the Conference Model and the Future Search methodology. The Conference Model usually consists of a series of conferences, each with a structure that is determined in consultation with clients. Plus, there is a "walk-through" process to ensure large-scale buy-in throughout an organization. "If you want to redesign an organization," says Axelrod, "there can't just be one session. You need multiple sessions over time so that you can reach out to an organization."

Resources:



http://www.axelrodgroup.com/conference_model.shtml