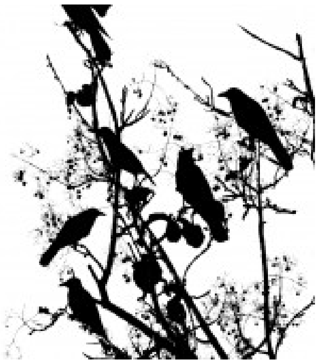
Managing Effective Meetings



Have you noticed the tendency among Coordinators to march, late and slightly harassed, into a coordination meeting in a flurry of files, testosterone and radio static, and then bark that the meeting will take exactly one hour. I think they must have got this mistaken idea of what they think it takes to look efficient from one of those very expensive East Coast business schools.

On the other hand, there is a counter tendency that sees some Coordinators hijack the first agenda item for the first 45 minutes, leaving no airtime for the remaining, equally pressing issues.

Neither approach works in multi-cultural and multi-lingual settings, especially if the Government is co-chairing (which it should be). Let's be clear: stage-managed information-sharing meetings may take one hour but genuine Cluster coordination meetings take two hours — including time for mingling afterwards — particularly if translation is required.

Equally important is to realise that effective meetings have had considerable effort exerted beforehand to **prepare the ground in advance**. Investment in this aspect is, indeed, the hidden art of truly effective coordination management.

No less important is to create an atmosphere conducive to fruitful discussion. This means tea, coffee, and biscuits afterwards if you can manage it. Everyone used to come to sector coordination meetings run by UNICEF in Baghdad in 2003 because the coffee was so good. Eventually, WHO gave up trying to compete with luke-warm Nescafé and no air-conditioning, so moved their health sector meetings to UNICEF … well, security did have something to do with it too?!

TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE CLUSTER COORDINATION MEETINGS

1. Pre-agree someone else to present every item on the agenda. And meet, or talk with, each individual beforehand.
2. Agree the agenda with your government counterpart beforehand, and give him or her the opportunity to manage the meeting.
3. State that the meeting will take not less than 90 mins.
4. Cover issues outstanding from the previous meeting at the end, not the beginning.
5. Allow only newcomers to introduce themselves.

Any meeting with more than thirty attendees or twenty different organizations is, by definition, a 'large' meeting.

Coordination meetings are important events as they guide operational partners and other stakeholders through a process which starts with the rather passive sharing of useful planning information, and which goes on stimulate cooperation within and between Clusters. For this reason, and despite some sometimes rather loud voices to the contrary, such meetings should be treated as formal occasions – even though the 'style' of the person chairing will tend to be informal.

If he or she is up to it, the government counterpart should co-chair (but not chair) the meeting. Usually, the government representative is only too happy for the Cluster Coordinator to manage the process. Be careful, though, to let the government open proceedings and make sure you know their attitude to 'cluster governance' before the meeting starts. The Health Cluster got this badly wrong during the last Lebanon-Israel conflict by failing to clarify the role of Hezbollah viz-a-viz the Beirut authorities beforehand.

Similarly, with some governments having adopted the Cluster Approach wholesale, cluster partners are 'obliged' to follow government diktat as they chair all coordination meetings; a position somewhat contradictory to the ideals of the humanitarian imperative, especially where the same government is busy oppressing its own people – as is the case in Mindanao and Darfur, for example.

That said, try to avoid giving the 'top table' impression as the aim of the Coordinator is not to be authoritarian but is to create an enabling environment where a balance is achieved between 'robust' decision-making (which can only really be achieved with an evidence-base and strategic framework to guide negotiations) and the engendering of trust in the Cluster (Lead) Coordinator as independent 'honest broker', while allowing the "voice of the smaller partners to be heard" (see generic Cluster Lead guidance note).

Early meetings (i.e in the first week of a crisis response) tend to focus on needs assessments, who is doing what where, and what is in the pipeline. These require flip-charts and plenary discussions. Subjects outside these areas need more detailed consideration and should be assigned to ad-hoc working groups set up for the specific purpose (see section on 'management essentials' which covers the two-tier process commonly referred to as "SAG and TWIG"). As discussions become more detailed some weeks after onset of crisis, consideration should be given to using real-time projection of data, not least because this reduces the amount of paper and colour printing required.

For larger crises, the Cluster Coordination team comprises a Coordinator, an Information Manager, and a Technical Adviser (plus national support staff). The Information Manager will convene a Working Group comprising NGO information managers, volunteers from Statistical departments of local Universities, OCHA, and the Government information service. This group is set up from the outset with TORs agreed by the SAG. Similarly, the technical adviser will convene a Working Group (plus relevant Sub-Working Groups as required) to agree 'appropriate best practice' technical issues associated with the emergency.

MEETING MANAGEMENT CHECKLIST

BEFORE MEETING	
Action	**Comments**
Confirm room booking	• Probably hotel for first week or so

Inform OCHA and HIC of time / venue / frequency of meeting	• Ensure it is correct and posted on relevant office/corridor walls (posters) and websites
Send draft agenda to e-mail list	• Request input from the partners; use GoogleGroup[1] or similar for list management; make sure the agenda is realistic, does not have too many items on it, and that the items are sequenced logically (see example). Put major and/or difficult items first. Attach meeting notes from the previous meeting.
Seating arrangements for 100 people + standing room for 100 more	• Sit at a large round table, or, at a separate table at the same level with the other participants surrounding in a semi-circle. Ensure adequate seating/standing room for all.
Sign at entrance to building and on Door	
How to join / contact Cluster Poster on wall	
Other posters on wall as space allows	• Switch Off phones / No Smoking / No guns • Coordination Aims • Barriers to coordination • Principles of coordination
Map facing audience	• As big as possible
Mobile Amplification • Two amplifiers • Two Desktop microphones • Two wireless microphones (+spare batteries) • IT Cluster / Office technician in-room standing by	
Translation (preferably simultaneous)	• Best is to have (commercial) electronic systems available, otherwise, each and every sentence has to be translated which doubles the length of the meeting or halves the agenda items covered. Alternatives such as positioning volunteer translators throughout the audience don't work very well unless the meeting is conducted in the local language with translation into the relevant UN language. • Recording and projecting meeting notes in real time is an aid to inclusivity and understanding as many nationals will have time to understand the written word
Print 2 x Attendance sheets	• Cover sheet + 2 blanks (stapled) on a clipboard if possible

Hard copies of agenda, previous meeting notes, maps, matrices etc on every other chair	• Prepare these well in advance; staple the last set together no later than 1 hr before the meeting
Water available for (Co-) Chairs	• Small bottles
Arrange for coffee/tea and biscuits outside *after* the meeting	• Coffee/Tea and biscuits are *essential* as it engenders much goodwill and enables discussions to take place in the margins of the main meeting which are often every bit as useful as the main meeting itself
Appoint Meeting Note taker from Secretariat or Participants	• Should be a native speaker of the language in which the meeting is conducted. This is not as easy as it looks. It should *not* be the Coordinator him/herself if at all possible; Usually, the Assistant Coordinator (secondee from National NGO should be requested).

DURING MEETING

Action	**Comments**
Call meeting to order	• Start on time unless the government rep has failed to turn up, in which allow ten minutes extra. Explain the delay to all, but make it clear this is a one-off arrangement. (Tip: Tap an empty glass with a pencil next to the microphone or tap the microphone itself) • Use a microphone as this prevents perceptions of being domineering
Introduce Chair and Co-Chair	• If a Government representative is present (s)he *must* speak first and hand-over to the Cluster Coordinator only if (s)he wants.
Nominate Meeting Note taker	• Normally the chair but can be a rotated NGO volunteer (Tip: the one whose mobile phone goes off, takes notes at the next meeting)
Identify any Donor representatives or Press in the room	• Do *not* ask everyone to introduce themselves; only those who are attending for the first time. • Partners should be encouraged instead to fill in the 'Agency Profile' form (see template) and submit either electronically or at the next meeting. • If Press is present, inform the room that everything that follows is "off the record" and subject to 'Chatham House Rules' i.e the affiliation of the speaker is not mentioned unless expressly requested. Speakers should still

	mention their name, function, and agency when intervening though.
Mention any points of 'housekeeping'	• Outline how the meeting will be conducted and ask anyone who doesn't like the approach to come up and recommend improvements afterwards. • Run through administrative points of relevance to the meeting (e.g coffee afterwards, meeting will last 90 mins; mobile phones off) and print these on the agenda and/or project them on a screen as people gather • [Tip: Suggest that anyone whose phone goes off automatically volunteers to take the next set of meeting notes…. It's amazing how everyone scrambles to mute their phone !]
Outline expected outcomes of the meeting	• Even in the first days of crisis response, meetings have definite themes
Ask if the agenda needs amending	• Normally any matters arising can be handled under 'Any Other Business'. • Accept minor changes if there is consensus. • Large items will be included in the next agenda. • The agenda should become standard after the first 'chaos' phase has passed (see example)
Manage the agenda (see notes for Facilitators, below)	• Do not run through previous meeting notes at this stage. [Tip: Either put something simple as the first item, or brief an NGO to raise a particular issue before the meeting starts]
Update partners on action points arising from the meeting notes of the previous meeting that have not been covered during the meeting	• Meeting Notes are action-oriented (see example)
Provide simultaneous translation services	• See preparation section above

AFTER MEETING

Action	Comments
Circulate and meet representatives of larger NGOs	• Arrange to visit three per week, either in the field or in their office. Ask if any improvements could be made to how the meeting was conducted.
Ensure Donors know that you are available to (brief) them at any time	

Collect attendance sheets	• Ensure attendance is tracked in graphic (numerical) form according to type of participant (Donor, Large/Small INGO, NNGO, Other Clusters, Government, Academic Institution); Update Cluster Partners list.
Download latest data onto NGO Flash-drives	• As requested by NGOs
Circulate meeting notes within 24 hrs	• These are meeting notes, not minutes. As such, they capture key issues discussed and actions/responsibilities/deadlines delegated. Principal concerns are captured in the SitRep; Post to Cluster / HIC website

FACILITATION

Facilitating a meeting with over 50 NGOs present is likened to "herding cats". Being seen to be impartial, independent, a good listener, and someone who is not afraid to ask advice goes a long way to engendering the 'trust' so vital to being perceived as an 'honest broker'. Try these:

- Start with a statement that sets the tone and style of the meeting (avoid humour, though, as this is so often mis-interpreted in multi-cultural settings, especially where people are already stressed)
- Avoid talking too much and getting personally involved in discussions
- Listen actively (i.e be aware of body language)
- Stick to the agenda and keep discussions focused on key issues (i.e stop digressions – interrupt if necessary). However, allow flexibility within agenda items for participants to express and develop closely-related issues and concerns (but watch the clock)
- Encourage wide participation. Ask for information and opinions, especially from smaller NGOs and Donors. Ask open-ended questions.
- Don't be defensive and don't take comments personally
- Clarify and elaborate when requested or when needed
- Test continually for consensus ("Do you all agree ?")
- Summarize, re-formulate and record key points. Since this is easier said than done when chairing the meeting, arrange for a volunteer to record salient points as they arise; this helps the group stay focused, avoids repetition, and helps reach consensus
- Obtain agreement from those present on specific proposals and allocate responsibilities there and then (it helps to write the proposal on a Flip-chart)
- Anticipate problems and prevent or mitigate them by defusing clashes and being seen to deal calmly with difficult participants
- Rationalise meetings and limit the proliferation of sub-groups unless there is a clear need for them.
- Emphasise strategic issues and action-oriented decision-making rather than information-sharing.
- Ensure speech is simultaneously translated
- Know who is attending (and who isn't)
- Summarise action points at the end
- Set strict time limits per agenda item (90 mins max)
- Use conference calls instead of meetings.
- Ensure that accurate draft meeting notes are circulated within 24 hrs.

Meetings are usually part of a longer and more complex process of trying to achieve a given 'strategic' result. They are only effective if the participants have prepared for and contribute proactively to a process that ends up with clear decisions as to who is to do what by when.

The success or otherwise of the meeting will depend to a great extent on the level of engagement in planning and preparation. Consider the following:

Why

- What is the purpose and expected outcome?
    - Share information, feedback, report
    - Generate ideas (brainstorm)
    - Find solutions / Make decisions / Solve Problems
    - Develop trust, relationships, teams
- Who needs to agree the objectives beforehand?
- What do participants want and/or expect?

What

- What items are on the agenda?
- Circulate the agenda in good time (and bring spare copies)
- Prioritise the agenda by indicating how long each item is supposed to take. Note that the most important is not necessarily first.
- Outline what needs to be read beforehand.

Who

- Who should sit at the table, and who behind as ‘advisers’ or ‘observers’?
- Are decision-makers at the table?
- Is there a protocol for invitations and seating arrangements?

Where

- Which is the most suitable venue?
- Does the venue have appropriate space, equipment, ventilation, quiet, and catering capacity?
- What is the most appropriate layout e.g long or round table(s)?

When

- When is the best date?
- What is the best time to start bearing in mind religious and/or cultural sensitivities?
- When should the meeting finish – so that some hospitality can be offered afterwards and breaks/interruptions factored in?

CHAIRING MEETINGS

The role of the ‘chair’ is to facilitate the meeting in such a way that the collective wisdom of those attending is tapped into so that the objectives of the meeting are met and the intended results are achieved. At the same time, the participants’ role is to prepare for, and engage constructively.

Being seen to be impartial, independent, a good listener, and someone who is not afraid to ask advice goes a long way to engendering the ‘trust’ so vital to being perceived as a good manager. Good ‘chairs’ demonstrate the following skills:

- Start with a statement that outlines the purpose of the meeting, and the maximum time you will allow the meeting to last (60-90 minutes). This sets the purposeful tone and style of the meeting (be careful with humour, though, as this is so often misinterpreted in multicultural settings).
- Establish do’s and don’ts such as “please mute your phones” as this encourages respectful behaviours.
- Ask if everyone is happy with the items on the agenda. Don’t get too hung up on this, though.
- Keep discussions focused on key issues (i.e stop digressions – interrupt if necessary). However, allow flexibility within agenda items for participants to express and develop closely-related issues and concerns (but watch the clock).
- Avoid talking too much and getting personally involved in discussions.
- Listen actively i.e be aware of your body language, look your interlocutor in the eye, nod and grunt from time to time to demonstrate your interest – even if this is feigned.
- Encourage wide participation. Ask for information and opinions.
- Ask open-ended questions.
- Don’t be defensive and don’t take comments personally.
- Clarify and elaborate when requested or when needed.
- Test continually for consensus (“Do you all agree ?”).
- Summarize, re-formulate and record key points. Since this is easier said than done when chairing the meeting, arrange for a volunteer to record salient points on a flipchart or powerpoint slide as they arise; this helps the group stay focused, avoids repetition, and helps reach consensus.
- End the meeting having agreed when and where to meet next, and ask anyone with suggestions as to how the meetings could be more effective to see you privately afterwards.

Nevertheless, managing conference-calls is quite different to other sorts of formal or informal meeting and is an art in itself. Because visual cues are usually absent, a different set of ‘rules’ apply when conducting conference-calls. This may mean, for example, interrupting speakers in a way that might be deemed offensive when in a ‘normal’ setting of being around a table. The Chair should not be afraid to mediate ‘robustly’.

Whether chairing or participating, tips for better conference-calls include:

- Distribute important documents to participants well in advance, including a draft meeting agenda and overall statement outlining the purpose of the meeting. Confirming the agenda is item one on the agenda. Set the time and date of the meeting making sure to make clear what time-zone is being used, and e-mail all attendees the passcode and conference access number in advance.
- Open up the meeting room five minutes early and jot down the name of participants as they come on-line.
- Start your meeting on time by reading out your list of names, introduce yourself, and then ask if there is anyone else on-line who has not been mentioned.
- Clarify the purpose of the meeting and quickly run through the agenda to confirm that it suits everyone. Quite often, one or two participants will need to leave early and so will want various items brought forward. Having agreed any revisions, let everyone know how long the meeting is scheduled to take.
- Introduce late-comers at a logical break rather than as and when they enter.
- Participants should identify themselves by name and location each time before speaking.
- If disconnected, simply re-dial the conference access number and enter the passcode. There is no need for re-introduction.
- If any participant thinks a speaker is rambling on or repeating things already said, they should not be afraid to say so. Nobody will be offended.

- Enhance call quality and minimise background noise by asking everybody to mute their phones.
- If chairing, summarise action points and deadlines at the end of each agenda item rather than leaving it all to the end. Make sure everyone knows to whom the responsibility for each action has been delegated
- Leave some time at the end of the meeting for any other business (AOB). However, note that some chairpersons prefer to suggest that AOB merely sets the agenda for the next meeting.
- Provide the web address where participants can see and exchange materials and request additional information.
- Close the meeting by deciding when the next one is to take place, and, if rotating the chair, who is to facilitate preparations and chair. It's surprising how many times this is forgotten.
- After your meeting, circulate decisions and action items by e-mail to all attendees as well as other appropriate people.

"Know how to create powerpoint presentations. Use bullet points and minimise the use of complicated moving graphics."

MAKING PRESENTATIONS

Practice and rehearse your presentation at home or where you can be at ease and comfortable, in front of a mirror, your family, friends or colleagues. Use a tape-recorder and listen to yourself. Time yourself.

- When you are presenting in front of an audience, you are performing as an actor is on stage. Look pleasant, enthusiastic, confident, proud, but not arrogant.
- Appear relaxed, even though you will feel nervous. Secretly, **take ten really deep breaths before starting**.**Memorize your first few sentences having first written down a key 'memory-jogging' word for each.**
- Speak slowly, enunciate clearly. Speak to the person farthest away from you to ensure your voice is loud enough to project to the back of the room. Vary the tone of your voice
- Standing or moving about is preferred to sitting downKnow how to use 'powerpoint', especially how to start and stop the presentation, maximise, how to scroll (arrow keys), and how to blank the main screen while still being able to see the slide on the computer screen (hit the letter 'b')
- Do not over-dazzle your audience with excessive use of animation, sound clips, or gaudy colours which are inappropriate for your topic. Do not torture your audience by putting a lengthy document in tiny print on the screen and then reading it out to them.
- Speak in a logical progression from introduction, through strong supporting arguments, to conclusion.
- If you make an error, correct it, and continue. No need to make excuses or apologize profusely.
- Use eye contact to make everyone in your audience feel involved.Avoid humour in multi-cultural settings; not everyone will understand your joke, and some will be offended by it.
- Be sure all necessary equipment is set up and in good working order at least 15 minutes prior to the presentation.
- Check out the location ahead of time to ensure seating arrangements.
- Have handouts ready and give them out at the appropriate time. Tell your audience ahead of time that you will be giving out an outline of your presentation so that they will not waste time taking unnecessary notes during your presentation.
- To end your presentation, summarize your main points. Terminate your presentation with the single 'bumper-sticker' idea that you want your audience to remember. Then thank your audience and take questions.

POWERPOINT

Senior military commanders despair at the amount of time their junior officers spend preparing briefings using Microsoft's 'powerpoint' software. They argue that the medium, with its ability to move all manner of colours, shapes and sizes around the slide often tends to obscure the message. They also argue that the simplicity with which complex intellectual constructs can be reduced to a series of two-dimensional bullet points and multiple map overlays obscures the superficiality of the purported strategic thinking.

Civil servants in the UN can be accused of the same thing. How often have I sat through a mind numbing presentation consisting of fifty slides or more, to wake from my reverie during the polite applause not knowing or understanding what it was that the presenter wanted me to go away knowing about. How often has some eminent public health doctor moved on the next epidemiological graph when I have hardly had time to digest what the lines and columns on the first one were telling me.

As with other aspects of the information technology revolution, our human brains have not yet caught up with the potential of the medium. We appear to have forgotten how empirical data and emotional information is processed inside our heads, and so bombard us with more information than we can possibly process.

US General Stanley A. McChrystal, who leads the US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, was shown this PowerPoint slide in Kabul. The idea was to portray the complex interlinkings of US military strategy – and complex it certainly was. "When we understand that slide, we will have won the war," he said, to widespread laughter.

"Some problems in the world are not bullet-izable," he went on to say, concerned that bullet points tended to miss or understate the economic, political and ethnic dynamics of a scenario.

Others have spoken out against what they call "fuzzy" bullet points. For example, a bullet that says "Improve information management" says nothing about who should do the improving, how or indeed, why.

Admittedly, the swathes of interconnected lines on that slide looked more like a Jackson Pollock painting than any kind of useful presentation. But again, that's down to the shortsightedness of whoever put it together. A little more thought beforehand would have saved him from going down that route – and the laughter of the audience. (With thanks to David Vickery)

Meanwhile, I can't count the number of times I've seen someone work hard on an ambitious presentation, test it all out, copy it to a laptop, and then have it fail when presenting. The reason is usually that the the presentation has become huge and the laptop isn't fast enough or doesn't have enough memory to handle it.

TIP: To reduce the size of your saved file:

save the file under a new name. PowerPoint remembers all your actions in a session so that you can undo them. Saving under another name discards this information. For some reason, this works better than closing and opening the same file.

Always test your presentation on the computer that you'll be presenting from.

Reduce and/or compress the size of your images.

Don't copy and paste, or drag 'n drop, images into a presentation. Instead, save them as a separate file and insert them as a picture.

When I was a junior account executive in an advertising agency long ago, I had to give a new business 'pitch' to a prospective client in front of my boss. In these pre-powerpoint days, slides were biked round at 3 a.m for approval so there was little room for last minute changes. When the moment came, and the lights dimmed, I strode to the podium and pressed the switch to advance the slides which were nestling in their neat pre-rehearsed order. But I must have pressed the wrong button, because all that happened was that the carousel housing the slides sped into reverse and ejected the slides all over the floor. My boss was hissing rage at me as, together, we scooped them up. An age later, my glowering boss was buying me champagne. We had won the business !

You might think that the magic of 'powerpoint' has made a relic of such crassness. On the contrary. Just last week, I had to give a presentation to over 500 people at a conference in Bangkok entitled "Language Kills !'. With such a provocative title, the opening had to be powerful. It was. The slides showed alright on my laptop monitor but that all-too-familiar 'no signal' sign was all the audience could read on the vast screen behind me. Once we sorted out the technical glitches, I started again. But not only was the opening – me speaking in Russian – ruined, but somehow the slides had reset themselves to advance every fifteen seconds regardless of what I was saying.

To prevent this, make sure you know and/or do the following every time before presenting:

- Rehearse.
- Makes sure the animations are set as you wanted i.e 'advance on click' (*never* use the 'auto-advance' function as presentations usually don't go according to plan)
- Cntrl+F7 blanks the main screen while you can still see the slide on the monitor. Press it again and both go blank. Press it a third time, and the slide will show on both the monitor and the main screen. There can be a few seconds' lag, so wait a bit before pressing the key again.
- Do not prop a book against the projector lens when you want to blank the main screen, especially a plastic covered book. There are over 150 people in Haiti who will tell you what happens when a plastic book cover explodes into flames just as the Coordinator is making his key point !

MULTI-LINGUAL MEETINGS

The success and quality of your meetings rely on everyone being given the space to contribute their views and information without fearing the consequence of anything they might say and without making them look stupid in front of their peers.

Conducting meetings entirely in either the relevant international language or the local language reduces effectiveness as it excludes key stakeholders. There are four options for interpretation:

1. **Whispering**: Useful when only one or two people require interpretation, but it is distracting.

2. **Liaison**: The interpreter translates a few sentences at a time. This is effective in short meetings when every word has to be understood, but becomes tedious and more than doubles the length of the meeting.

3. **Consecutive**: The interpreter listens to a longer exchange of information, takes notes, and then delivers a summary. This method is probably the most useful as it captures key points but it risks losing some of the required detail.

4. **Simultaneous**: Requires a radio microphone for the interpreter and headsets for the listeners. Obligatory in larger or more formal multi-national meetings, but requires technology, high levels of technical translation skill, and a pool of interpreters who can rotate (every half hour or so).

The method I have found to be the most effective and the most efficient is to chair the meeting and make presentations in the international language while simultaneously projecting a summarised version in the local language on a screen dedicated solely to that use (i.e in the opposite corner to the main screen being used). This version then becomes the basis for the meeting notes that you will circulate after the meeting.

What follows is the text from a presentation I gave in Bangkok at the 'Language and MDG' conference in November 2010:

It is important to recognise that **improving accountability is a process that starts with the capacity to listen and respond to those affected.**

People will respond in different ways to an emergency and some will be more resilient than others, providing ample opportunity to start the process of consultation. Emergencies personnel can and should nurture people's capacity to overcome adversity by listening, providing clear and accurate information and opportunities for people to shape the responses and to feed back on actions taken.

Of course, as I mentioned at the beginning, and slightly counter-intuitive as it appears, it is actually *lack* of language skills that is one of the prime determinants of poor coordination.

Of course, other aspects are also important. For example, the vocabulary of disaster ensures that we use

- Aid Speak (see below)
- Incomprehensible acronyms, not just of the humanitarian enterprise as a whole, but with its myriad technical specialisms

This is an extract from an article in the 27 January 2011 edition of the Economist:

THE emerging new country of South Sudan, which has voted overwhelmingly for secession from the north, has already become a leading nation of "the workshop": not a place where hard work gets done under duress but where the language of aid is taking hold even among the natives. "I feel like a stakeholder now," exclaimed a woman of the Dinka tribe, the region's most prolific.

All the favourite words of NGO-speak are now aired in the makeshift corridors and canteens of Juba, the fledgling capital. Top of the list are "empowerment", "capacity-building" and "stakeholder" (not someone actually carrying a stake). "Governance", "civil society", "facilitators" and "disadvantaged" follow fast behind. British NGOs have a fondness for "focal groups". Americans like anything that leads to "inclusion", especially of the "excluded".

Such terms' joy is that they are nice and woolly, hard to define and harder still to contradict: who could possibly turn down the chance to enhance development practitioners' facilitation skills for the capacity-building of gender-disadvantaged women?

NGO-speak is particularly cherished and fostered in the grant applications that smaller NGOs have to file to the bigger ones. Using the right word is all. "If you don't know the buzz words," says an NGO director, "you hardly have a chance to apply for funds."

Now, what do us humanitarians do at the moment?

- Hire local interpreters at community level. This is fine when doing a participatory rural appraisal under the Banyan tree
- Provide sequential interpretation in larger meetings. But this more than doubles the length of the meeting.
- Provide simultaneous interpreting services dotted about the room. But people don't like to admit they don't understand.
- Project written translation in real time. Works well, but is highly dependent on a rare skill and electricity.
- And as for the written word, do it badly though 'google translate' or wait a week or more to find anything on the website

The international humanitarian system fails to provide translation and interpretation services as an integral component of its coordination management arrangements. Why?

Because coordination costs money.

But, poor coordination costs lives.

If the inability to engage with disaster victims through lack of a common language results in poor coordination, then, by definition, people die needlessly or suffer unnecessarily as a direct consequence of being unable to converse with the aid community that has come to help them.

In other words, language kills.

Coordinated poorly, each disaster event has the potential to set back attainment of the MDGs as resilience and coping capacities among affected populations erode.

Ongoing reform of the humanitarian sector led by the United Nations demands that aid expenditures are as efficiently and effectively used as possible. This infers that cost-effective and appropriate relief interventions have been planned for based on local assessment of needs, capacities, priorities, and solutions.

Yet, the very people who know their needs best – those who have been directly affected by disaster – become disenfranchised because in too many cases they do not speak the same language as the international aid community that has arrived to support them.

As a result of this disconnect, it is estimated that a significant percentage of humanitarian aid is squandered through poor appreciation of the need and consequent misallocation of incorrect relief supplies.

Internationally-recognized 'good practice' guidelines for disaster response stipulate the inclusion of the affected population into the policy formulation and operational decision-making process. Yet, every recent evaluation of external humanitarian assistance specifically cites the language barrier as one of the major constraints to achieving this.

International humanitarian agencies, including the United Nations system, recognize the problem, acknowledge the need, and are increasingly asking for provision of language services.

The aim is to provide Cluster coordination mechanisms in the field with a consistent and high quality translation and interpreting service using stand-alone portable systems and web-based applications managed by local humanitarian enterprise initiatives.

TIP:

Once a document has been translated, get a separate translator who has not seen the original document to translate it back – does the translation make any sense?!

VIDEO-CONFERENCING

Like individual jet-packs and flying cars, the idea of actually seeing the person you were talking to on the phone seemed a somewhat futuristic concept that was always just over the horizon, but would never actually happen in our lifetimes.

Well, thanks to 'Skype' and other similar voice-over-internet-protocol applications, that future is now well and truly upon us and it's called "video-conferencing". Any manager needing to justify why they have to fly half way round the world to hold a two hour face-to-face meeting or attend a conference the title for which is so complicated that it needs to be read three times before understanding what it's about, will need to learn new methods of business communication and familiarize themselves with its darker arts.

The trouble is that while 'Moore's Law' – the 'law' that supposes the impact of technological innovation rises exponentially – continues to hold good, the digital revolution remains out of synch with the our prehensile ability to adapt our fumbling human behavior fast enough to keep up.

Even high definition TV monitors mean that we squint blankly across stuffy meeting rooms trying to discern who from the room full of people on the screen opposite is actually talking. Current video-conferencing technology also means that person-to-person conversations ensure we rarely look at each other eye to eye.

Because the camera on a laptop is at the top of the screen, actually looking directly at your colleague's ugly mug on screen means he or she perceives you to be looking down. "When someone doesn't look us in the eye, the brain deduces this as someone being less likeable, less confident, and less honest," says Dr Tom Lewis, a practicing psychiatrist. This is problematic when trying to forge relationships over distance. "Even though intellectually we know that this is simply a technological quirk, deep down in or brains it's hard to overcome feelings of suspicion when someone doesn't look you straight in the eye."

It gets worse. All we usually see on screen in one-to-one conversations is the head and shoulders of a semi-distracted person looking down, quite often typing while they're supposedly listening to you. This lack of social interaction and feedback from body language cues off-screen makes it difficult for us to 'trust' the person with whom we're supposedly having an interactive dialogue. Because of these little seemingly insignificant details, it is not unusual to come away from a group or one-to-one video-conference feeling vaguely disquieted without really understanding why. Psychology is why.

WORKSHOP FACILITATION

Workshops are used to analyse problems, develop plans together, learn new skills, swap experiences, change behaviour, and build teams. Good facilitation skills maximise the benefits of running workshops. A facilitator's job is to "make it easy"; a role which therefore involves:

- Being objective and neutral
- Ensuring clarity and structure
- Managing time
- Focusing on outcomes
- Ensuring relevance of discussions
- Summarising and clarifying key points for learning and understanding

- Recording actions are agreed, recorded, and allocated
- Keeping the event flowing by managing the pace, suggesting breaks and allowing time for informal discussion
- Listening and observing to ensure everyone contributes
- Creating a relaxed atmosphere by use of 'ice breakers' and 'energisers'
- Encouraging generation of creative ideas and individual thinking through 'the no question too stupid' principle
- Ensuring 'parked' (difficult) issues are not ignored

In preparing for a workshop, the following needs to be considered:

Focus on the intended outcome:

- What is to be gained by gathering people into one room?
- Would a webinar achieve the same outcome?
- Who is it aimed at?
- Have the objectives been agreed by the key stakeholders?

Possible Constraints:

- How much time is needed to practice the skills being imparted as opposed to being lectured to?
- Is the benefit worth the cost?
- Is the event a valuable use of executive time?
- Which location and layout will enable maximum participation?
- What style of learning are participants used to?
- How to ensure active participation across different cultural and language barriers?

Administration to make sure everything goes smoothly:

- Venue: Ensure the right room is available; that there are enough breakout rooms (each with flipcharts, paper, pens, tape and VIP-cards); registration
- Food and Accommodation: Coffee & Tea; lunch; transport to and from hotels
- Equipment: microphones (and spares); powerpoint projector(s) and screen; briefing packs; name tags
- Interpretation and Translation: simultaneous translation
- Facilitators and Speakers: invitations; transport; accommodation; payment; format and design; content; equipment and resources
- Materials: printing and collation of handouts (plus folder); registration of participants; evaluation questionnaires

Activities to maximise participation and outcome:

- Group work: mixing sizes, groups and tasks to stimulate wider 'out-of-the-box' thinking
- Multi media: overcomes language and cultural barriers
- Open-ended questions (why, what, how) to encourage exchange of experiences
- Simulation exercises: people learn best by doing
- Action planning: define actions to be followed up after the workshop

For further information: www.mindtools.com, www.networklearning.org

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[1] Cluster participants request the webmaster (Cluster Information Manager) to join the Partner List. The beauty of this method is that individuals can de-select themselves at any time.