



The Social Physics of Meetings

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American Program Bureau
Speaking to the World for Over 50 Years

Meetings and conventions are hard. We spend enormous amounts of time and money on organizing them, and still they sometimes don't work out very well. But things are changing: by measuring second-by-second patterns of social interactions at hundreds big and small meetings, we are getting to understand that the key thing is idea flow: being exposed to new ideas that can 'plug into' your life and that can potentially produce a creative explosion. As Steve Jobs put it: "Creativity is just connecting things. When you ask creative people how they did something, they feel a little guilty, because they didn't really do it, they just saw something. It seemed obvious to them after a while. That's because they were able to connect experiences they've had and synthesize new things."

Similarly, what I see at MIT is that the most consistently creative and insightful people are explorers. They spend an enormous amount of time seeking out new people and different ideas, without necessarily trying very hard to find the 'best' people or 'best' ideas. Instead, they seek out people with different views and different ideas.

Along with this continuous search for new ideas, these explorers do another interesting thing: They winnow down their most recently discovered ideas to the best ones through their habit of bouncing their most recently discovered ideas off of everyone they meet—and remember that they

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meet many different sorts of people. Diversity of viewpoint and experience is an important success factor when harvesting innovative ideas. The ideas that provoke reactions of surprise or interest from a wide range of people are the 'keepers'. These are the ideas that are harvested, assembled into a new story about the world, and used to guide actions and decisions.

The most productive people are constantly developing and testing a new story, adding newly discovered ideas to the story, and then trying it out on everyone they meet. Like sculpting raw clay into a beautiful statue, over time their story becomes more and more compelling. Finally they decide that it is time to act on the story, to bringing it into the light and testing it against reality. To these people, the practice of harvesting, winnowing, and sculpting with ideas feels like play. In fact, some of them call it 'serious play'.

There are simple ways normal people can change their personal habits in order to increase idea flow. When we conduct experiments that track social interactions using electronic name badges, producing a millisecond-by-millisecond record of interactions, we find that individuals who adopt an energetic, engaging interaction style that drive their one-on-one conversations ended up being more important to idea flow in the social network. Just like what I see when I look at the most productive people in the world, continually engaging with others in order to harvest new ideas

creates better idea flow.

The most successful style is what I call the “charismatic connector.” These people circulated actively through the crowd and engage people in short, high-energy conversations, acting rather like a bee harvesting pollen. We found that the more of these charismatic connectors a conference had among its participants, the more successful the meeting was judged. These charismatic connectors are not just extroverts or ‘life of the party’ types. Rather, they are genuinely interested in everyone and everything. They tend to drive conversations, asking about what is happening in people’s lives, how their projects are doing, how they are addressing problems, etc. The consequence is that they develop a good sense of everything that is going on and become a source of social intelligence. And the people they talk to feel good as well; how often is someone genuinely interested in what you are doing? It is a flattering experience.

These findings give hints at how to produce more successful meetings: encouraging an energetic, positive energy that will produce lots of face-to-face discussion within small peer groups, focused around a succession of relevant topics. How many times have you seen people automatically migrating to small pockets of familiar people, leaving some out in the cold from the onset? Or shuffle from session to session without interacting with each other?

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Instead, here are a few ideas to get idea flow moving:

> **Kick things off with short ‘firestarter’ talks** followed by very small discussion groups, carefully curated to include people from the same industry but with complementary and diverse perspectives.

> **For your plenary sessions, use your key assets**—your keynote speakers—as an invitation to interact collectively, allowing for contests for best comments and most responses.

> **Build collective “activity spaces” where people** will congregate between sessions. Fill these spaces with some form of rousing activity that will attract people into crowds and provoke discussions.

> **Create team contests with randomly drawn** members that builds on the conference theme and which also rewards interaction with other teams.

Of course not every meeting has the budget or manpower to create this sort of personalized information flow and crowd sharing activities, but there are simple tricks that use on-line registration information and social network information to produce a good approximation. With a bit of creativity you can play match-maker and improve the idea flow

in your next conference...and as a reward your participants will judge the meeting to be much more valuable.

Collaborating on the Next Generation of Meetings

American Program Bureau (APB) has spent the past 50 years helping meeting planners such as yourself develop meaningful, educational, and game-changing events. We make it our priority to be at the forefront of creating new, useful programs and we pride ourselves on presenting speakers who will elevate your audience's way of thinking. Alex 'Sandy' Pentland, MIT's preeminent Big Data scientist, is one of them. His remarkable discoveries have become the bedrock of a whole new scientific field—social physics—and his presentations on idea flow are now changing the way business is being done at every level.



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