



CONFERENCE LEADERSHIP

Professor Henry G. Roberts

NOTICE

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Reviewed by: Dr. Reichley, 5 October 1962.

INDUSTRIAL COLLEGE OF THE ARMED FORCES
WASHINGTON, D. C.

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21 August 1962

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INDUSTRIAL COLLEGE OF THE ARMED FORCES

Washington 25, D. C.

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COLONEL SILLS: General Quill, Gentlemen:

The subject of our session this afternoon is Conference Leadership. Last Friday Dr. Reichley explained to you how our instruction is conducted here. I am sure that you will recall that he emphasized the fact that much learning takes place in small discussion groups.

Beginning tomorrow in the Foundation Unit and throughout the remainder of the year in the other units of instruction you will ^{be} /organized into such groups. Usually one of you will be designated as the leader or the chairman of the group.

Now, the effectiveness of the group will depend to a great extent on how successful the leader is in getting the members of the group to actively participate in the discussion of the assigned topic and in controlling the discussion.

There are various techniques which the group leader can use to accomplish these objectives. What we are going to do this afternoon is first to have a talk on Conference Leadership by a noted authority in the field. That will take about 30 minutes. Following that we will take a 10-minute break and will come back here for a demonstration conference, using members of the faculty as conferees here on the stage, at which time we will try to identify for you some of the techniques which the lecturer will discuss in his talk. Then we will have a

question-and-answer period on both the lecture and the demonstration conference.

We will break this up at 1500 or 1505 and then you will report to your discussion rooms which are assigned on the weekly schedule, at which time the faculty moderators/^{who} will work with you in the Foundation Unit will tell you in more detail what is expected of you in the group discussions on government.

To guide us in our discussion today we have with us a man who is eminently qualified by education, background, and experience to teach us the fine art of conference leadership. He has been in this type of work for most of his adult life, as you probably gathered from reading his biography. Really, he might be considered as a member of the faculty, for he has been coming here for the past 15 years as one of our two instructors on public speaking. So at least half of you, and probably more, will get to know this gentleman well before the school year is over. He is listed as a training specialist for the Department of Navy, but I know he teaches at many other places.

It gives me a great deal of pleasure to present to you Professor Henry G. Roberts.

Professor Roberts.

PROFESSOR ROBERTS: Thank you, Tom.

I am supposed to talk about Conference Leadership this afternoon, but most of you will know me as an instructor in public speaking. So I am going to take about one minute to make some suggestions about a speech of introduction,

times when you will be tempted to be a double-dyed son of a bitch and really snag the man who is up at the head of the conference table trying to make that conference a success. I have only one suggestion--you, too, are going to be up there in your time, and you, too, are just as vulnerable to that sort of treatment. My suggestion would be that if you will work together you will accomplish a great deal.

What I am going to try to talk to you about today is about some of the ways in which you can succeed in working together, some ways in which the leader of the conference can make his meeting more effective, and perhaps some ways in which you, as conferees, can help him to achieve the end.

Now, I am going to start by going back to some very simple fundamentals. Group meetings of small groups of people are not new. We have been working with them for years. The result is that experience has shown us that certain formats are more useful than others when it comes to getting a worthwhile, useful discussion from a group of people.

The first thing I would like to give you is something that perhaps most of you have already run across--the formal pattern of a conference or a discussion meeting. If you will follow this pattern when you are the leader, if you will think of it when you are planning your meeting and organize the whole meeting around this simple pattern which I am going to give you, you will have your optimum meeting. This doesn't mean that it can't be thrown out of the window and something else quite different done but it does mean that, speaking for myself, if I were going to have a meeting and I was trying to plan it, I would

do it this way 95 out of 100 times. I think that is a pretty good average. Essentially it breaks down into five sectors (writing on blackboard). You have brought together a group of people to discuss some subject. Later this afternoon up here on this platform we will be discussing a specific subject. What do you do first? The first thing you've got to do if you are going to have any useful discussion is to isolate the subject, to make clear to everyone in the group exactly what the problem is that you are discussing, to cut it away from all of the subjects and confusion that surround it.

For instance, this afternoon we are going to be talking about the Alliance for Progress, a major part of our Government's Program. If we get it confused with the Peace Corps, with AID, or with military support through military aid, we are going to be tremendously confused. The first thing we have got to do is to isolate that subject and to make sure that our discussion is simply upon the matter of the Alliance for Progress. I don't anticipate any difficulty with this and I am not going in this instance to worry too much about it.

The second thing you have to do is to get information about the problem or about the subject. I don't want to pull out the old saw, "Don't worry me with the facts because I have already made up my mind," but it can very easily happen in such discussion groups as we have here at the College. The most useful discussion that you can get is one which is based on information--the more accurate the better.

I am always disturbed in a conference group--and I hope it won't happen

to me this afternoon--when 30 seconds after I have opened the conference I find one man presenting one firm plan or one firm solution for a problem, and within 30 seconds later or a minute later I find another man presenting another firm solution to the problem, because immediately then the conference degenerates into a debate, and, although I have coached debates for a good many years in college, I have been impressed that debating is singularly ineffective in bringing out any fact. It presents points of view. It presents interests. But, so far as getting out the facts is concerned, it is not very useful.

You gentlemen are down here at this College to get information. It will be very easy for you to completely lose information and knowledge if, in the very beginning of the thing in your conference groups, you try to pit one group against another. I suggest to you that I am very doubtful that arguments are very valuable around a conference table. I would suggest that facts and an emphasis upon facts and on getting out information about the subject matter are the most important things for you. I think we'll see that this afternoon.

Third, your next step is to develop possible solutions or possible answers. Try to get quite a number of them. You've got a problem. You get the factual information about it and then let the boys run on about what should we do about it. Don't make the mistake that many conference leaders make. For instance, Atkinson might come up with Solution No. 1, which would be a Navy solution, and somebody else might come up with an Air Force solution,

and then you'd try to battle your brains out as to which one of those two solutions should be accepted. I suggest it might be an Army solution or a DOD solution.

Look for possible things that you can do. This is one of the major problems of the conference leader. He gets the information out of the group, but they try to come up with one or two standard solutions, and very likely, time after time--and you'll find this to be true through the year here in your studies-- they will try to come up with one or two very obvious solutions. When your hour and 30 minutes is just about over, at about an hour and 25 minutes after you have begun, you'll realize that neither one of the solutions that you have been arguing about is really worth a damn. And right then, just before you are going to adjourn, people come up with useful ideas about ways of solving the problem.

My suggestion would be to try to stimulate different ways of doing things, of getting different answers as you go along. But you'll learn this about April or May for yourselves.

You'll learn from your own experience that one of the most difficult things to do among any group of 15 people down here at the College is to get them to agree on any one thing. But you can try. Perhaps we'll be able to show some of that this afternoon.

Finally, there is the summary step of just what you did decide, wrapping it up in a nice parcel, putting a big bow of ribbon on it, and saying, "This,

gentlemen, is what we have come up with." This, unfortunately, gentlemen, I can assure you from having worked with your conferees for the past 15 years, is one of your greatest weaknesses. I am amazed, at the Navy Department, at FAA, at the Coast Guard, and at other places where I work, to sit in conferences with people, and then perhaps two days later to have luncheon with somebody who was in such a conference; when we come to talk about the conference and come to discuss what we decided in that conference, to my amazement I find that what this man thinks took place and what I remember as having taken place are quite different indeed. This man has heard something that I haven't heard.

You have been in the Pentagon, many of you, or in the Main Navy. Just sit and think of how many time you have been in the same conference that you were in six months or a year ago, because nobody ever went to the trouble to put down in black and white what had been decided at the previous conference. Six months later everybody has a different idea about it, and you have the conference all over again.

This situation here at the College is such that you will probably do a pretty good job of summarizing, because they ask for reports.

In what I am trying to say now, I am simply saying that, wherever you have a group of people together to discuss any subject matter, your general plan of operation should be this. This in 95 cases out of 100 is the most effective plan of operation. Make sure that the group understands what the problem is. This is up to you. This is your job as chairman. Make sure that they

understand. Then get them to discuss the subject matter, with the emphasis upon information rather than on opinions. After they have had a chance to talk about it in terms of factual information, then lead them on into what should be done about it. After you have gotten a number of suggestions about what might be done to solve the problem, try to get a decision from them as to what should be done or what their recommendations are. After you have got it, then wrap it up in a nice package. Put it down in black and white and report it to the people who are in authority.

This is fundamental to all good conference leadership. Your temptation will be to jump, just as my temptation this afternoon when we get onto this subject of the Alliance for progress and the question, Is it reaching its immediate objectives? will be to do the simplest thing, obviously, from my point of view, which will be to get these 15 people on the platform and say, "Gentlemen here is our problem? What are your impressions? Is it meeting the objectives or isn't it?" If I do that, what will I have? I will have 15 slapdash impressions, with every man taking a position. Then I'll have to get him to retreat from that position without the loss of face. I'll have to struggle with them for the rest of the afternoon. This you can do, and indeed about 80 percent of you will succeed in doing it. But I would suggest to you that there is an easier way. Get your facts first, and then go for opinions. I'll try to demonstrate that this afternoon.

This is the first thing I'd like to talk to you about. I have now 9 minutes to talk to you about something else. As I look down at you I see a great many uniforms. I can see a great deal of command responsibility out in front. I

can see thousands of years of indoctrination on command and on how to keep in control of the situation. I have no doubt that there is not one of you who could not come up here and give orders effectively and get them obeyed by the group that is out in front here.

One point I would like to make is that around a conference table I think the first thing you need to realize is that it really doesn't make any difference how many gold stripes you've got on your shoulders or whether you are wearing eagles or some other sort of insignia. Command alone will not give you control over a conference group of people, particularly when the people involved are your confreres and of essentially the same group.

I have many times seen flag officers who lost complete control of the conference where there were juniors. I have likewise seen juniors who were able to maintain very effective control over groups in which flag officers were simply constituents. It is you as a person handling the situation, rather than your rank, that is going to determine your effectiveness with these groups here at the College. You are all too close together. Your date of rank is not a matter of importance here.

I would just like to show you some of the tricks of controlling a conference group of people. They are pretty simple. There are several ways in which you can run a conference. First I would like to show you one that has control built into it. Let's take this as a conference table (drawing on the blackboard). I am sitting up at the head of it and I am determined that I am not going to let this thing get away from me. I am going to keep in control of it. What do I

do? I spot a man here and I ask him a question. I name him and I spot the question. He gives me an answer to it. He comes right back to me. I haven't let it get far away from me, because I am going to be the man who comes in in the middle every time. So I ask another question over here (indicating) and I get an answer back. So it goes. I am asking all the questions. I am deciding who is going to speak to those questions. Gentlemen, I have control, because every other time it passes through my hands, up here. If you are afraid of control, this will give you control, but you are going to pay for it.

The problem here is, of course, that presumably, if I use this method of operation--as I will use it partially this afternoon--it presumes that I know whom should be asked which questions, and that I know the right questions to ask. I wish I were that omniscient, but a conference leader never is. You've seen many of your seniors use this method of operation. I think you have also sat there, knowing the answer. This guy gives the wrong answer and you know it--or it isn't quite right. Do you interrupt and say, "The Captain is in error." No. You keep your mouth shut.

I don't like this method of operation. I don't like it for two reasons: One, it doesn't get any real participation. Secondly, it makes me work too hard as conference leader. I am always on the side of doing it the easy way.

There is another way you can do it and I like it better. This is what I hope the group this afternoon will fall into, this pattern of operation. Here I am up here (indicating on blackboard). I throw out a good question, an overhead question. I let anybody answer who wants to answer it. I get an answer

here (indicating). Then somebody over here has something to say, and somebody down here. And so it goes. I am sitting up here staying out of the discussion, waiting until it becomes desirable for me to come back in and do something about it.

I don't think there is one of you who as an ensign or as a second lieutenant didn't feel that you had to have your finger in everything that happened in your company or your office or your group of people. You worked yourselves to death with minutia, with things that the chiefs or the sergeants could have handled very much more effectively than you did. But you wanted to be in there having your say on everything that happened. This is the trouble with many conference leaders. They want to be in on everything that takes place. My suggestion is: Why not sit out and listen for a while to what is actually being said by the people around your conference table. You will be surprised at how much you will learn. You will see that there are times when you've got to come in and stop this kind of operation to get it back on the track. You will also be surprised that when you have learned to live with this kind of operation for a short time it becomes very much more simple to handle the conference group. You are not worn out as you are with the other pattern. Instead of being talking every time and constantly thinking, "What am I going to say next?" you are listening, listing as a shrewd observer.

Now, this has some weaknesses. It gets off the track and very easily. But the answer is simply this: If this begins to degenerate, switch back to the other operation for one or two times. Then let it go again.

My suggestion is that most of you, I am afraid, will probably this year, in the beginning, at least, try to operate the first way most of the time. About January remember that I suggested that there is another way of operation, of sitting listening to the boys talking, coming in only when you need to give them direction, keeping them on the road but not dominating them. And I think you will find that life will become very much simpler for all of you.

There is just one last thing I would like to say. It is essentially the same thing that I said at the beginning of the talk this afternoon. There will be times when you will be at the head of the table or sitting in the middle of an arrangement something like this , where you have the job of being the chairman. But for every time that that happens there will be 14 times when you are going to be simply a participant in the conference group.

Let's be brutal about it. You can use those 14 times to make life hell for the man who is sitting at the head of the table. You have that choice. But you can be perfectly certain that every time you make life hell for the man who sits at the end of the table, the chairman, your turn is going to come, and if he has any shrewdness at all he will succeed in making life hell for you when you are at the head of the table.

If you will learn to cooperate you will find that your life is going to be much happier. It is going to be tough for the first several months, because you've all brought built-in points of view. They'll disappear as the year goes on. Remember that the poor chap who is sitting at the head of the table is trying

his damndest to get a good job done, to get a good discussion going. Help him. Do your part, and then he will help you. Then, when it is all over, you'll feel very much better about it.

Tom, let's get the gang together.

COLONEL SILLS: We'll take a short break while we fix the table up here, and then we'll come back for the demonstration conference.

(DEMONSTRATION CONFERENCE)

COLONEL SILLS: You have seen that the life of a good moderator is not always an easy one. I'd like to spend the rest of the time with the question period. Ask any question you want to of Professor Roberts, not only about what he said here today but about any ^{conference} technique or anything that you want to discuss with him. Are there any questions?

QUESTION: It seemed that a lot of comments were made which were impressions and that there was nothing based on fact. I have the impression that more data are required. A couple magazine articles were introduced, but other than that there were personal impressions. Yet I got the impression that there should have been facts presented and that personal impressions were not the deciding factors.

PROFESSOR ROBERTS: I think only one comment is in order. This, unfortunately, is what happens in a great many conferences. You have to live with it. I don't know much about Defense Supply Agency, because that is a little bit too new for me to learn anything about, but your predecessor agencies certainly ran into the same problem. This is just one of the things that you run

up against.

Frankly, on this situation, with this particular problem, I quickly tried to read some literature myself, and I came up with the one that Castelazo did. It's one in Time. It was darned hard to find much. I think you will find in many of your conferences in the College here that you will have exactly that same problem.

That's why I suggest that it is wise to try to get them started, as I did today, on information that they had rather than have them take a position. Suppose that I had started this conference this way: "What is your position? Is this Alliance for Progress achieving its original objectives or is it failing?" We would have gotten a split instantly and I think we would have wound up by getting very much less information than the little we succeeded in getting.

COMMENT: It appears to me that when you ask a question such as you asked before a group, one of the first things you have to do is determine a measuring stick and use it. It appears to me that this was something which was left out and which is important.

PROFESSOR ROBERTS: I'm not quite sure I know what you mean by "measuring stick," in that sense.

STUDENT: What I mean is that there were certain goals to be reached. At the end of one year, I presume, or some period of time, there will be certain goals reached. The question could be: Have these goals been met? If not, then the program is not proceeding as it should be.

PROFESSOR ROBERTS: I might say this. I don't know whether the

Colonel has read Air Force Manual 50-8 on Conference Leadership or not, but he has just stated very good Air Force doctrine in what he said. I commend the manual to all of you. It's a very good one, and I think his point is well taken. Do you have copies down here?

COLONEL SILLS: Yes, we have copies of it.

PROFESSOR ROBERTS: It is an excellent job. I suggest that all of you read it.

QUESTION: The question of timing comes to my mind. It seems to be an important factor. You can't go on debating forever. How do you settle limits and how do you control the timing, relating to your time schedule? If you are going to go on forever digging out information regarding the problem you are not going to have any time left to have a proper solution.

PROFESSOR ROBERTS: I wish I could answer that effectively. I'll be very frank--I cannot. You play for a certain time period in which you hope that you will get things accomplished, but it's my experience that you rarely succeed in hitting them. Just as an example, yesterday afternoon this same group talked over this same subject matter and the whole thing took a completely different pattern and a different course. I wish I knew how to answer that. I wish I knew the answer so that I could do it. You simply pray, I suppose, and do your damndest. That's about what it comes down to.

COMMENT: I have a personal observation that there are two members of this group for whom I have no feeling as to the extend of their knowledge or viewpoints on the matter you were discussing. It brings to mind the point of

knowing the individual members of your group, or as much as you can about them, and covering the group with information about the members who are present.

PROFESSOR ROBERTS: It would indeed be very helpful to know more. That is one advantage you will have. As the year goes along, you will learn more and more about the people you have in your group. You will have that information which I did not have today.

One thing that strikes me, particularly after yesterday, is how differently this group operates when they are in a small conference room upstairs from the way they operate here on the stage.

MR. HILL: You mean we are more polite down here?

PROFESSOR ROBERTS: Well, Muncy there, in that original statement, was giving a set speech, if I ever heard one. Yesterday it was very easy. Also the effect of the audience I find is a very real one. It changes things. I don't know whether it is stimulating or hurtful, but it changes the situation.

There's one fact, though. Colmer kept his mouth shut yesterday afternoon, but you brought him to life this afternoon.

QUESTION: Could you give us a technique of controlling the person who might want to hog most of the conference period?

PROFESSOR ROBERTS: Yes. There are any number of things you can do. If you are putting it into a military situation, the answer somewhat depends on the insignia that he wears. But by and large I think you will find this to be the technique: (1) Don't make the mistake of inadvertently calling upon him, or

attracting attention to him. For instance, with Colmer playing the role he was playing this afternoon, I would never have asked Colmer a question, for instance. I would probably have thrown my questions down the other way to get the attention away from Colmer. You will find yourself very frequently, because you are so conscious of that man being a thorn in your side, quite unthinkingly calling on him and bringing him into the conversation, when the thing you would like to have is keeping him out.

Another thing that you can do very quickly, very frequently, is this: Remember one thing about leading a conference. The man who is the most talkative, no matter who he may be or what rank he may have, has one physiological disadvantage. He has to breathe. If you are primed to take over the instant he stops to breathe and throw a question to a man in the opposite direction, the talkative man is out. This is the most frequently used device. There are others, but I would be very reluctant to use the heavy stick, and say, "Well, we've heard a great deal from you. Why don't you shut up and let somebody else talk?" That I don't think works.

QUESTION: In trying to summarize you disagreed. Is the College satisfied that the summary is always a disagreement?

PROFESSOR ROBERTS: That I think I shall refer to a higher authority.

QUESTION: In your opening statement you defined the subject, but it seemed to me that you did not tell the conferees what they were expected to produce. In other words, the subject was defined, but the problem of the conference was not. Do you care to comment on that?

PROFESSOR ROBERTS: I'll be very frank with you. If I had told them what I hoped they would produce, I am afraid I would not have had much of a conference. It was simply this. I didn't know what information they had. I didn't know what they could come up with. And I was very much afraid that if I made the statement, "Give a yes or no answer--is the Alliance for Progress achieving its original objectives?" the inevitable answer would have been very quickly, "No, it is not." I didn't want to choke off the discussion that way. Is that what you are talking about?

STUDENT: No, I meant that usually there has to be a report and a recommendation.

PROFESSOR ROBERTS: I see what you mean. Actually, there was no such end product envisioned here, so I didn't mention one. You've got a very good point. If it has got to be a report, a recommendation, I am strongly in favor of spelling it out exactly--what the end product is going to be, and what we are going to come up with. I think it should be made very clear to the conferees--not so much here at the College, perhaps, as in real work situations. To have a group of people talk for an hour and a half and then find out that they've got to make a definite statement to the Chief of Staff that this is this and this and this, or to tell them after an hour and a half that this has got to happen, I think this is unfair to them. They should have known it from the beginning.

COLONEL SILLS: We have to call time. We have another formation at 3:15. I am sorry we have to call this to a halt now. Thank you very much, Professor Roberts, for coming here today to help us out on this very important question with which we'll be involved all year long. On behalf of the members of the faculty, thank you very much.