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# Scientists' Meetings: Collegial versus Positional

From Airlie House to Asilomar, from Arden House to Aspen, scientists are participating in workshops, conferences, and meetings. Yet often, as these gatherings draw to a close, one has the impression that many in attendance question whether the time taken away from their principal pursuits was really worth it. If scientists are "convoking more but enjoying it less" the reasons may run deeper than the oft-cited "distractions" of out-of-town conferences (jet lag, touristic lures, free and freely flowing libations, too much socializing). One such deeper problem may be the all-too-frequent mismatch between a meeting's intended function and its format.

Most scientific meetings are intended to serve one of two functions: either exchange of research findings and techniques or formulation of a collective position on matters regarding public policy (for example, the safety of nuclear reactors), ethical guidelines (should certain lines of experiments in genetics be voluntarily suspended?), or the interests of the scientific community (should there be a separate office for a scientific adviser to the President?). Thus, meetings are essentially either *collegial* (in the tradition of the Royal Society and the annual conventions of the AAAS) or *positional* (that is, attempting to evolve a position those assembled, or those they represent, can come to share).

Trouble arises where sociological formats developed for and suited to collegial meetings are carried over to positional ones. Thus, a collegial meeting can thrive on scores of presentations, delivered in numerous simultaneous sessions of which scientists attend some or none, with relatively little time set aside for group dialogue. To reach a group position and evolve the consensus to back it up, however, a quite different structure is needed, one entailing relatively few presentations and much room for dialogue, few or no simultaneous sessions (or only in the first part of the gathering), and as full participation as possible.

Collegial meetings can do quite well with what social psychologists call laissez-faire leadership (which actually means no leader at all but a passive chairperson). In contrast, positional meetings tend to require one or more active chairpersons, whose role it is to keep the dialogue on the track by cutting off excessive side trips, summarize whatever consensus emerges, clarify remaining points of difference, and urge progress toward a resolution.

In the selection of participants, a collegial meeting can be relatively nonselective, allowing scientists spanning a wide range in outlook, status, and temperament all to have their day in the free-for-all of findings and hypotheses. In contrast, positional meetings work best if participants are invited who represent at least the main relevant alternative viewpoints but are also willing and able to have a true dialogue with each other and make an effort to join in the collective enterprise of reaching a group or community position.

There is no room for concern if many, even most, scientific meetings are of the collegial type. But when the intent is positional and the format collegial, the result is likely to be a frustration of purpose that will tend to generate disappointed participants and more heat than light.—AMITAI ETZIONI, *Columbia University, New York 10027, and Center for Policy Research, Inc., 475 Riverside Drive, New York 10027*