Article

Chairing Scientific Meetings*

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Introduction

Chairpersons constitute an essential component of any major scientific meeting. It is, therefore, important that those selected for such a task understand that the role of the chairperson is to facilitate the execution of the meeting and function as a connection between the speaker and the audience. Surprisingly enough, this role is frequently not understood; in fact most scientists can testify that they have attended scientific sessions that were adversely affected by a chairperson belonging to one of the following groups:

- The *Oscar Winner*, who has spoken at conferences and chaired sessions for decades - speakers have to fit in with his/her performance, and *it is* a performance, developed and honed over many years.
- The *Know it All*, who is always ready to impose his/her stamp on any presentation and demonstrate brilliance by hogging question time.
- The *Unconstrained*, who is oblivious to the clock, frequently ready to stimulate irrelevant discussion and frustrate speakers, especially the next one, and audience alike;
- The *Nervous*, who starts twitching 5 minutes into the lecture, shifting papers so as to be ready for the next presentation – s/he is capable of putting anyone off.
- The *Technophile*, who is looking forward to any breakdown in the presentation technology so that s/he can leap up to assist.
- The *Busy Professional*, who arrives a minute before the session starts – s/he is completely unaware of the session order or gender and presence of the speakers.

A collection of such experiences acquired over many years has inspired us to write this piece. Its purpose is to encourage chairpersons and conference organizers to work actively to achieve fluent and effective programming by identifying the key features of effective chairing and offering practical suggestions for organizers and prospective chairpersons. Although it is targeted especially at new chairpersons, it will, hopefully, be of interest also to more experienced colleagues.

Tips for organizers

It is a fact that *not all* experts make good lecturers. It is also true that good lecturers and brilliant scientists *do not necessarily* make good chairpersons. One reason is that the personality and verbal display that can carry a lecture may inhibit another's presentation by seeking the spotlight.

Photo Caption: Leiv Sydnes relaxing in the Akatarawa Valley

Very often members of the Scientific Committee are selected as session chairpersons. This may be appropriate, but *not* if there are linguistic or other limitations. This is especially true of Opening Sessions, where the audience's interest needs to be ensured. In order to reduce the probability of ending up with chairpersons that will jeopardize these sessions, the Organizing Committees should:

- *Identify session chairpersons early* – their role is at least on a par with that of the speakers.
- *Provide clear guidance of what level of activity is required* – for example, should there be a brief introduction to the session or a short summary of the presentations at the end.
- *Provide full details of the program of the sessions* – this may change at the last minute since speakers drop out or are replaced. Do not wait until the last moment to inform the chairperson of this (usually via a scribbled and often illegible note). Confusion in statements from the chairperson can readily undo months of planning.

- *Ensure that water/soft drinks are available*. Do not forget bottle openers, if necessary – 90 minutes gazing at an unopened bottle can be torture in an airless room.

Tips for chairpersons

The chairpersons are in control, but the best chairpersons exercise the velvet glove rather than the iron fist. Pomposity and bluster are not qualities to display before an international audience, and are certainly not those to be passed on to younger colleagues. The activities of a successful chairperson may be divided into four sections.

Before the session

Ensure that the organizers have provided correct details of the session, its timing, the program, and the speakers. Check that audiovisual aids and microphones are available and working. If a plenary or keynote lecture is included, make sure that you have brief biographical details of the speaker, or seek the speaker out before the session to obtain these. If you do not know the speaker, ask one of the organizers to point him/her out. This can save hours of squinting at name badges of people that you imagine look like the speaker.

At the beginning of the session

Greet the speakers and seek any last minute information (see below). Inform them about the importance of keeping to the schedule, make it abundantly clear how you will inform them that time is coming to an end and how you are going to terminate the presentation before the next speaker is introduced. Calm any last minute nerves and try not to pass on yours to them, especially when less-experienced speakers are involved. Furthermore, make it clear that problems with the audiovisual equipment and the microphones are the responsibility of the organizers, not the speaker.

Ask the speakers to pronounce their names and, if necessary, make a note of these phonetically. It is not funny to mispronounce *foreign* names or organizations - it is, quite simply, *rude*. Remember, too, that the chairperson has precedence over the speaker, even if he or she is your old Professor or your present boss!

Ensure that the session begins on time. Five minutes before the stated start, invite people to take their seats. Good organizers will already have been ushering people through the doors (a bell may be a useful accessory here). Check that all speakers are in the room. Do not rely on the fact that you saw the first speaker 15 minutes ago. S/he may have retired to the washroom, or returned to their room. Ideally, arrange for all speakers to be in the front row.

Allow yourself 30 seconds to read through the names of the authors and the titles of presentations. Then start by speaking slowly and clearly. Welcome your audience. If you feel it appropriate, welcome the audience in the language of the venue (it is always much appreciated) – if you do this, ask a local colleague to repeat the words slowly and write them down phonetically. Briefly introduce yourself (and your co-chairperson if necessary). Make sure that the name on the table is in agreement! Do not give the audience the option of deciding whether you are Dr Rimsky or Professor Korsakov. Remember to remind members of the audience to switch off all mobile telephones (and ensure that your own is switched off!).

Introduce the session briefly and move to the first presentation. A typical introduction to a plenary/keynote paper should be no more that one minute, including maybe details of graduation, positions held, recent research interests and activities, awards – all to demonstrate the suitability of the speaker for the presentation to come. Conclude with something like: *It, therefore gives me great pleasure to invite Dr Knoblauch to present this plenary/keynote lecture on [title].*

For invited oral presentations, check that you have identified the right author and run through the pronunciations of the authors and their affiliations. A typical introduction could be: *The next paper is entitled [title] by Schwarz, Noir and Black from the Institute of Chemistry of the University of Innsbruck. This will be delivered by Dr Anni Schwarz.*

During the presentation

Be aware of any restlessness in the audience. Has the microphone has gone dead? Maybe the lighting needs adjusting.

The greatest challenge – and fear – of any chairperson is the *over-running speaker*. Sometimes s/he is apparent from the beginning (as, for example, when the introductory slide is still showing after 10 minutes), in other cases the presentation dribbles or gushes on and on. *The watchword in such cases is politeness*. It is possible to curb such speakers, but strangulation is really not an option. Some large conferences, often running parallel sessions, still adopt a green, orange (two minutes to go) and red (stop) light system, but this is not common and in any case may be ignored by those claiming to be colour-blind.

The chairperson must have a watch or clock watch and should note the exact time of commencement. Prior to the session the chairperson should have decided where to sit during the presentations since this can effect his/her actions. Make clear the nature of the signal you will send to the speaker (for example moving from front row to dais when 5 minutes remain). Alternatively, a hand signal may be used. Some presenters have, like some waiters, been known to lose their sight at such vital times, and so the signal should be significant. If a further indication is needed, then a firm: *Two minutes, please* through the microphone is very effective.

Incidentally, do remember to switch off the microphone between comments, since you are not likely to gain the speakers friendship if a comment *Isn't this ghastly…. Where did they find this cretin?* passes through the hall. If all else fails, walk to the podium and adopt a stance next to the speaker as your final signal. *Again, be polite.* Indicate that it is indeed an interesting topic, but there is a tight schedule, other speakers are waiting and further discussion and exchange of views can take place later during the tea/coffee break.

It is the unlikely prospect of the last scenario that causes the most stress amongst chairpersons simply because one is not totally in control. However, the audience is on your side. The only things to remember is to work through the signals in turn and stick to the conviction that *the conference is greater than the individual speaker*.

It is good to remember the names of speakers that do not comply with the time allotted, after all you will likely organize conferences yourself at some time and you can avoid these people. In any case you certainly do not want to experience a re-run the next time you take the chair.

After each lecture

Questions should only be allowed if the program is running according to or ahead of schedule. On the other hand, questions are an essential part of the scientific process and all lecturers, therefore, deserve at least one question. Thus, during the lecture it is important for the chairperson is to generate a couple of questions that can be asked if nobody else has one (if the topic is not in your area of expertise, a question can sometimes be prepared from the available abstract). This is especially important at the beginning of a conference when potential questioners may be rather shy or doubt their ability in English. Questions from the chair, therefore, provide a little more time for the audience and give the speaker a chance to move into less formal *answer mode*. If no further questions are forthcoming thank the speaker and perhaps comment that further discussion will be possible after the session or over lunch, *etc*.

Usually there are questions, sometimes too many. Ensure that the questioners have access to a traveling microphone, or speak up so that the whole audience can understand. Often questions addressed to the speaker are inaudible to those sitting behind the questioner so, if necessary, repeat the question (this also gives the speaker a few more seconds to prepare an answer).

Show that you have seen potential questioners so that they do not wave furiously. If there are a number of questioners, politely discourage the person who has three questions and a comment, by inviting him to ask one question to give others a chance. Do not be tempted to let questions continue to the detriment of the overall timing; it is far better to cut a discussion short and invite its continuation at coffee or during lunch.

Remember that every speaker deserves his/her full time. If the session is overrunning, do not put pressure on later speakers to speed up their presentations. It is not their fault. If necessary, ensure that a message is sent to the caterers alerting them to the fact that teas/coffees or lunches will be 10 or so minutes late. Remember that they are working to a schedule too. One memorable conference session managed to lose 90 minutes over a 3 hour period!

At the end of the session

If there is a link to the next session refer to it briefly, such as: *In this session we have heard about the methods developed to measure vitamin deficiency. After coffee/lunch we will see how these have been used in a clinical situation*. Thank all the speakers, the translators (if appropriate) and the lecture theatre staff and ask the audience to express this in the usual way. Announce the time at which the next session will begin.

Make a special point to informally thank the speakers in your session after the session has come to an end, especially those at the beginning of their careers. If you have constructive criticism to put forward, make it after some positive comments. A few words of support and encouragement at such a time will do wonders for their confidence.

Before leaving, look over the facilities and make sure you leave them as you would wish to find them. Hand the meeting over to your successor efficiently and on time, and make sure that your name plate has been removed.

Parallel Sessions

Concerns about smooth running and attention to timing obviously are particularly important when there are parallel sessions. Even if time for moving out/settling in seems to have been included in the program, most participants will probably, in practice, experience a time crunch when switching from one session to another. This is especially true if deviations from the lecture schedule are combined with complex logistics. Organizers can assist by briefing all chairpersons on the importance of timing (it just takes one laggard to cause chaos) and to ensure that the various lecture theatres are in reasonably close proximity.

Chairing the last session

The last session of the conference was coming to an end; the speaker and chairperson looked out across an audience of one. The speaker drew to a close and thanked the chairman, who thanked the speaker and congratulated the audience member for his perseverance and willingness to remain to the end. In reply the audience member informed the chairperson that he was, in fact, the last speaker.

There is really no way of denying that the last session of any conference is equivalent to the speakers' *graveyard* after-lunch plenary. Some of the audience will have left, some will be leaving during the session, and those that remain will wish to get the earliest taxi or train to the airport. This is not to say that departees should not be quiet – the person who wanders around kissing friends *au revoir* is not doing a service to the speaker, nor is the person sitting in the middle of a row who decides to move. Departures between papers is usually possible; if not a seat should be taken at the end of a row.

No manner of wit or wisdom will delay those desperately wanting to avoid the traffic jams to the airport! The basic rule, therefore, remains the same: Stick to the timetable and do not prolong the session!

Selecting Young Co-chairpersons

In order to support and encourage the next generation of scientists in conference involvement it is a good idea to introduce co-chairing of sessions by younger (this being up to the organizers to define) and more-experienced (a euphemism for *older*) colleagues. We believe this will improve conference chairing in the long run and certainly

Photo Caption: Often the last session of a conference can be the speaker's graveyard

contribute to increasing the quality and knowledge transfer of conferences that seek to stimulate scientific discussion and generate new ideas. It also gives other young people in the audience the feeling that, in time, they could do the same. However, potential young chairpersons should be selected with care – not sleeping the night before and facing the audience rigid with fear is not what this experience is all about. In such circumstances, the responsibility is with the senior person to *look after* their more junior colleague. This is not, after all, a PhD viva.

Concluding remarks

It should be emphasized that it has not been our intention to outline *The Only Way* of chairing scientific meetings. On the contrary, each individual chairperson, like each presenter, should be encouraged to build on their own personality and develop their own style. However, there is no doubt that the overall quality of scientific meetings can be improved significantly by good and constructive chairing, characterized by clear leadership and the ability to catalyze scientific discussions during the sessions.

Good chairpersons will learn from their experiences and should not, knowingly, turn in a poor performance since this will reflect badly on themselves and on the organizers. So, before you accept that next invitation to Honolulu or Crete, ask yourselves what you can bring to the conference and prepare yourself.

Remember:

- The Chairperson is the servant of the meeting and the speaker, not the other way around
- Read through the programme in advance
- Identify the speakers and check the pronunciation of their names
- Explain how you will chair the session (timing, etc.)
- Speak clearly (and, if a native English speaker, do not speak too quickly)
- Keep to time
- Let questions flow
- Thank everyone
- Note the performance of other chairpersons, draw up a list of personal do's and don'ts
- Adapt good rules to your personality, don't try to change your personality
- Above all, enjoy the experience.

Good luck!

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