

# THE TEN COMMANDMENTS FOR ORGANIZING A CONFERENCE

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Once upon a time, an Economist, a Head of Department and a PhD Student were walking along a river and came upon a dusty bottle sealed with an ancient cork. On removing the cork to check if any wine were left, they were amazed to see a fierce genie burst from the bottle and bow before them. The genie offered each of the three a wish in gratitude for freedom: the Economist asked to be responsible for organizing the most successful conference in the history of the universe, the Head of Department asked not to be involved with it in any way, and the PhD Student asked to be on the Local Organizing Committee. Instantly, the three wishes were granted.

At one time or another during their careers, most Economists, Heads of Departments and PhD Students will have one or more opportunities to be involved in organizing a conference. As the opportunities for finding a grateful genie with a Graduate Diploma in Conference Organization are generally quite limited, 'the most successful conference ever imagined' typically relies on foresight, skill, hard work and Divine Intervention.

In my experience, those who have survived organizing a conference have adhered to the following Ten Commandments.

Commandment 1: Size is not important.

The alleged importance of size is a common misconception. A conference with 200 delegates is not twice as difficult to organize as one with 100. Conversely, a conference with 100 delegates is not twice as easy as one with 200. There is no known formula for determining the optimal number of delegates: for pessimistic conference organizers the number is zero, while for others it is somewhat greater than one.

Commandment 2: Imitate Mr. Magoo.

Being oblivious to whatever is going on around you will reduce your stress levels considerably. A guaranteed side-effect is that it will increase, in direct proportion, the stress levels of everyone else.

Commandment 3: Delegate responsibility.

This rule is particularly easy to follow if you are surrounded by highly responsible

colleagues and/or willing graduate students. There is a fine line between drawing upon the experience of established academic colleagues and the raw, unadulterated enthusiasm of early career researchers and graduate students. That comparatively rare commodity, enthusiasm, usually wins out.

Commandment 4: Choose professional consultants with care.

This rule refers to the hiring of external conference organizers in an attempt at total delegation. However, what might appear to be a standard expectation in a university environment may vary wildly from the non-academic world of your consultant.

Commandment 5: Be careful in choosing the conference accommodation.

Under no circumstances should the importance of conference accommodation be underestimated. Most academics (and students!) have horror stories to relate about student accommodation. My personal nightmare took place at this institution a few years ago and might be referred to as the Goldilocks Incident ('Someone is sleeping in my bed!') or a variation on musical chairs. Consider the following assessment of a certain college's accommodation (names have been suppressed to protect the guilty): 'After 10–20 hours of flying time and a 30-minute taxi ride from the airport, perhaps finding that your room key doesn't fit the lock is slightly annoying. However, finding that the key fits, but there is a woman in your bed (alternatively, the key fits, but the room is locked from the inside; the key fits, but the room is not made up; the key fits and the room is made up, but someone else is already using it; you are sleeping in 'your' bed, and someone else enters in the middle of the night, thinking it's their room), opens up all sorts of possible reactions! (I am not making this up — these things really did happen to a number of delegates!)' [Oxley, 1994, p. 200].

Commandment 6: Remember to organize conference lunches.

A hungry delegate is not a happy camper! For obvious reasons, this rule is ignored at your peril.

Commandment 7: The conference dinner must be excellent.

Most conference delegates will remember the dinner years after all else has been forgotten — it is best that their memories be fond ones.

Commandment 8: Select the keynote speakers wisely.

Riveting keynote speakers can add significantly to the quality of a conference, while those less adept tend to leave lasting impressions of an altogether different kind. Choose wisely.

Commandment 9: Think seriously about an after-dinner speaker.

If you can obtain the services of a charming and polished after-dinner speaker whose fee will not bankrupt the conference financially, then do so. If this is not possible, no after-dinner speaker might be preferable to the alternative.

Commandment 10: Questions you know the answer to you don't need to ask.

If you have anticipated every conceivable incidence of organizational adversity, the majority of the delegates will probably agree that they have attended an excellent conference, perhaps even 'the best conference in the history of the universe'.

## Reference

Oxley, L. (1994) International Congress on Modelling and Simulation, Perth, Australia 1993, *Journal of Economic Surveys*, 8 (2), 197–201.