



Compass Tool Path:

Tool / Collaboration Ecosystem / Design Collaborative Interventions

Conductive Spaces

**What will you
learn?**

How the physical setting of a meeting can influence the results of a conversation between stakeholders

**What will it help
you with?**

To make a conscious choice of the seating order for your next stakeholder event

**When is this
factsheet particularly
relevant?**

Throughout all phases of the **Dialogic Change Model** whenever you plan a meeting or event among stakeholders



For an in-depth understanding of making collaboration work, please view our open access publication

Kuenkel, P., Kuehn, E., Stucker, D., Williamson, D.F. (2020)

**Leading Transformative
Change Collectively**
A Practitioner Guide to
Realizing the SDGs



Understanding the influence of meeting settings

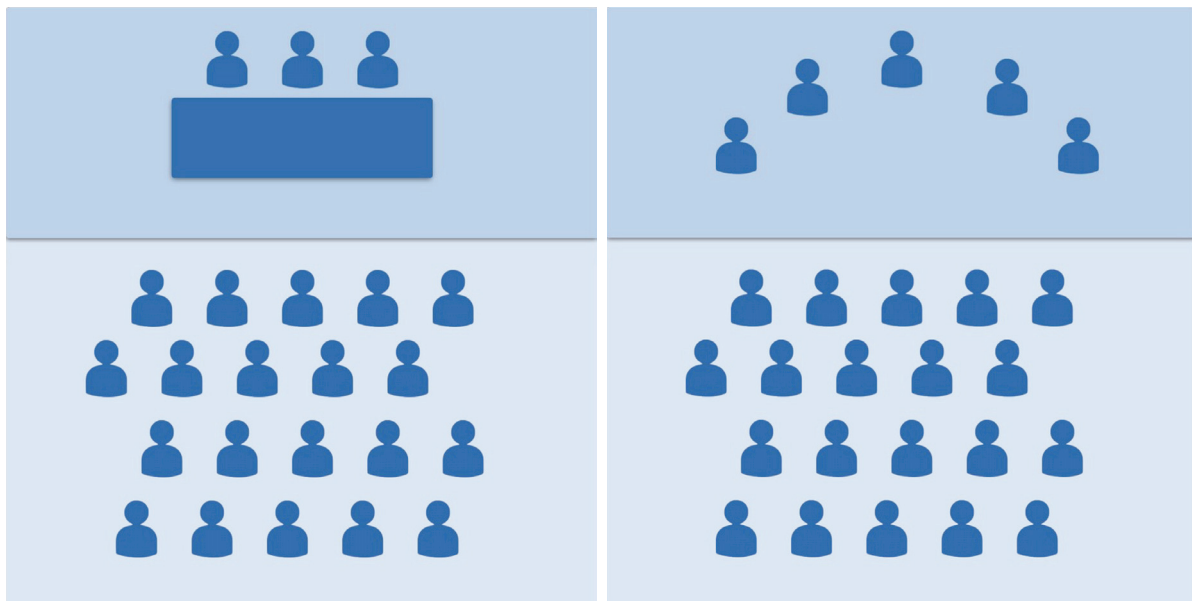


The physical setting of a meeting has a more decisive influence on the results of a conversation between stakeholder than we may be aware of. The structure of a seating order often determines to a great extent the way people communicate with each other. Getting the space right is paramount for co-creative events. Below you can find the description of typical seating orders for stakeholder events or meetings, and their impact on the emergence of collective intelligence.

The conference setting

In a formal conference setting, there is usually a panel at the front of the room, or a speaker's podium, and the meeting facilitator stands in front of a row of chairs. People, most of the time, silently listen to the speakers, the panelists or presenters, while occasionally having the chance to ask a question or make a short statement on a particular issue.

Quite often opposition will be raised in the form of statements, disguised as a question. There is, for the most part, a unilateral flow of communication. No real dialogue between speakers and listeners can emerge, and there is practically no communication between the participants.



Advantage

The **conference seating order** allows for a large number of participants. High-level supporters and speakers are given sufficient respect and feel acknowledged.

Disadvantage

The **conference seating order** creates a barrier between the more important people and the rest of the participants; it therefore emphasizes the hierarchy between speakers and listeners.

Conclusion

The setting is adequate for events that are planned to convey information, inspiration or guidance, but it is not suitable for stakeholder events that claim to authentically engage different stakeholders' perspectives and consider their contributions. This setting does not promote discussion, insight, encounter or experience.



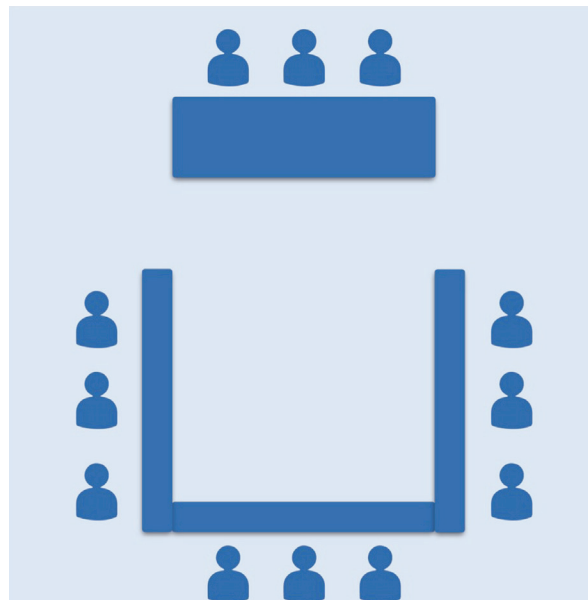
It is also incapable of bringing stakeholders into an exchange with each other – which is a prerequisite for a successful dialogue process.

Even a panel discussion does not easily allow for a fruitful conversation between the panel and the audience, who are likely to resort to making statements.

The u-shape setting

In a formal stakeholder event setting people often resort to a U-shaped table, as it is the most commonly used form for round table discussions which include different stakeholders. It is known to most stakeholders from the public sector, private sector and civil society across many cultures, and therefore does not provoke irritation when used for stakeholder events.

In hierarchical settings where protocol plays an important role, the highest person in charge often chairs such meetings. This may not always be a person skilled in ensuring that dialogue can take place. However, such meeting settings can also be facilitated by professional moderators, which can improve the likelihood of an equal contribution by all participating stakeholders.



Advantage

This **U-shape seating order** allows for a limited number of stakeholders to enter into a close exchange of perspectives and positions. For stakeholders who are already familiar with each other and have well established and communicative relationships, this setting can foster good results. It keeps the hierarchy safe, and may therefore be considered a first starting point for a stakeholder meeting in a very formal environment.

Disadvantage

The **U-shape seating order** establishes a hierarchy between the important people in the front and the other participants. The formality of the setting, unless facilitated by a very skilled professional moderator, will invite participants into conveying statements rather than entering into a conversation with each other. This will rarely lay the ground for developing ownership and collaboration. One can expect a communicative pattern of serial monologues (move/move), a debate (move/oppose), or, in very hierarchical settings, compliant communication (move/follow).

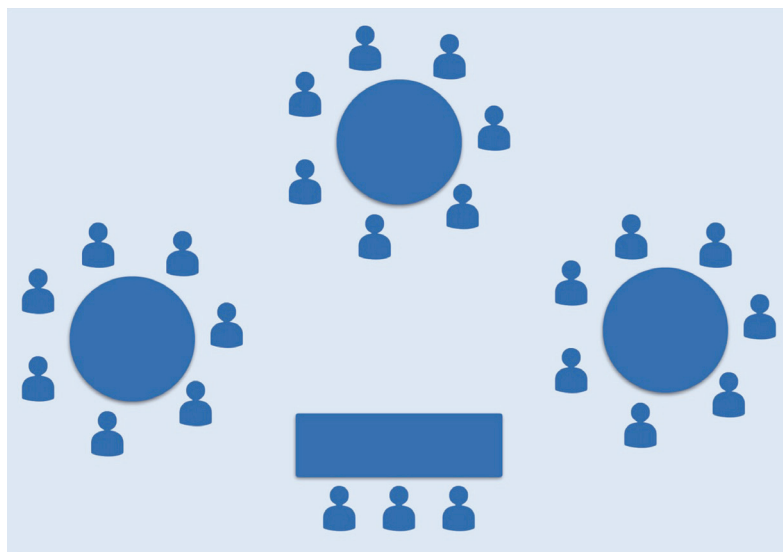
Conclusion

At the beginning of a collaboration initiatives, it may be impossible to convince decision-makers to use a seating order other than a U-shaped one. If there is no alternative, dialogic process facilitators should stay aware of the fact that this seating order can do little in achieving encounter, relationship building and a sense of collaboration. They must therefore find other ways of bringing these elements into the collaborative process.

For a kick-off events of multi-stakeholder collaboration the settings is not particularly suitable, as it rarely achieves a shift in communicative or relational patterns or permits participants to encounter each other in smaller working or discussion groups. This setting makes group work impossible, unless the facilitator plans for break-out sessions. It does not particularly further reflective or generative dialogue.

The round-table setting

In general, a round table seating order (alternatively: small square tables) can serve stakeholder events with more than 20 participants well. It is possible to combine input with exchange and conversations among stakeholders who sit at the table. In order to create an intimate atmosphere and to give participants the opportunity to engage in conversation, the number of people at the table should be at maximum eight, and the diameter of the table should allow for conversations across the table.



However, it also matters who sits around which table with whom. The key to success for co-creative events is a careful selection of table groups and therefore part of the preparation and the process design. It is advisable to orchestrate the seating in the beginning to make certain people meet certain other people, as this can create openness to change. Depending on what needs to be achieved, facilitators may compose

- tables of homogenous stakeholder groups, when it is important to show differences between stakeholder groups. This usually feels safer and is suited to letting stakeholder groups elaborate a joint position, or
- mixed tables with different stakeholder groups sitting at the same table, when getting to know each other and integration of perspectives is more important. This can be fruitful for exchange of views, and for working on solutions or recommendations etc. that are acceptable to all.



Advantage

The **round-table seating order** creates a level of intimacy that helps stakeholders connect with each other as people and across differences. Small working groups can take place at the tables and there is no need for break-out sessions that often compromise timing in events. This setting can host a large number of people (up to 100, depending on the size of the room).

Disadvantage

The **round-table seating order** feels uncomfortable to stakeholders who have not experienced it before. This may compromise their willingness to engage and this needs to be counteracted by a very conscious event design that allows them to get to know each other right at the outset of the event.

Conclusion

The round-table setting is the ideal seating order for co-creative stakeholder events as it can ensure that stakeholders get into a closer communication with each other, listen to different perspective from different tables but are still able to follow speakers and presenters. The round-table setting requires professional facilitators who are familiar with the setting and know how to balance interaction, presentation and working groups.

More important people, e.g., decision-makers, may have reservations towards such a setting as they do not have a distinguished seating position. Such a problem can be alleviated by creating an opening panel with important speakers at the beginning of a stakeholder event.

The setting requires, particularly if the stakeholder group is large, a very structured facilitation, and a focus on table related group work rather than plenary discussion.



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