

Lenny Lind is a pioneer in the field of integrating technology with large group dynamics, but even he never dreamed his methods would be applied to a group of nearly 4,500 people. But that was the size of the crowd that gathered at the Javits Center in New York City in July 2002 for a meeting that gave residents of the city and surrounding area an opportunity to respond to proposals for the redevelopment of the World Trade Center site. CoVision provided its fast-feedback system, placing networked laptop computers on 500 tables. As a result of the event, called "Listening to the City," officials made substantial changes to their proposed plans.

Other high-profile meetings supported by CoVision include:

► **Lance Armstrong Foundation LIVE-STRONG Summit:**

At a 2006 gathering in Austin, more than 700 cancer survivors and caretakers discussed what they considered the biggest obstacles in their experience with cancer. The format allowed participants to discuss sensitive ►

Innovative Meetings

By Barbara Palmer



Faster Feedback

A Fortune 100 company learns how interactive technology can speed up communication — and add value — to its meetings

Since 1992, Lenny Lind and his colleagues have helped support more than 3,000 meetings — for clients ranging from the Davos World Economic Forum to Lance Armstrong — with interactive meeting software designed to speed up and enhance communication within groups.

But only now, said Lind, president of CoVision, the San Francisco-based company he founded in 1985, might interactive meeting technology finally be on the verge of breaking out. The combination of a lingering recession and the perception of corporate excess has greatly increased

happening in the world, in demographics, gender, globalization — even some rumblings of what is now this economic meltdown," Lind said. "They felt like they needed to get their leaders together." As a result, the company recently used CoVision's meeting software when it convened more than 500 of its top executives for a global summit.

CoVision uses technology — specifically, networked laptop computers — to speed up the process of feedback cycles. "Communication is feedback cycles," Lind said. "Feedback cycles are going on all the time, the more the better."



TALKING BIG: A multi-site conference on the future of health care in California in 2007 included 1,000 people in Los Angeles, linked with groups of 500 in seven other California cities. Results were captured from each table in each city, and then polled.

scrutiny of travel and conference budgets. At the same time, the urgency of the challenges facing organizations makes meetings more vital than ever.

"Everyone is looking for value," Lind said. "Meeting face-to-face is only valuable if you are going to use the time to really build some kind of alignment. Meetings will have to produce real results, right there in the meeting room."

Speeding Up the Cycle

That was the realization of a major Fortune 100 company that last year "saw that big changes were

But things that happen easily in small groups — getting questions answered, gathering information from sources such as body language — slow down in large groups. The goal of what CoVision calls "fast-feedback methodology," Lind said, is to speed those cycles back up, enabling large groups to effectively engage in a single conversation.

At the Fortune 100 company's global summit, that meant gathering feedback during most of the speaker sessions over the course of three days. Executives had the opportunity to

ON THE WEB: Learn more about the theory and mechanics behind fast-feedback technology at www.covision.com.



Innovative Meetings

continued

talk about what they just heard, and two or three of the most salient points from each small group were recorded. A "theme team," made up of CoVision consultants and individuals within the company who had been trained by CoVision, then distilled the big messages that were coming from the whole room.

"We are primarily focused on how to design meetings where the outcome for the participants is that they are engaged, where they know their voice has been heard by the leadership," said Karl Danskin, a senior consultant at CoVision. "From the leadership point of view, the outcome we are designing for is a certain kind of alignment through discussion and dialogue. And really, what this is leading to is flexibility. Organizations can start to be more

three or four human brains are far superior to pattern-recognition software. The challenge is to find meaningful patterns in a very short period — which they accomplish, Lind said, by using methods they've honed over the years.

The main ideas identified by the theme team are given to the presenter — who, Lind said, returns to "respond to what the whole room is thinking." Interactive methods allow organizations to discern very quickly the most important topics at a particular session and throughout an entire conference, Lind said. People are much quicker to say what they're really thinking in small groups, he noted, and trust grows as participants become more and more forthcoming.

The whole system shares some characteristics with the World Cafe, a meeting process in which

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flexible, because they have some sense of what everyone is thinking, where there is agreement and disagreement."

How It Works

In simple terms, interactive meeting software creates alignment in groups by using technology to incorporate input from all attendees. At the start of an event, networked laptops are distributed on round tables throughout the room. Then, instead of a traditional presentation, "with somebody up there talking for 55 minutes with PowerPoint and five minutes of questions, we ask them to present for a slightly shorter time, maybe 35 or 40 minutes," Lind said. "Then we give people at the table five or 10 minutes to buzz around questions related to the presentation."

Table leaders use laptops to record the responses, which are accessed by the theme team. The team then quickly compresses the responses into a few main ideas. At some point in the future, there might be a way of automating the distillation process, Lind said, but at this point,

participants sit at round tables and in which group comments are recorded. But, according to Lind, there are crucial differences as well. "World Cafe is a great process, but it's a manual process," Lind said. "It takes time." The use of technology such as interactive meeting software, Lind said, can greatly compress the amount of time it takes for group alignment to occur — especially during senior-leadership meetings, where the stakes are high and time is precious.

Plus, the costs of using the technology have decreased as laptops have become less expensive, and it has become more common for many people at meetings to have their own laptops, Lind said.

Using fast-feedback technology is not inexpensive, but it can cost less than hiring a keynote speaker, Lind said. "Companies that use [the software] sometimes bring in subject-matter experts, but rarely bring in big-name speakers," he said. "Most of the people we are involved with decide that the experts are already in the room." ■



topics in small groups — and also helped a clear, shared vision to emerge.

► The 2005 Davos World Economic Forum:

A meeting of 700 world leaders used CoVision's accelerated-feedback methodology to quickly prioritize the most urgent problems facing world leaders.

► Clinton Global Initiative:

The first and second Clinton Global Initiative conferences, convened by former President Bill Clinton in 2005 and 2006, respectively, brought together 1,000 leaders from around the world to talk about problems such as world poverty and climate change — helped along by fast feedback.

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