

## Organizing an event, from VISION TO REVISION

[In the span of ten years IPH has organized a series of events and programs for various age-groups and on various themes. They have been marked by immaculate planning and deep emotional impact. How has IPH managed to hold so many events in a year and almost all of them worth remembering? What really goes behind the stage? Dr. Anand Nadkarni, the major crafts person behind the events divulges his secrets here.]

I have one sentence Mantra for all those who want to organize any public event. VISUALIZE it in every detail. And then, visualize it at least once a day in detail till the event is over. There is a method in this process. Try to see before your eyes the 'end-point' of the event. What is it going to be? What is the impact that you foresee? What can you imagine?

Apply two factors, first are emotions and second is time-sense. Imagine the emotional graph at the end-point. Visualize it in two forms; from the perspective of those on the stage and those in the auditorium. Then calculate the tempo of the event. That is the emotional graph and time-sense graph converging to a point. That is the crescendo; the climax; one for which you are working. Keep it as your reference point and roll your camera backwards. First in regular motion so you get to know the time-graph and then in slow motion, because now you want minute details.

Each event with its first breath comes alive with a life of itself. That life, in terms of time, may be from hours to days. If one is aware of this right from the beginning, then you end up designing the event effectively. After this life is complete the event has another life. This is in the audience's mind. If one is able to craft the first life well then second gets prolonged. In the second life the emotional graph also counts a lot.

So, let's say we are designing an event A for adolescents and their parents and we want the graphs to converge on a point when the parents and children are feeling emotionally and physically close and proud of each other. The topic is 'communication'. Then this session should be of maximum two hours in length. If it has to end at that point, then at the beginning the children and parents should be made to sit separately. The last activity should be such that it brings them 'together'. And the event has to end on that feeling of togetherness. They should leave the venue with that feeling. No formal speeches, vote of thanks, nothing. Which means, the 'feedback' has to be one part of the last activity. Therefore, what is going to be the backwards sequence?... now get the camera rolling.

Once you design the parts and come to the start of the event, then work on the links between the parts. The parts should not be disjointed. They have to flow from one to another. No jerks in emotions. There should be small precise points where emotions should be stirred and there should be points where people tend to see inwards, introspective moments.

When you are slowly working out and visualizing the process of the session, the physical details also start emerging. For such a session what should be the seating arrangement? It has to be flexible. You will need lots of open space what should be the distance between facilitator and audience? Minimum. So, 'stage' is not to be used. The facilitator should not be stationary. So, tell for a microphone with long wire and not a stationary one.

In this sequence, one comes to a point just before start of the event. You have to now write down, all details under the heading of 'venue arrangements'. This is your checklist of things that should be ready. You may now draw a diagram of the venue to visualize better. When you are working with a team, drawing diagrams is very important for conceptual clarity.

Whenever you make physical arrangements keep one dictum in mind: "If anything can go wrong, it will".

So, battery back up for tape-records, generator back up for stage have to be planned. Also think of the alternatives if this too fails. One has to keep oneself ready for all scenarios including alternatives in audience response. One has to keep reminding oneself, take care the things within your control. Leave the rest.

For one of our major community programs in June, we keep plastic bags ready. If it is a rainy day you give one small bag to each person to keep his/her shoes or chappals. Generally people sit cross-legged on the mattresses

but even if they sit on chairs we give them these bags. The venue stays clean. While going back they have return the bag at the counter. By this arrangement the bags are not littered around. In case it is a dry day, the bags remain packed.

The sense of anticipation is vital in designing an event. But it is important not to get panicky when one visualizes negative consequences. Stay cool and think about what best you can do in the circumstances.

Message from the event/session is and should be considered as the most important outcome of the entire endeavor. Any factor hindering it has to be dealt with decisively.

At times too many people want to talk, at times few people talk too much, during an event. Tight designing means being flexible when any idea to enrich the message is floated and being firm when anyone poses an obstacle.

Any eventuality, harming the tempo of the event has to be dealt with creatively. At our annual career conference, VEDH; after every session the faculties of the session were mobbed by students for their autographs. This used to disturb the timetable. We then started collecting autograph books from the students. With the popularity of this event growing, our guests had to sign at least four hundred times. So we thought of creating a one-page souvenir designed with two color printing with quotations relevant to that years theme. These pages are distributed to all students after the last session on the last day. Thus, a 'law & order' problem was solved.

Once the flow of a particular session is clear in your mind, it is very important to share it with your team, as well as guest faculty, during seminars – chat shows – interviews. In one of our programs with teen-agers, I wanted to interview a celebrity film star. I had taken care of all the possible factors in my mind, including the fact that some of the audience might just barge on the stage. The local police extended their support but we politely declined. The key was 'communication'. As compare of the event it was my task to involve the children in the program so much that the entry & exit of the superstar should go smoothly. It was an enormous challenge on which I started acting a day before. This was a two-day event and the star's session was the final one. I started establishing rapport with the audience by teaching them a theme-song and playing drums with them. I told them that this was going to be our own unique way of welcoming the star. We wanted to 'polish' that song till his session came. Before the star's entry teenagers were busy in 'preparations' for their 'great welcome'. It worked. At the end of the session we requested the star to sing on e of his popular songs which was then played on the sound system and he called on them to join him singing & clapping. They obliged enthusiastically. In that ecstasy, he had disappeared before the song ended.

Entire sequence of all his actions was in his hands, before that program, so he knew what was to be done. I had painstakingly visualized this and believe me, finally it turned out to be more beautiful than what I had imagined.

In an educational program if you have more than one faculty it is important to visualize them' together'. Their chemistries should match. Their personalities should be complimentary. They should have received information orally and in writing regarding their contributions. They also need inputs regarding nature of the audience. They should be provided with a map of the venue, driving directions, emergency numbers. After each event the faculty should receive a photograph of the event. Rather than spending on a costly bouquet of flowers, we prefer to give a single rose-bud with a decoratively packed chocolate attached to its stem. This has now become our tradition.

We try to follow another dictum, which has evolved over the years. When the event unfurls, the main organizer should be totally free. All the tasks must be delegated and it is time for him to relax. For this, meticulous paperwork and checklists are required to be made. These checklists and duty lists should be known to all major departmental heads. Our career conference draws crowds in thousands. Caregiver meets (for patients suffering from mental illnesses) have five to seven hundred participants. All this looks amazing to western observers who have heard so much about backwardness of Indians. Our education conference on a disorder like obsessive compulsive disorder had an attendance of two hundred and fifty people. Our educational programs for parents and citizens draw a group of almost a thousand people.

This happens only because we are organizing a chain of programs for many groups CONSISTENTLY for a decade. People start taking you seriously only when they are convinced about your motives and sustenance. But there is little time to bask in the glory, because at this point one has to be innovative, otherwise; the one successful formula becomes stale.

In first five years of IPH, its regular activity of summer camps got consistent support from the students of our community. But from 1996 onwards, precisely when Internet made its appearance on Indian horizon and electronic media became more colorful and wide-ranging, to get young adults in the age group of 15-19 became increasingly difficult. After careful scrutiny we found that, by this age most of our urban students had already made firm commitments with their career choices as well as hobbies. Our camps were of a more exploratory nature. This meant this model was now more relevant to 13-15 years age groups and the 15-19 age group needed different approach. When we offered them Sunday workshops on different themes the attendance was enthusiastic. On a workshop on Gestalt therapy, twenty three collage students enrolled themselves by paying a registration fee of Rs. 20/0 the subject of psychology we found was now popular choice amongst students but the teaching in most colleges found bookish and theoretical. On this background workshops from professionals actively working in the field was like cool breeze in summer. We have now decided to offer growth-related seminars to young adults though out the year. A course in personality development spanning over 8 sessions aroused limited response. It was titled 'ways & waves' but after three waves (such courses) it never left the shores.

The lesson we learnt is that continuous assessment of any community project/event/seminar is extremely important.

In all psycho-educational programs it is important to publicize the event in print and electronic media. We have experimented by giving invitations of such events to each and every client visiting the center. Generally there is an appeal in this pamphlet to spread the message. This gives around 10-15% response. Which means if you distribute 1000 pamphlets at least 150 people come for the event. This is a large turnout. Addresses of the families that get associated with IPH for any educational, developmental or therapy groups are maintained. According to the nature of the program information is posted to some groups. Volunteers working for various IPH programs are another group through which message spreads and people come and attend programs.

While designing the program, formality rituals and protocol is the first to get severed. If it is a caregivers or parents meet for example the formalities have to get over in around five-minutes, and by the time audience settles down mentally, the main program starts.

Generally the 'welcome-introductory remarks – introduction of faculty – vote of thanks' is bunched together and one person does this with precise communication. Thereafter the main program begins and ends. There are no formalities at the end. I have seen, formal functions sabotage the message from that event.

In IPH programs the compare is miserly with words. He/she only links the event. He/she does not dominate the event. Their main task is to maintain the flow. Their oratory skills are not at stake at such times. While interviewing a person, questions asked are precise and are designed to echo the queries in the minds of the audience. There is not even a hidden intention of 'trapping' the interviewee in conversation.

Plans and checklists of all community programs are reviewed periodically by a core group. IPH team members are allotted, organizing tasks of specific events one year in advance in the yearly calendar. Since 1997, all community outreach programs including group – psycho-educational programs are planned an year in advance. Implementation of this timetable is the minimum requirement. We try to stick to this schedule and our record is that of 90-95% conformity. Working more is allowed. For example, the 1999 timetable had planned five batches of Palakshala in the academic year, in reality we completed ten batches.

This yearly planning gives all team members advance notice and impetus to plan their events. Another advantage is, with dates known; eminent faculty members can be contacted almost a year in advance.

