How to Chair a Conference Session

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The one take home message...

The Session Chair:

• Facilitates the conference process
• Allows communication – a two way process

• Successful Chairs lead to a successful conference
• The opposite is also true
Agenda

- What is a conference?
- The role of the Chair as a facilitator
- Some Dos and Don’ts
What is a conference?
A cascade of definitions

• A **conversation** is a spoken exchange of thoughts, opinions, and feelings

• A **meeting** is an assembly or gathering of people to discuss an issue or other specific purpose

• A **conference** is a meeting for consultation, discussion and exchange of views

• A **symposium** is a meeting or conference for discussion of a topic, especially one in which the participants form an audience and make presentations
Bottom line – a 2 way transfer
The role of the Chair as facilitator
A director of conversations

But NOT a dominator of ideas
A Facilitator ...

- Enables conversations
- Promotes the sharing of ideas
- Makes presenting information easier
- Simplifies acquiring complex concepts
- Improves the experience of the conversation
Some Dos and Don’ts

NB! Some requirements will differ from discipline to discipline
Things to do before the session...

- Check with conference organisers exactly what they had in mind wrt the purpose of the session
- Meet the presenters
  - Share with them the purpose of the session
  - Discuss their biographies
  - Reinforce the timings; start time, finish time, Q&A time
- Load their presentations before the sessions begins
- Check that the venue is suitable (light, sound, space)
Things to do at beginning of session...

- Start the session on time – get people to take up their seats
- Set the context of the session
- Discuss the programme for the session
- Lay down the ground rules
  - Time for presentation
  - Time for discussion
  - What will happen when
- Introduce each speaker

Timing is important
Things to do during the session...

• Keep speakers to time
• Take notes
• Manage Q&A sessions
• Ask leading questions
• Encourage 2 way conversations
Things to do at the end of session...

- Provide a brief summary of session
- Thank speakers
- Thank audience for participation
- (Hand out gifts if appropriate)
- Talk about the next session briefly
- Give any announcements

Timing is important
Don’t

- Allow speakers to go over time
- Allow a question from the audience to derail the session
- Inadvertently stop conversations
- Go power mad and dominate the session
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Thank you, Siyabonga