Highpoints From the
Amplifying Your Effectiveness Conference

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Improvements within an organization require people skills as well as technical skills. The Amplifying Your Effectiveness Conference held last November in Phoenix, Ariz., provided presentations for both sets of skills.

Improvement to an organization, project, or process usually requires more than just technical skills; it requires people skills. The Amplifying Your Effectiveness (AYE) conference strives to give attendees the personal skills required for improvement. As one of the AYE hosts, Jerry Weinberg states, "[The AYE] conference looks at technical problems from this human point of view."

The AYE 2002 conference was held in Phoenix, Ariz., from Nov. 3-6, 2002. The attendees were from technical positions such as project managers, software developers, software testers, and quality assurance personnel. While they were seeking new information on performing their jobs better, they also appreciated the atmosphere of the conference.

The AYE conference may be different than other conferences you have attended. Attendance is limited to the first 100 registrants and use of slides during a presentation is discouraged. The AYE hosts want speakers to talk to attendees, discussing information from their own experiences instead of simply reading from slides. As a result, speakers sit in a circle with the presentation attendees and discuss the topic of the presentation. The presenter notes key points on a flip chart during the discussions.

The range of issues at the AYE conference dealt with personal skills such as writing, presenting, dealing with different personalities, working with differences, working under stress, enhancing personal influence, effective feedback, and change-agent skills. Technical presentations addressed quality vs. speed, technical reviews, service level agreements, sharing project status, and dealing with project problems.

All the presentations included an activity to use the ideas shared in the presentation. The presenters then called on the attendees to provide their solutions before sharing solutions from the presenters. One example of this was the presentation "Building Writing Skills and Confidence: A Writing Workshop" by Johanna Rothman and Naomi Karten (two well-respected authors). During this presentation, the participants were challenged to write a story on a variety of topics. The results of the exercise were then shared, along with several tips for effective writing. These tips are included in the "Tips and Ideas for Building Writing Skills and Confidence" box.

When asked, a repeat attendee said she liked the conference because she preferred the focus on people skills vs. technical skills. One of the key attributes of

> *"The Amplifying Your Effectiveness conference is geared to help those with technical strengths tap into their interpersonal and relational talents."*

this conference was the personal touch from each host. When not presenting, the hosts made themselves available to all conference attendees to answer questions and discuss issues. This invitation was available during the welcome dinner, daily lunches, and even anticipated for people that may be sitting in the halls not interested in any presentations. However, I was told the hosts never found this last situation at the AYE conference.

A Few Example Models
Popular ideas shared at the conference included the Satir method and models. The Satir tools were developed by Virginia Satir, a family therapist, as a "self-esteem tool kit" and are aimed at helping people realize that they own the resources necessary to deal with daily situations but often forget to use them, especially when feeling powerless. Following are the tools included with this kit:
- **Wisdom Box.** The ability to know what is right and what is not right for you.
- **The Golden Key.** The ability to open up new areas for learning and practicing, and to close them if they do not fit for you at this time.
- **The Courage Stick.** The courage to

Tips and Ideas for Building Writing Skills and Confidence

1. Learn from others. Find role models – people whose writing you like – and study their style. Read with intentionality. Notice what strikes you as good or bad writing.
2. Writing anything is better than writing nothing. Practice makes less imperfect. Make every writing opportunity an opportunity to develop your writing skills.
3. All good writing starts with the initial rough draft. Your first draft is just the starting point. Learn to trust yourself and the process.
4. Don't fall in love with your own words. Edit ruthlessly. Focus on tight writing. Become best friends with your delete key.
5. Write like you speak. Eschew terminological obfuscation and fancy formality. Write in a conversational me-to-you tone.
6. Let your subconscious do your writing for you. A great deal of writing happens when you are away from the keyboard. Write, put it away, then look at it later on with fresh eyes.
7. When (not if) you get stuck, notice your writing "shoulds." Acknowledge them and set them aside. Take a break, then write an email about what you are stuck writing about.
8. Find a setting that is conducive to writing. Use your favorite font. Play your favorite music. Find your favorite location. Use whatever approach works best for you.
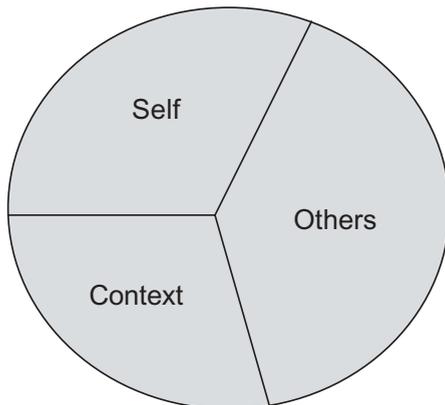
Figure 1: *Congruence Model*

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try new things, and to risk failure.
- **The Wishing Wand.** The ability to ask for what you want, and to live with not getting it.
- **The Detective Hat.** The ability to examine data and to reason about those data.
- **The Yes/No Medallion.** The ability to say *yes*, the ability to say *no* (thank you), and the ability to mean what you say.

Another model discussed was the Congruence Model (Figure 1). The intent of this model is to remind the user that in dealing with different situations, the person should consider oneself, others involved in the situation, and the context of the situation. The inclusion or exclusion of any of these elements results in a stance that that may be blaming, placating, overly reasonable, or congruent.

A similar model shared at the conference was the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) (Figure 2). This model describes possible reactions to conflict based on consideration of self vs. consideration of others. The five possible reactions are displayed in Figure 2.

The TKI reactions are as follows:
- **Competing.** The goal is to win.
- **Avoiding.** The goal is to delay or avoid.
- **Compromising.** The goal is to find a middle ground.
- **Collaborating.** The goal is to find a win-win situation.
- **Accommodating.** The goal is to yield.

To use the models when in an uncomfortable confrontation, the user should take a moment to consider where he or she is relevant to the model and where he or she would like to be. Then, modify behavior appropriately.

Many attendees considered the closing session to be the highlight of the AYE conference, since it was an opportunity to network those who still had questions or other needs with people who could help.

The AYE conference is geared to help those with technical strengths tap into their interpersonal and relational talents. It aims to demonstrate that these types of talents can be learned in the same way that technical skills can be learned.

In the interest of sharing technical expertise, the AYE 2003 conference is providing one scholarship to each of the winning projects of CrossTalk's 2002 U.S. Government's Top 5 Quality Software Projects contest. This will ensure attendees the opportunity to interface with some of the best software developers in the United States. Readers interested in learning more about this conference can access the AYE Web site at <www.ayeconference.com>.◆

Figure 2: *Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument*