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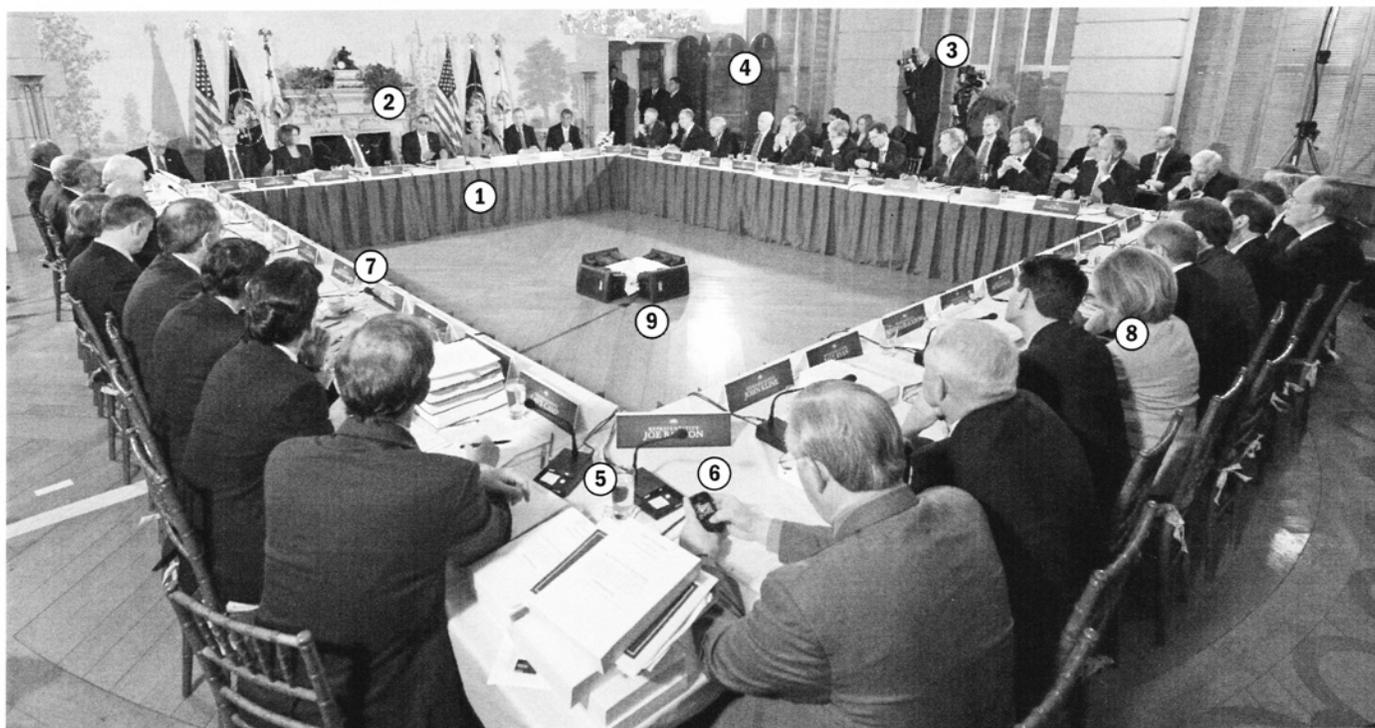
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Health Summit Failed? Blame Bad Meeting Design

These Nine Mistakes Doomed the Meeting from the Start

By **BOB FRISCH**



No sooner had last month's White House summit on health-care reform concluded than "leaders from both sides... held separate news conferences that made it clear they were no closer to an agreement than they were at the start of the day," the Wall Street Journal reported.

It's no wonder. All you need to do is look at a photo of meeting to tell that the effort was doomed from the start.

In 27 years of designing and facilitating corporate meetings, I have rarely seen one with so much at stake that so obviously suffered from a lack of thoughtful design.

Here's what they did wrong -- mistakes that anyone organizing a meeting should avoid.

1. Too many people in the room.

Having 40 attendees is fine if the goal is to

brainstorm or broadly communicate information to important stakeholders. But for crafting compromises, allocating resources or making decisions, a smaller group of six to 12 can accomplish a lot more.

Of course in corporate settings, as well as politics, certain people have to be included by virtue of their position. In such cases you can break the meeting into two sessions. Let the full 40 air the issues and brainstorm potential solutions in the morning and then convene a smaller group to make real progress in the afternoon. Forty people is too large a group to forge a compromise.

2. No neutral facilitator to run the meeting.

Not every meeting needs facilitation, and third party facilitators are virtually unknown in a political setting. But if compromise is the goal, you need someone in the front of the room who is neutral about

the outcome - an 'honest broker' to run the meeting. Instead, President Obama, perhaps the person with the greatest stake in the outcome, chose to lead the Summit himself.

3. Letting outsiders in the room.

A major reason for failure lies in the presence of the press. Reaching compromises requires a confidential setting in which people can float "what-ifs" and speak freely without worrying about how they might sound. Outside observers, here or in critical corporate meetings, make genuine negotiation impossible.

4. No small group discussions.

Compromise also requires that participants be able to confer, formally and informally, in smaller sub-groups. In formal breakout sessions, mixed groups can make mutual

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progress on contentious issues. In informal huddles, such as the cloakrooms of the House and Senate, they can candidly explore what's possible, or members of a particular faction can check with their people to see where the boundaries of their position really lie, or how they might be moved. We didn't see any mention of breakout sessions in news coverage, and few informal opportunities for discussion were built into the summit.

5. No collaborative tools.

The photo shows an absence of "common collaborative space." There are no flip charts, whiteboards or projection screens for capturing ideas and focusing collective attention. Attendees have no means of collecting concepts, or of visually building common solutions together.

6. No ban on cell phones or Blackberries.

In the foreground of the picture you can see a Congressman texting. But don't blame him. Either there were no clear ground rules established for the day - including a rule about shutting off phones and Blackberries - or the rules weren't enforced. A

lack of basic meeting discipline hinders genuine engagement with the issues.

7. Room itself is too small.

The Garden Room of the Blair House, where the meeting was held, is charming: an elegant chandelier, a marble fireplace behind the President, a fresco painting of an outdoor scene on the wall. But for a meeting aimed at compromise, everything about it is wrong.

For starters, it's too small. Attendees are crammed at the table shoulder to shoulder with no space for stretching or relaxing. The chairs the participants are sitting in are small and uncomfortable. Physical discomfort for six or seven hours isn't conducive to compromise.

8. Political allies are grouped together.

Attendees are also seated in party clusters - groups of Democrats alternating with groups of Republicans. By intermingling party members more, the meeting designers could have encouraged side conversations that might have helped foster compromise.

9. Seating encourages confrontation.

The square configuration of the table itself encourages confrontation and inhibits the floating of new alternatives. Having a neutral point of focus allows a more free-flowing conversation. If you remember the famous photos of President Nixon meeting with Chairman Mao, they were seated next to each other facing in the same direction - not across from each other. This type of seating allows for cooperation and conciliation. In the case of the Summit, a U-shaped table, with a facilitator, a flip chart or some other neutral point of focus in the open end, would have been better.

There is no picture-perfect meeting design. By starting with the objective of the meeting and then designing all three elements around it - who's in the room, the rules of engagement and the physical layout - the organizers of the Health Care Summit wouldn't necessarily have guaranteed a success in reaching compromise. But by ignoring those elements they certainly guaranteed failure.

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