

# And when delegates go home...

"This," the Honourable Lloyd Axworthy told delegates from more than 150 countries assembled at the Government Conference Centre in Ottawa, "is our agenda for action." It was a dramatic, powerful moment at the close of three days of dramatic, powerful moments.

The date was December 4, 1997. The event: the Landmine Treaty Conference. The then-Minister of Foreign Affairs was brandishing a thick, blue-covered document that captured two-and-a-half days of discussion, and a consensus that had been years in the making.

The document was the work of an on-site team of 40 note-takers, writers, editors, translators, designers, and project managers, and it was a tribute to the quality of a conference report that can be prepared for a high profile event with a large budget.

Few events command the level of resources available to an international treaty-making conference. But at a time when a simple three-day gathering of 100 senior administrators can cost \$100,000 just for direct meeting-related expenses – not including costs of travel and accommodation and time – it makes sense to pay attention to the value that you get for your money. And to the value you give participants for their money and their time.

This requires an initial focus on strategic objectives. Establish them well in advance, and have a clear understanding of how every step you take – including the planning and reporting of meetings – takes you closer to your objective.

**"THE 1997 AGENDA FOR ACTION ON LANDMINES GENERATED CRITICAL DIPLOMATIC MOMENTUM BEHIND THE NEW OTTAWA TREATY COMBINED WITH A CLARITY OF VISION OF HOW THE GLOBAL MOVEMENT TO BAN LANDMINES COULD BEST COOPERATE TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE ON THE GROUND FOR MILLIONS OF PEOPLE AFFECTED BY THE SCOURGE OF LANDMINES."**

Bob Lawson (Senior Policy Advisor, Non-Proliferation, Arms Control and Disarmament, Foreign Affairs Canada) on value of the 1997 conference report as support for follow-on work

- When deciding what to report, use a very broad definition of 'meeting'. It doesn't need to be a group of people assembled in a room. Technology provides a range of tools – from an old-fashioned conference call to a webinar to a videoconference. These tools can now interact with, add value to, and occasionally take the place of live meetings in ways that would have been unimaginable five years ago. What sort of report do you need? A verbatim transcript is typically required only for judicial or quasi-judicial proceedings. For any other meeting, the key question is: How will the report be used and

**NO ONE SHOULD HOLD A MEETING FOR ANY PURPOSE OTHER THAN CHANGING THE FUTURE.**

The value of meetings should be calculated solely according to the outcomes they generate. Meetings are very prominent (and expensive) links between the months or years of work that precede them and the series of events that follow them. A record of a meeting must be useful. It must serve as a tool that supports the work flowing from discussions and decisions.

For a meeting to be an instrument of change – the change required by your strategic objectives – a well-designed reporting process is every bit as vital as a well-designed agenda.

Which leads to the obvious question: How are you creating your 'agenda for action' at the end of your next meeting? Here are a few vital considerations:

- Your report (in particular, what to capture and how to report it) should be planned according to the objectives you've established for your event. (If you can't state those objectives clearly, you're probably not ready to meet.)
- Using in-house resources can be the least costly option, and can help to develop a body of expertise, but only if in-house resources are available. Otherwise you risk exhausting your staff, waiting many months for your report, diverting resources that ought to be involved in following through on initiatives and decisions from the meeting – or all three. But if you decide to go outside, select an experienced reporting firm.

by whom? Do you need simple minutes of decision, or a chronological or thematic record that provides more detail on arguments and discussion? Do you need it same day, next day, or next week? Think carefully about how this important tool will be used.

The report need not be prepared by a 'hired gun' from outside the organization. It must, however, be prepared by someone whose sole responsibility at the meeting is to take detailed notes that will form the basis of the report, and who has been allocated a reasonable amount of time immediately after the meeting to turn the notes into a record of discussion that will support the achievement of your objectives.

The onus is on you to ensure that you get the report you need; to find the point at which your reporting needs meet your budget. Many people pay little attention to this issue, or fail to consider it with an eye to the strategic objectives the meeting is intended to support.

The gavel closing a meeting marks the beginning of a vital task: Turning those notes into a concise, timely, readable account of the discussion – one that records decisions and identifies opportunities: The task of creating your 'agenda for action'.

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