Moderating a Conference Session: The Important Role of the Session Chair and Keys to Holding a Successful Session

Based on the “Short Road to Great Presentations” by Peter & Cheryl Reimold
With special thanks to the MST TC
Edited by the E&TM Group
The Session Chair’s Role

- Form a coherent theme for the session
- Set a positive tone and maintain momentum
- Encourage audience participation and lively discussion
- Help and protect the presenters

“The Session Chair can make the difference between a successful session and one that appears pointless, disorganized, ...... or thoroughly upsetting”
The Session Chair’s Virtues (PQR)

• **Preparation**
  - Start early

• **Questioning and Summarizing Skills**
  - Focused questions
  - Timely summaries

• **Responsibility**
  - It’s YOUR session
  - Set the rules and maintain control
Track Chairs and Session Chairs

A Short Diversion
The Track Chair and the Session Chair

- **Track Chairs** develop an overarching theme
  - Consisting of a number of sessions
  - Strategic

- **Session Chairs** develop the specifics of their particular Session
  - Consisting of a grouping of related paper topics
  - Tactical
  - Where the rubber meets the road!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Track 1</th>
<th>Track ...</th>
<th>Track N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Session 1</td>
<td>Session 1</td>
<td>Session 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper 1</td>
<td>Paper 1</td>
<td>Paper 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper ...</td>
<td>Paper ...</td>
<td>Paper ...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper N</td>
<td>Paper N</td>
<td>Paper N</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session N</th>
<th>Session N</th>
<th>Session N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paper 1</td>
<td>Paper 1</td>
<td>Paper 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper ...</td>
<td>Paper ...</td>
<td>Paper ...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper N</td>
<td>Paper N</td>
<td>Paper N</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
If You are a Track Chair (1 of 3)

- Start planning about 1 to 1 ½ years out
- Pick a theme of which you are familiar and have an interest
- Make a list of possible topics on the theme
- Make a list of people who are most knowledgeable on those topics
If You are a Track Chair (2 of 3)

- Contact those people and see if they are interested in:
  - Being a Session Chair or Session Co-Chair
  - Recommending someone to be a Session Chair
  - Writing and presenting a paper
  - Recommending someone to write and present a paper
  - Co-authoring a paper if you can find someone who is acceptable to them
  - Co-authoring a paper with a student or young professional in a mentorship role
If You are a Track Chair (3 of 3)

• If the person is legendary in the field
  ▪ Ask if they would be willing to provide an oral history to a student who can use it in a paper

• Consider panel discussions
  ▪ If this format is more suitable to your topic(s)
  ▪ If you cannot fill a session with papers
If You are a Session Chair (1 of 4)

- Work closely with your Track Chair
- Get to know the other Session Chairs in your Track
- If there is more than one Session Chair for your session (i.e., you are a Co-Chair)
  - Establish a protocol on how you will work together
  - Agree on division of duties
  - Ensure you re-visit these duties as the conference date approaches
If You are a Session Chair (2 of 4)

- **Building Your Session**
  - Contact people and see if they are interested in:
    - Writing and presenting a paper
    - Recommending someone to write and present a paper
    - Co-authoring a paper if you can find someone who is acceptable to them
    - Co-authoring a paper with a student or young professional in a mentorship role
  - If the person is legendary in the field
    - Ask if they would be willing to provide an oral history to a student who can use it in a paper
If You are a Session Chair (3 of 4)

• Building Your Session (cont)
  - Consider panel discussions
    - If this format is more suitable to your topic(s)
    - If you cannot fill a session with papers
  - Determine which presenters may be a “big draw”
    - If you are the 1st session of the 1st day, put them in the middle of the session
    - If you are in the afternoon, put them up front
• Building Your Session (cont)
  ▪ Determine which presenters may be coming from overseas or may have difficulty traveling
    – Higher probably that these presenters may be no shows
    – Put these presenters at the end of your session, so you don’t lose your audience and/or your momentum
  ▪ Sandwich Students and Young Professionals between your big draw presenters
Actively Recruit at the Previous Year’s Event

- Actively recruit topics – and papers – at the previous event
  - For example, if building a session for the 2013 ASM, recruit from people who are at the 2012 ASM
- Leverage the enthusiasm from the current conference
- There is a high probability these folks will be returning to the next year's conference
- There is still a lot of time until their abstracts are due
- They can discuss ideas with their colleagues at the current conference
Follow up on Commitments

• If Session Chairs or Presenters are wavering, find out why
  ▪ Try to keep them committed
• Offer to adapt to their needs
  ▪ Different session, different time, different day, etc
• Try to eliminate “place holder” abstracts
• Ensure you receive a full abstract
Back to the Session Chair Focus
Early Preparation is Critical

• Tie separate contributions to a main theme
  ▪ Guide presenters on their contribution relative to the theme
  ▪ Inform each presenter of other contributions to the session
  ▪ Beware of using initial abstracts for preparation – the paper may be very different!

• Get the best out of your presenters
  ▪ Motivate them to prepare well and early
  ▪ Offer to review their papers / presentations

Your diligent preparations will help minimize no-shows and last minute withdrawals
Getting the Best out of Your Presenters

• Ensure papers are uploaded and submitted through ScholarOne prior to the deadline
  ▪ “No paper, No podium”

• Recognize that there may be issues emailing files
  ▪ File size, firewalls

• Verify that the presentations are compatible and will project well
  ▪ Colors, font sizes, content

• Dry run the presentation
  ▪ Ensure the material fits comfortably into a 20 minute window
One Month to One Week Before Your Session (1 of 2)

- Obtain content and biographical information from presenters
- Ask presenters to prepare 2-4 questions that the audience might ask
- Call each of your presenters
  - Talk to them at least once each prior to the conference (don't rely on just trading emails)
- Invite audience members who could enhance the quality of the session
- Develop a session overview
  - Find a unifying theme
  - Develop focused questions to stimulate discussion
  - Formulate session rules
• Prepare a session agenda slide that can be projected prior to the start of the session or during gaps
  ▪ Provides a professional feeling to the session
  ▪ Provides a good visual for session gaps

• Prepare a TC “advertisement” slide that can be projected during gaps
  ▪ Augments the session agenda slide
  ▪ Showcases your TC

• Prepare a “stand-in” presentation for last minute withdrawals
  ▪ Sponsoring TC “overview”
  ▪ Relevant topic that pertains to the session theme
Speakers Breakfast

- Plan ahead to meet with your presenters (when and where)
- Review your session overview and presenters’ questions
- Review biographical information
  - Verify pronunciations
- Establish time-keeping rules
  - Signaling procedures
  - Ensure presenters understand your commitment to keeping the session on track
- Review and agree on session protocol
  - Q&A format
- If you have your own computer, offer to put presenters’ presentations on your computer
  - This will save time when switching from one presenter to another
Just Prior to The Session

• Check your Speaker’s board to see if there are any changes
  ▪ No-shows and last minute withdrawals
• Familiarize yourself with the room
  ▪ Where is the entrance / exit
  ▪ How is the sound
  ▪ Do you have all the equipment you need
  ▪ Any IT issues
Starting The Session

• Have session agenda on screen
• Welcome audience and invite participation
• Give a brief overview of the theme and how each talk contributes to it
• Remind all attendees of time boundaries
• Involve the audience from the start
  ▪ Mention that you have possible questions that you will share before each paper
  ▪ Invite them to note down and ask questions
  ▪ Provide guidance on how many questions
  ▪ Tell them when to ask questions
• Introduce the first presenter
Introducing the Presenters

• State the name, title, and biographical / other information relevant to the topic
• Announce the title of the presentation
• Mention questions or topics that the audience should consider

Prepare well and be accurate
Give the presenter the best start possible
Running the Session (1 of 2)

- **Support each presenter**
  - Proper introduction
  - Help with technical issues and emergencies

- **Organize and control Q&A**
  - Invite questions at the proper time
  - Repeat questions, if necessary
  - Direct the question to the appropriate presenter
  - Rephrase if necessary for clarity
  - Exclude or parry off-topic questions
  - Enforce Q&A rules including the per-person question limit
Running the Session (2 of 2)

- **Stimulate discussion**
  - Ask focused questions when appropriate
  - Call on specific people, if necessary
  - Suggest ranges of questions to ask
  - “Connect” questions and comments to important themes

- **Enforce timing rules**
  - Signal presenters on the time remaining
  - Politely bring a talk to an end, if it’s going over the allocation
    - Avoid repeated “begging”
Question Types

- Open question
  - What can you tell me about flight simulation?
- Closed question
  - Is flight simulation effective for training?
- Focused question
  - What is the trade-off between simulation fidelity and transfer of training?
- Use background statement + focused question
Managing Hostile or Off-Topic Questions

- You are in charge – protect the presenter
- Be gracious but firm with the questioner
- Rephrase
- Use well-meaning humor to deflect or rephrase the question
Ending on a High Note (Closing the Session)

• Ensure you allow enough time for the closing statement
• This is your chance to present the “take-home message” to the audience
• Craft your summary using:
  - Your initially prepared notes and questions
  - Audience comments and questions
• Remind the audience of other sessions coming up with related focus or relevance
• Thank the presenters for all the good work
• Thank the audience for listening and contributing
Closing Sequence

- Thank all the presenters and audience
- Summarize the session
- Remind the audience of other sessions coming up with related focus or relevance
- Close on the main message of value to the audience
- Thank the presenters and audience again
Post-Session Activities

• Request feedback
  ▪ From presenters
  ▪ From selected attendees
  ▪ Accept and record feedback from all

• Complete AIAA session form
  ▪ To aid future conference planning

• Submit Candidates for Best Paper Award(s)
You’ve graciously volunteered to be a AIAA Conference Session Chair

THANK YOU!