

BEIGE

By Charles Chandelier III



Hello there. My name is Charles Chandelier III. Yes, that's right—I'm a chandelier. And I have to tell you, I've had it with beige. I don't mean the colour of the meeting room walls – although they're bad enough. No, I mean meeting content and processes that are anemic, banal, blah, bland, boring, characterless, colourless, commonplace, drab, driveling, dry, feeble, flat, ho-hum, inane, innocuous, lifeless, limp, mild, mundane, ordinary, plain, pointless, prosaic, spiritless, stale, subdued, tame, tedious, tenuous, tired, trite, unimaginative, vapid, watery, weak, wearisome and wishy-washy.

I've spent the last seven years hanging from the ceiling of the ballroom in a major Canadian hotel. In that time, I've had an opportunity to look down (not that I had much choice, mind you) on a wide variety of meetings beneath my, well, beneath my sparkling crystal lights. In some cases, these meetings have been small ones with only one section of the ballroom open. In others, they've been large conferences with more than 2,000 people. And I must tell you that beige meetings just aren't cutting it anymore. In fact, they never did, but most people didn't seem to care as much when the economy was strong and money was flowing more freely than it is today.

It's quite common for me to look down on conferences and conventions that follow the very same pattern, time after time, and that fail to deliver value to the participants or their organizations. Speaker after speaker gets up and talks about a subject that's marginally relevant (but hopefully interesting) to the audience seated in front of him or her. Participants are bored stiff, pretending to listen (although it's mostly about remaining vertical whenever their manager looks over), waiting to get back to the office where they can continue to do things the way they always have. They haven't had to actually struggle with any radically new ideas or perspectives and the current flavour of the month approach to business has just been reinforced by a popular speaker who wrote the book that was distributed to all participants before the meeting began. And, by the way, the speaker was likely chosen by a senior executive who wanted to prove that whatever he or she professed to be true, was in fact true. The result? No controversy. Comfortable participants without much to complain about except the lineups at break time and the dessert selections available at lunchtime.

What a lost opportunity! With most information available to most companies most of the time, there is little competitive advantage to

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present “common wisdom” that is widely available to everyone else in the same industry. Bragging rights for booking the speaker(s) who wrote the book(s) are available for those who enjoy name-dropping as a competitive sport, however, there is not much value for the organization.

One of the best ways to establish a sustainable market advantage is to find and use information the competition is unlikely to pay attention to, or to take a look at common information from an uncommon perspective. Enter the need for a controversial speaker or a controversial process to bring a colourful end to the world of beige.

Wikipedia defines controversy as “a state of prolonged public dispute or debate, usually concerning a matter of opinion.” Traditional sources of controversy are typically politics, history, religion and philosophy. These tend to be areas where people have strongly held opinions, largely based on their truth and their facts, rather than the truth and the facts (if such even exist).

In organizations, the truth and facts presented in meetings tend to be extrapolations of corporate strategy or senior executive beliefs – controversy is neither valued nor welcomed. Not much wrong with that if you want your employees to line up like mindless sheep, unable or unwilling to think for themselves, and quite content to graze in a rigorously defined pen that requires uncompromising compliance. If you believe in unerring, omnipotent leadership, that might work. However, I have witnessed from my elevated position on the ballroom ceiling the value that comes from wrestling with controversial opinions which require re-examining corporate goals and philosophy in a wider context. From that, a deeper and broader understanding of larger issues emerges – an understanding that allows participants to make up their own minds about the most appropriate action they should take upon returning to work.

Some of the most controversial (and valuable) conversations I have heard resulted from provocative explorations on the following:

- Revenue at Any Cost
- Customer Revenge – A Marketing Opportunity
- Caring Organizations are Failing Organizations
- Enraged Employees Trump Engaged Employees
- Branding is for Cattle, Not for Companies
- Social Media Creates Mediocre Societies
- Fail Fast and Fail Often – Success Isn't All It's Cracked Up to Be

Why do meeting planners (both internal and external) avoid recommending controversial speakers or processes? Here are some of the reasons I've heard.

- “We want everyone to be happy.” (As if that drives any meaningful organizational change.)
- “The result will be unpredictable.” (Is the market predictable?)
- “The higher-ups will never go for it.” (So, let's not even mention the possibility to them.)
- “I don't know how to find the 'right' controversial speaker.”
- “Someone might be offended.” (So might participants who feel their intelligence and ability to think for themselves isn't recognized.)

- “We can't afford to take a risk. If the client doesn't like it, we may not get hired back again.” (By all means, worry about your own skin first, rather than the potential benefit to your client)
- “We've never done it that way before.” (So, we'd better not attempt it now, even though the topic of the conference is, say, innovation.)

If you are willing to summon the courage to leave beige behind, and create meeting experiences that are rich, meaningful and colourful ones that will really drive value for your clients, consider including more of the following:

- controversial speakers
- debates, where multiple sides of an issue are explored
- greater audience direct participation (risky, but engaging)
- shorter keynotes or no keynotes (gasp!)
- non-traditional meeting settings (If you go down to the woods today, you're sure of a big surprise...)
- online meetings (or pre and post a regular face-to-face meeting)
- elaborate AV or, dare I say, no AV (there goes the glitz, glamour and a bit of profit margin)
- regular physical activity breaks (to keep minds engaged)
- graphic recording (fabulous addition to traditional note taking)
- hot seats, with speakers sharing their expertise “live”

Last year, I had the privilege of witnessing a convention in Montreal at a hotel in which I once hung around – not a shade of beige in sight. They abandoned the traditional model of featuring 45- to 60-minute keynote speakers in favour of short, laser-like presentations followed by on-stage explorations by a skilled interviewer; scheduled, informal hallway conversations with world-class experts; encouraged audience interaction with platform speakers; held mass introductions and thank-you's of all speakers at once; provided graphic recording of all plenary conversations and more. Not just one potentially controversial design element, but many!

Two weeks ago, I shone my light on a board planning session where two teams made up of board members and a senior management team took opposite positions in an adjudicated debate about a strategic direction the management team was proposing. The result? Much greater confidence in supporting the proposed direction because they had all participated in examining the pros and cons so thoroughly.

I was recently chatting with my cousin, Gloria LaGlobe, a ballroom fixture in a western hotel. She told me she had recently been illuminating a leadership conference for women in the energy industry and was shocked that they had a speaker on, believe it or not, global warming. Talk about controversy! Then talk about getting people to really think differently. Now that took courage.

I realize that reading the comments of a ballroom chandelier may be a bit strange. However, from where I hang, I felt I had to at least attempt to shine a bit of light on the fact that being beige is not only boring, it isn't working anymore.

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