

There are many subtle and not so subtle ways that people change when they are together. Human behavior is a complex combination of interactions with other people. When people enter a room that is largely empty, they will tend to position themselves evenly throughout the room. This means that while they are waiting for the presentation to start they will not necessarily be close to each other. The larger the room in relation to the number of people, the bigger this effect will be.

Presenters are not immune to the subtle interactions. When you as a presenter enter and stand in front of a room that is buzzing with people and conversation, it has an effect on you too. If you step into a room that is quiet and empty, it will not energize you.

If possible, talk to the host of the event and see if you can get a room that will be mostly filled in order to have energy and excitement in the room before you start. This is true for small meetings as well as large.

Sometimes it is possible for you to have an effect on where people sit. This is difficult in an auditorium, but if you are in a smaller room with classroom-style seating, or a meeting room, then you can take away the chairs or the handouts, pads of paper, pens, and so on in one area of the room and concentrate all the materials together.

Takeaways

- * Avoid presenting in a room that is less than two-thirds full.
- * Ask your hosts ahead of time how many people they are expecting, and then ask them to find a room that will be mostly filled.
- * If you are in a classroom or a conference room that has more seats than you will need, take away chairs or materials to help concentrate where people sit.

It's right after lunch, and now it's time for your presentation. The blinds are drawn, and someone turns off the room lights just as you start your presentation. You are essentially standing in the dark. You will have to be an even better speaker than usual to make sure that people don't fall asleep with lights off and a full stomach.

A decade or two ago, projectors were not very bright, so in order to be able to see the slides, the room lights had to be turned down very low. These days, projectors are much brighter and light systems are more sophisticated. You shouldn't need to turn room lights down very low anymore.

LOW LIGHTING MAKES IT HARD FOR PEOPLE TO SEE

If the light level is too low where the participants are sitting, they will have a hard time taking notes. If the light level is too low where you are standing, then it will be hard for people to see you. A presentation is a performance, and your audience needs to be able to see the performer (you).

If possible, arrive early and check out what your lighting options are. Hopefully you are not over-relying on slides—you and what you have to say are as important as, or more important than, the slides.

Takeaways

- * Don't sacrifice the lights in the room in order to make the slides a little brighter. It's more important that people be able to see you.
- * When the lights in the room are too low, people can't see their own notes and materials.
- * Arrive early and experiment with the lights.

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IF YOU ARE OUT OF SIGHT, YOU MIGHT BE OUT OF MIND

When you are the presenter, you tend to think about the arrangement of the furniture at the front of the room. Do you have a place to put your laptop? Does anything block your access to move around? But don't forget about the effect that the arrangement of furniture in the room has on your participants.

In some cases, you may not be able to influence or control the arrangement of furniture—for example, if you are speaking in an auditorium where the seats are fixed (**Figure 55.1**). But in many rooms the furniture can be moved around.

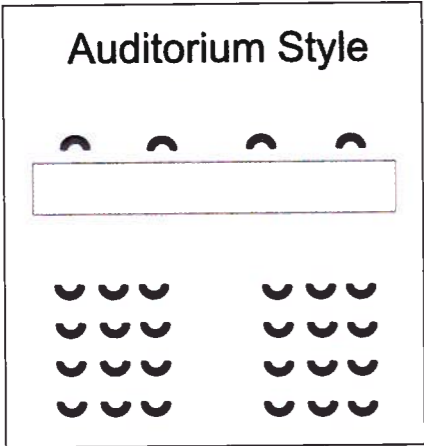


FIGURE 55.1 Auditorium layout

CHECK THE LINE OF SIGHT

Make sure that everyone in the room can see you without physical discomfort; if they cannot, rearrange the furniture to fix it.

Some standard seating layouts have a lot of seats with poor sightlines. **Figure 55.2** shows a "banquet" seating arrangement and highlights the seats with poor sightlines.

Figure 55.3 shows a "banquet rounds" seating arrangement and highlights the seats with poor sightlines.

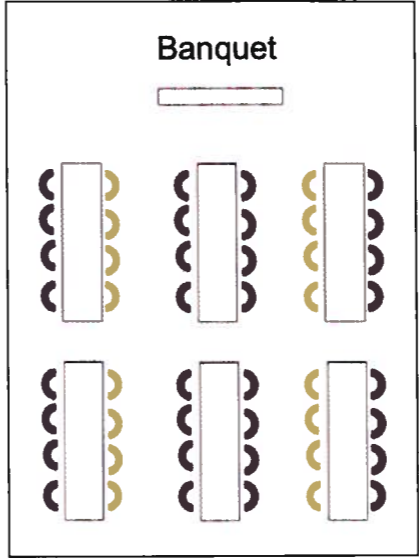


FIGURE 55.2 Banquet layout

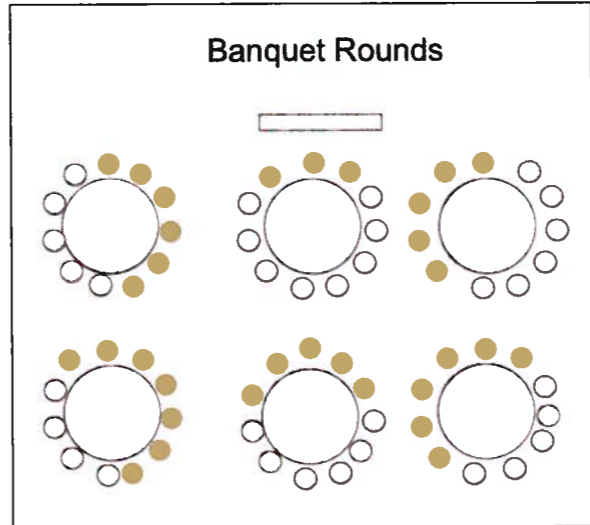


FIGURE 55.3 Banquet rounds layout

Both of these seating arrangements have a lot of seats with poor lines of sight. If you are giving a short presentation, then people might be willing to turn their seats around to

see you. But you might want to consider a different layout so people don't have to move chairs to see you.

A "modified banquet" layout (**Figure 55.4**) improves the line of sight.

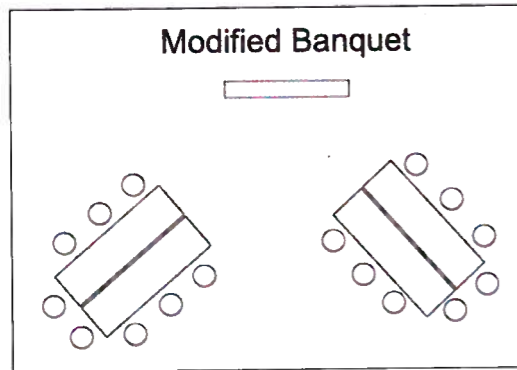


FIGURE 55.4 Modified banquet layout

You can send a diagram of your preferred layout ahead of time. But don't rely on the diagram. Even when I send a preferred layout ahead of time, more than half of the time the actual layout of the room is not what I sent in the diagram. Make sure you show up early so that you or the staff can change the setup before participants arrive.

Takeaways

- * Make sure your participants can easily see you.
- * Ask your host about the room and its seating arrangement.
- * If you have a preferred seating layout, send it ahead of time.
- * Arrive early and be prepared to modify the layout.

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PEOPLE ARE AFFECTED BY THE ARRANGEMENT OF FURNITURE

Furniture arrangement is not just important so that people can see you as the presenter. The arrangement of the furniture can affect unconscious expectations about the interactions between you and the participants, as well as about interactions between participants.

IS YOUR FURNITURE CONDUCTIVE TO COLLABORATION?

Some furniture and furniture layouts make it easier to interact and do activities. When participants walk into a room and find a seat at a table with five other chairs—and there are four other tables like that—it sends a message that the session might be interactive. They will be more likely to talk to others around them before the presentation starts. They will have a different experience than coming in to a room with chairs that are all facing the front. People will engage more with people they are facing than with people they are sitting next to.

If you have group activities, then you will need to be able to move around the room to see how the groups are doing and if they have any questions. Make sure the room layout allows you access to the different groups while they are working.

Takeaways

- * If you are planning to have group activities, then consider having several tables with four to eight people at a table rather than a classroom- or auditorium-style room.
- * If you have group activities, make sure there is enough room for you to move around and visit the groups during their activities.