

# Effective Meetings for Busy People

Let's Decide It and Go Home



**William T. Carnes**

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## Author's Preface

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This book is about meetings, meetings that will not go away despite wishful thinking. I shall admit to their ineffectiveness, their inefficiency, their tedium, and the utter impossibility of doing much to improve some kinds of meetings. But *decision-making meetings* are the worst at their best, and at their worst they are the most awful meetings imaginable.

Yet decision-making meetings are the ones we must attend; these are the ones for which we cannot "let George do it." Fortunately, something *can* be done to improve decision-making meetings, and this book will describe, with details, the methodology for turning "command performance" nightmares into something alive and useful and desirable. If meetings are inevitable, should we not learn how to make the best of them? The answer is "Yes, of course," and we should get started. But this book will upset a few old theories; it will pull rugs from under old institutions and traditions; it will make you ponder what you have been doing and, I hope, teach you some new tricks while saving you money and time. It may even entertain you a bit, while showing you the way to get more use and fewer ulcers from your next decision-making meeting.

Inasmuch as this book may start a few small revolutions in the decision-making capitals of industry and government, it might be wise to begin with a few words of a general nature before tearing to bits all our most esteemed chairmen and their followers at the very beginning of Chapter 2. Therefore, a few urgent "whereases" have been squeezed into this Author's Preface, a few "necessities" are documented in Acknowledgments, and the introduction and background are poured out in Chapter 1.

First, I must state, firmly and without apology, that these principles of the Goldfish Bowl deliberative conference are drawn from real life as the practices and procedures of an important committee in a major industry; they are not creatures of academia, developed from scientific or logical deduction. These practices are the final result of five decades of tinkering with real-life decision processes in that industry rather than new ideas generated as a possible solution to old mistakes. These means of deciding complex matters have been utilized, essentially in their present form, for a quarter century, with only fine-tuning being applied to the process, rather than being an oscillatory reaction to some

transient psychological upset. The industry is commercial air transportation. The activity is the standardization of the electronic devices and systems utilized by the world's airline aircraft. The entity is the Airlines Electronic Engineering Committee (AEEC). The organization is Aeronautical Radio, Incorporated (ARINC), the airline industry's own telecommunication company.

The necessity for expedited standardization caused that effort, but the usual methodology for standardization produced little benefit and proved much too ponderous and expensive. It was that evolutionary improvement in the standardization process for this major industry which produced a new methodology applicable to decision making that finally evolved into the Goldfish Bowl deliberative conference as the best possible environment for complex, large-scale decision making.

*Second*, this book is applicable to decision making for any purpose, not just for standardization. And although examples are given throughout the text to illustrate the application of the Goldfish Bowl deliberative conference and its methodology to product standardization, such "how to do it" is *not* a purpose of this text. Product standardization is a highly complex and very specialized field and must be the subject of a separate text. True, much industry and government decision making relates to some kind of standard, but product standardization is different from, for example, the standardizing of procedures, practices, regulations, policies, or just plain words.

Yet, because it was the product standardization effort that produced a better methodology for deliberative decision making than had been applied before, this text must give some background information on the need for airline standardization, the history of its evolution, and the benefits realized (Chapters 1 and 15 and Appendix 1). The application of this text is much broader than standardization: it pertains to the gamut of deliberative conferences in industry and government, in which there is strong motivation to develop a consensus where at first none seems to be possible. It is this motivation that generally pervades commerce (where industry is paying the bill) which makes simplification possible in traditional parliamentary procedures. This text will explain where and how to effect such simplification in the interest of speeding up a democratic process that traditionally is as lengthy as the 7-year itch in most pedigreed organizations and sometimes is equally ponderous in industry. It will concentrate, not on standardization, but on improving communication between and among a chairman and the meeting participants to expedite the decision making that is the foundation of commerce and industry. These processes have worked for one industry, resulting in a great economy of time, effort, and funds, and they will work for many industries in a broad spectrum of applications.

*Third*, not only has improved standardization sired the improved deliberative processes known as the Goldfish Bowl deliberative conference, but the latter has spawned innovations and improvements in other areas. One such improvement is in the field of conference room arrangement and hotel negotiation, with its subsets of meal planning, travel arrangements, social activities, and all the rest. This text will touch on these topics only to make the basic topic more understandable through the inclusion of such ancillary matters. Although this text will offer new angles, many other texts and magazines give more detailed coverage of that phase of conference management activity; however, I believe that the reader will profit from the new material on coffee breaks (Chapter 22), some mention of humorous happenings and how to make them work for you (Chapter 23), and some sacrilegious remarks about "that other type of conference" (Chapter 24) to achieve a better understanding of the Goldfish Bowl deliberative conference and its processes and procedures.

*Fourth*, the Goldfish Bowl is a form of deliberative conference, or the form of methodology utilized in such a conference, in which the process of large-scale decision making is parallel rather than serial and in which the procedures are informal, flexible, and thoroughly optimized for debate, deliberation, and decision, with all parties affected or involved present in the conference. It is a public meeting in which large-scale decision making occurs and is publicized.

The foregoing paragraph is intended as an explanation, rather than a lexicographic definition, of the term "Goldfish Bowl." Although the term implies a large affair subject to wide public scrutiny, it may be applied to a small meeting of, say, five people, if that meeting is publicized to and welcomes all the parties and groups and individuals likely to be concerned with the decisions. The distinction is that not just users are invited but that suppliers, regulators, administrators, inventors, and even "legal beagles" and "bean counters" are aware of the meeting and are adequately represented. A meeting held by an association, with only association members invited, could hardly be called a Goldfish Bowl deliberative conference. Neither could a corporate new-product meeting be called a Goldfish Bowl deliberative conference if the sales department were excluded.

Before the reader dismisses the Goldfish Bowl technique as just another group dynamics gimmick and probably a variant of the "fish-bowl technique" known to psychologists, let me explain that the Goldfish Bowl and the fishbowl technique have nothing in common except the use of similar words. The fishbowl technique is a methodology used in group dynamics work and for group therapy in the field of psychology and social work. Although the term seems to be widely used in that

field, I have found little in the available literature to define or explain it. Research at the Library of Congress turned up only three references, all in recent periodicals, none of which is suitable for a reference here. Thus, although the term "fishbowl technique" might seem to be related etymologically to our term "Goldfish Bowl," I must state categorically that the only relation is pseudoichthyological.

It may seem suprising that the name Goldfish Bowl as a description of the type of meeting, the environment of the meeting, and the processes of the meeting as it evolved was originated by a corporation legal counsel. The background of what happened and why it happened, more than a decade ago, is documented in Appendix 2.

*Fifth*, my use of the term "chairman" must be explained here. Not only do I avoid the term "chairperson" throughout the text, but I have used the words "he" and "man" when I mean "he or she" or "man or woman." I recognize the probable scorn of some feminists, but I believe that the clumsy nature of the acceptable alternatives for a text on conferences would produce even more objections.

*Sixth*, already in this Preface (and later in the Acknowledgments), the reader will have discovered warnings that this text will not be the usual conference manual. By the time that the reader gets through Chapter I he will have discovered that the author has assumed that considerable authority will have been delegated to the chairman and, in Chapter 4, will discover that considerable relaxation will be urged in the formal procedures established by the usual texts on parliamentary law. Furthermore, the reader may be shocked by the suggestion, in Chapter 5, that the chairman can expedite business by using first names in a very large conference.

How did the formalities of parliamentary procedure originate in the United States? Is there any historical basis for relaxing the pedantic rules as we approach the twenty-first century? How can we protect minorities? Can we keep order?

We gain an insight into the origin of formality when we observe that written parliamentary procedures began in the United States at about the time that the Constitution was written. Thomas Jefferson, in his *Manual of Parliamentary Practice* (ca. 1800), looked to the long experience of the House of Commons in encouraging strict and formal procedures as a means of protecting an important minority in the U.S. Congress. The traditions of his *Manual* were carried over into other writings, including the early works of Gen. Henry Robert in *Robert's Rules of Order*. The presumption seemed always to be that *all* deliberative bodies would forever have differences, differences that in the past had been so great that they "divided mankind into parties, inflamed them with mutual animosity, and rendered them much more disposed

to vex and oppress each other, than to co-operate for their common good," in the words of James Madison, written in 1787 in his No. 10 in the series of *The Federalist Papers*. Several months later, in his No. 55, Madison applied this characteristic of political parties even more broadly: "In all very numerous assemblies, of whatever characters composed, passion never fails to wrest the scepter from reason."<sup>1</sup>

It was natural that when General Robert started writing *Robert's Rules of Order* in 1874 (first published by S. C. Griggs and Company in 1876), he would lean heavily on the traditional practices of Thomas Jefferson and others who followed him. Whether it was simply a continuation of a long tradition or a firm belief in Jefferson's dictum stated in the last sentence of his *Manual of Parliamentary Practice*, "It is very material that order, decency, and regularity be preserved in a dignified public body," or for whatever reason, Robert prescribed the same measures of protection for minorities in his *Rules of Order*, intended for use by clubs, societies, lodges, and other chartered organizations of members. The formal rules and procedures seem always to have been perceived as the best means of protection for minorities, whether political or nonpolitical.

Certainly we should not expect to change the established patterns of any organization today. If a body operates satisfactorily under formal rules, that system should probably be continued. If a body has a long record of success without such rules (or possibly *any* rules), why should we suggest change? The informal approach happens to be the author's preference, and this text will lean pretty heavily on a quarter-century successful application of that preference. The author suggests that many new organizations can probably profit by this experience.

Thus, because the *role* and *purpose* of today's deliberative bodies, particularly deliberative decision-making groups in business and government, are considerably different from the bodies envisaged by Thomas Jefferson at the birth of a new republic two centuries ago, this text will offer some suggestions that most certainly are at odds with the old ideas.

Perhaps General Robert envisaged a possible future relaxation in his own *Rules of Order* when he wrote this:

A chairman will often find himself perplexed with the difficulties attending his position, and in such cases he will do well to heed the advice of a distinguished writer on parliamentary law, and recollect that "The great purpose of all rules and forms is to subserve the will

<sup>1</sup>*The Federalist Papers*, The New American Library of World Literature, Inc., New York, copyright © 1961.

of the assembly rather than to restrain it; to facilitate, and not to obstruct, the expression of their deliberate sense."

That was the way General Robert expressed it in *Robert's Rules of Order* (page 125 of the 1907 edition, as reprinted in 1978 by Bell Publishing Company, New York). At the same time, Robert offered additional advice in "Hints to Inexperienced Chairmen," which appeared on pages 160–162 in the Bell Publishing Company's reprint of the 1907 edition, carried forward essentially unchanged into the 1951 edition published by Scott, Foresman and Company, Glenview, Illinois, and then dropped in that form from the 1970 edition. Here is the last paragraph of that section:

Know all about parliamentary law, but do not try to show off your knowledge. Never be technical, nor be any more strict than is absolutely necessary for the good of the meeting. Use your judgment; the assembly may be of such a nature through its ignorance of parliamentary usages and peaceable disposition, that a strict enforcement of the rules, instead of assisting, would greatly hinder business; but in large assemblies, where there is much work to be done, and especially where there is liability to trouble, the only safe course is to require a strict observance of the rules.

It is that advice from General Robert that this text will build upon and apply to today's business world of meetings and conferences.

WILLIAM T. CARNES

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# Acknowledgments

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To the most wonderful industry in the world and to all those thousands of nice people in that industry—airline officials, avionics suppliers, government regulatory people, and the many others who have worked with the Airlines Electronic Engineering Committee (AEEC) or its predecessor entities—I respectfully and thankfully dedicate this book.

To my own technical and secretarial staff and top management in Aeronautical Radio, Incorporated (ARINC), I express my thanks for a collective 30 years of dedicated help and commitment to a goal: the best aviation electronics that can be bought, but at an affordable cost with the minimum expenditure of industry time and money.

To the stalwarts of the past in our industry; to those who are still alive and kicking and can read here about nostalgic happenings; and to those who have passed on to that land where standardization is easy but unnecessary, conferences continue all day as one long coffee break, no one ever argues with anyone else during a debate, and parliamentary procedure becomes whatever you wish it to be—I would like to say, "Thank you for helping get it all started."

To those in our industry who have contributed laws, precepts, or syndromes for this text or those who have prompted the use of anecdotes, personal experiences, or ideas, I extend my thanks. Though they are not always identified by name, the origins of your contributions will be known to you and me.

To the ARINC legal firm of Kirkland & Ellis and its many staff lawyers who have had some part in shaping the activities of AEEC, I express my thanks. I particularly appreciate the advice and counsel of Charles R. Cutler and Richard C. Lowery.

To Dr. James L. McLain, Professor of Music Emeritus of American University and Organist and Director of Music Emeritus of Metropolitan Memorial United Methodist Church, I extend my gratitude for his encouragement and help and for first performing so effectively the song "Let's Have a Meeting, and We'll All Be There," the theme song of this book, which resulted from the happenings described in Chapter 26.

And to the official members and all the many past members of the committee that caused it all, the Airlines Electronic Engineering Committee, I express my profound thanks for a job that was complex, time-consuming, and seemingly thankless at times. You are the individuals

who have made up what has been the brainiest collection of knowledge and capability of any committee of any industry, anywhere, ever. What you have discovered, sometimes by accident I admit, has proved to be sound, proper, and permanent. You have developed the ability to think as a single individual might think but with a perspicacity and a combined intellect that have astounded those of us who have watched. You have pioneered in consensus development processes; you have found ways through the abysmal swamps of disillusionment over adversity; you have discovered routes to successful decision making when not even a path was visible to others. Your methods will be studied by many others and undoubtedly improved upon. You got it all started: the first major improvement in the efficiency and effectiveness of committees since the invention of the circulating fan for smoke-filled conference rooms.

And then I must extend personal thanks to several more individuals: first, to ARINC's Chief Engineer, Francis L. Moseley, who got the effort started at ARINC in 1939 and introduced the first airline industry specification-writing effort; second, to ARINC's postwar Chief Engineer, Charles R. Banks, who was the first Chairman of the Airlines Electronic Engineering Committee in 1949 and established the committee as we know it today; and third, to the new, third Chairman of AEEC, B. Richard Climie, who has succeeded me in that post and has already done a memorable job in continuing the effort started so many years ago.

And last, for Maxine, for 40 years a cheerful greeting each night after many a late meeting and often a ruined dinner on that account; and, on her behalf, for all the thousands of spouses everywhere who make a meetinggoer's life tolerable, with a laugh and a smile, whether waiting at home or waiting in a hotel room in Cedar Rapids, or possibly Munich, for some meeting that started before breakfast to finish; to these dedicated helpmates we should offer a toast—if we ever get out of the meetings long enough.

WILLIAM T. CARNES

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# *Contents*

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Author's Preface   vii

Acknowledgments   xiii

CHAPTER 1	The Goldfish Bowl for Decision Making: Deliberative Conferences in the Round	1
CHAPTER 2	How to Manage a Goldfish Bowl Conference	15
CHAPTER 3	Basic Methodology for a Successful Goldfish Bowl Conference	25
CHAPTER 4	Practical Parliamentary Procedures for Use in the Goldfish Bowl	27
CHAPTER 5	How to Maintain Order in a Large Meeting: Practical Suggestions for the Chairman of a Goldfish Bowl Deliberative Conference	41
CHAPTER 6	Informal Parliamentary Procedures in the United Nations and Their Application Elsewhere	53
CHAPTER 7	The Inefficiency and Ineptitude of a Committee	61
CHAPTER 8	The Hierarchy of Committees, or The Pecking Order of the Unctuous	67
CHAPTER 9	The Birth of a Committee, or "The Booming Deus": A Playlet in 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ Acts	73
CHAPTER 10	How to Get a New Charter Adopted in One Meeting	83
CHAPTER 11	What Does a Committee Do with a Report?	87
CHAPTER 12	The Art of Expert Argument, or One- Upping Your Competitors	95
CHAPTER 13	The Prerequisites to Expert Debating: Expert Listening and Expert Remembering	107
CHAPTER 14	The Committee Member versus His Constituency	123
CHAPTER 15	The Goldfish Bowl Deliberative Conference as an Aid to Product Standardization	131

**vi    Contents**

CHAPTER 16	The Effective Oral Committee Report	139
CHAPTER 17	How to Run a Small Committee with the Same Finesse as a Large Goldfish Bowl Deliberative Conference	145
CHAPTER 18	Beholden Committees: The Boss and His Staff Meetings	151
CHAPTER 19	How to Advise Our Government: The Federal Advisory Committee Act	157
CHAPTER 20	The Process of Going Public	167
CHAPTER 21	Aids in Developing a Consensus	173
CHAPTER 22	Those Wonderful Coffee Breaks	187
CHAPTER 23	The Funny Side: Let's Laugh at Our Foibles; Let's Counteract Our Foibles	195
CHAPTER 24	The Pseudodeliberative Conference: Running Scared	205
CHAPTER 25	The Art of Program Planning: Prioritization	213
CHAPTER 26	Long Meetings and What to Do about Them	225
CHAPTER 27	Advance Planning: Arrangements for the Large Goldfish Bowl Conference	233
CHAPTER 28	Publicity: What's in a Name?	251
CHAPTER 29	Starting on Time; Stopping on Time	263
CHAPTER 30	How to Negotiate with a Hotel	283
CHAPTER 31	Costs and Budgeting: The Bottom Line	301
CHAPTER 32	Apocalypse: The Past and the Future of the Conference	311
CHAPTER 33	Reprise: Etiquette for Meeting Participants, or How to Run a Meeting from the Back Row of the Audience	319
APPENDIX 1	The Evolutionary Development of the Goldfish Bowl Deliberative Conference for Airline Avionics Standardization	327
APPENDIX 2	Historical Origin of the Term "Goldfish Bowl" as Applied to Deliberative Conferences	341
	Index	343

**L**et's Have a Meeting, and We'll All Be There" is the continuing cry of government, commerce, and industry. Saying it another way, "If *you* call a meeting, I'll *have* to be there." Whether you or I like meetings or abhor them, we are both destined to spend much of our commercial or government life attending them. You will attend my meetings (for your own protection), and I will attend yours (to find out what you are up to); and we will both attend thousands of other people's meetings, conferences, seminars, symposia, task force sessions, working-group get-togethers, and committee meetings. You will complain, loudly, and I will object, noisily; but we will go.

### **Everybody Attends Meetings to Decide Things**

You or I need not be an active member of industry or government to become caught up in the whirlwind of meetings. If it is not the Parent-Teachers Association, it is the Civic Association Committee on Billboards, a committee of the League of Women Voters, the Baptist Elderly Care Working Group, or the Main Street Litter Cleanup Executive Committee. You may have discovered that by yourself you could not get the Main Street litter cleaned up, but with a committee, possibly working through an association, you could begin to make some progress. Everybody laughed when you sat down on the piano bench (your neighbors had filled the other seats in your home) and suggested a committee to clean up the litter. A committee? Why does the mere mention of a committee cause everyone to snicker? (I, too, shall snicker over a committee when I get to Chapter 7.)

We think we need a meeting to decide what to do. So we ask a bunch of people to serve on a committee, and they decide that someone must call a meeting. The consequence is new motivation for a proliferation of entities and subentities to do something or decide something. Obvi-

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# ***The Goldfish Bowl for Decision Making: Deliberative Conferences in the Round***

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ously, all these tasks need doing, or do they? Inasmuch as we are never quite sure *who* should do the starting, what should be started or eventually decided, and what should be done about it, we never pay much attention to established rules, principles, or parliamentary procedures or even to any requirements of the law until somebody complains. Until something is actually decided or accomplished or we all are ready to act on something, we don't hear any complaints. Then it all starts. We now learn that we have violated all the established rules, precepts, practices, and traditions. Or so it seems from the complaints of our critics.

### **We Hate Meetings, but We Go Anyway**

Does the foregoing sound like the dilemmas you have observed in your church group, your lodge, your civic association, your company, your trade association, your government, your world, your life? Do your groups then revert to a ponderous procedure of parliamentary discipline with a careful following of all written-down charter requirements, bylaws, established rules, and precepts? Or, even worse, do you find your group caught up in a wild oscillatory frenzy, in which at one minute you are following the rhetoric of rules and at the next you are breaking the same rules, never quite sure what you should be doing or why? If either this mad roller coaster or a dogmatic arbitrariness describes your organization, I say, "Welcome to the club." If you ponder the seemingly inconsistent behavior patterns of the organizations with which you must deal every day as a part of your important decision making, I say, "This book is for you."

Decision making by a meeting can be effective and sensible. The answer is not in increased authority for the decision makers. The solution is not one of eliminating meetings, of abolishing committees, boards, and panels, or of setting up new rules to replace the old ones. Some of these things may happen as a consequence of other direct improvements, but by themselves such changes are inconsequential help.

If you hate meetings with a purple hate, as many who must attend meetings do, you have already cut from your calendar almost all that are unnecessary. The ones left are those that have a chance of *deciding* something or *doing* something. You have already scuttled the ones at which nothing except talk is likely. Action, or decision-making, meetings are the only ones you have left.

### **And If You Don't Yet Go, You Will**

But perhaps you are not one of those lucky people who have savored many meetings as part of the activity of their organizations. Your time,

too, will come; you, too, will get promoted into that mad world of meetings, boards, and conferences in which you can enjoy that 2-hour, three-martini business luncheon, sandwiched (perhaps literally) into the middle of that "standard" 6-hour conference day. You, too, can enjoy the wit-sharpening byplay of that lively and enervating discourse of erudite, cosmopolitan contemporaries of the near great. You, too, can experience the ego-building elbow contacts in that hallowed hall. You will then be a part, an important part, of life. *That is the acme of perceptive participative parliamentarianism.* Yes, eventually, it shall come to you, too, and then you can join others who have gone before you in participatory hatred of meetings.

### Isn't This Book Just for Chairmen?

But hold everything! Even if I should get promoted into the conference participation echelon in my organization, that doesn't mean that I would ever become a chairman of anything. Attendees can leave meetings whenever they get bored; why do I need any book on improving meetings? Only the chairmen and other officers are capable of fixing anything; such a book as this would be wasted on me. If this is your answer, the author may have to let you in on a little secret that, for other readers, he will keep to himself until Chapter 33. But if you really wonder about that question, the author may have to offer you special dispensation to read, right now, all of Chapter 33. But not the rest of the readers. You must take these chapters in their proper order, as you do not need this special cheering up at this point in the text.

Thus, I have established that this book is for you, whether or not you attend meetings now and whether or not you are the chairman of anything now. Even if you are an adolescent and your most complex committee decision making *now* is that of selecting the site for your next outing with the scout troop, this book can help you be prepared for that future day when you can join the adult world and go to big meetings.

Many have pondered the reason why we seem to want to decide everything by means of a committee, or by a meeting. And then, after a meeting has been decided upon as the means of solving some superproblem of a community, an industry, or other entity, no one seems to want to attend; everyone wants *others* to go. But everyone affected by the matter shows up anyway, necessitating a mammoth drive to "reduce the size of committees to make them manageable." We all vacillate between two extremes: we know that we must have committees and meetings to settle things; we also know that they turn out to be less effective than we had hoped; and this conflict of emotions produces chaos in the administration of committees and their meetings.

## Why Do Americans Seem to Have More Meetings Than Other People?

It's probably true that Americans do have more meetings. Even if it were not true, the world believes it to be true, probably on the basis of what a widely quoted Frenchman wrote a century and a half ago. It seems that Alexis de Tocqueville, a French statesman and author, visited this country in 1831 and wrote about his visit after he returned to France. These writings were widely publicized in books by the International Association of Convention Bureaus and others. De Tocqueville made the point that Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly formed associations. He proceeded to describe the wide variety and scope of such organizations, formal and informal, and observed that Americans wanted to do by means of an association what was done throughout Europe by the decrees of government people. Naturally, de Tocqueville attributed this associationitis (or what we would call committeeitis) to freedom from a paternalistic government and an official church. The freedoms of democracy cause the clumsy constraints of living with it, and yet we have become a nation of committees without much training in committee methodology.

We should not assume from all this that only Americans suffer from committeeitis. Europeans are fast learners; they can get just as bogged down in committees as we do, and just as quickly. We can't really see much difference today, although there was a notable difference a quarter century ago. Nor do we find very much difference when we look outside the Western world. Our Russian friends accept all the principles of committees just as we do. As best we can determine, totalitarianism does not seem to reduce the problems of decision making. While Russians are extremely curious about how we make decisions in our Goldfish Bowl deliberative conferences, they seem only to want to learn the technique; we have sensed no desire to change it. Although politics may change the appearance of debate in the political arena, we see little evidence of significant differences between East and West in the complex technical world. It seems that a common solution acceptable to all is far more important than any parochial interest in winning.

Thus, wherever you may travel, there can be no escape from committees, boards, and panels; they will follow you to the ends of the earth. Committees are your destiny.

## Shouldn't Someone Write a Book?

But if everyone everywhere is in this same kettle of soup, both needing and abhorring meetings, why is there not a suitable and proper solution in the established literature on committees, boards, and panels?