

Seatings for meetings

TN71 Training Notes series: Structures

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Whenever I lead a training event I try to ensure I arrive early enough to give myself plenty of time to arrange the chairs. Getting the right layout for whatever the session is all about is so very important.

But many church councils and other decision-making bodies I observe do not seem to share my enthusiasm for seating layouts. They either have a set arrangement which they put out on auto-pilot, or someone simply unstacks some seats and puts them out as they come.

These notes are based on the kind of points I would make at a workshop on leading church business meetings. Let me see if I can encourage you to appreciate the importance of this topic if your meetings are to achieve their purpose.

On the next three pages I give six different layouts for a business meeting. Each is shown for a room with 18 people of whom one, coloured red, is chairing the meeting and a second, blue, is acting as Secretary. A flip-chart or screen for a data projector is shown in yellow. Each of these six layouts has specific advantages and snags when you consider issues such as:

- level of formality – and the effect this will have on the way business is conducted;
- sight-lines – and the building of a team from the members of this group;
- the role of the one chairing the meeting: strict control through to gentle enabling;
- comfort levels in both seating and handling paperwork or laptops.

There are of course many variations on these patterns, some of which are listed, and they can be combined in various ways. But my key point is to be aware of the possibilities so you do not get stuck in a rut.

The final page lists seven issues arising from the possibilities presented.

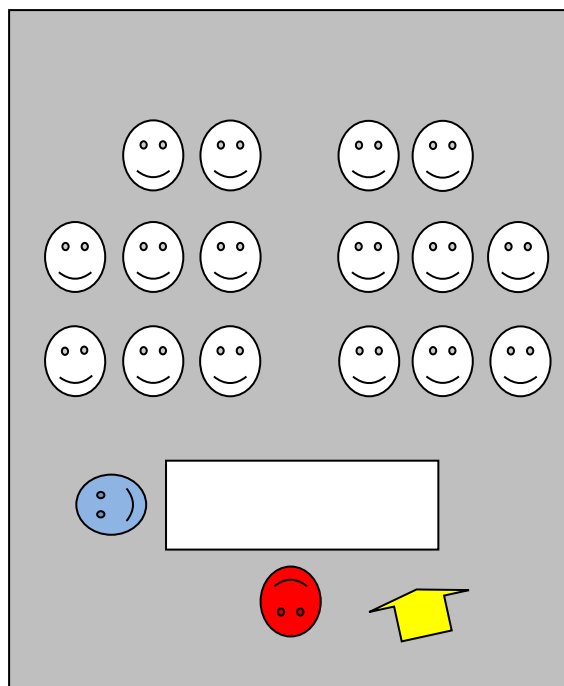
Note: if these pages are printed in mono, red appears as dark, blue as medium and the flipchart is the pale arrow.

Top table

This is still a common layout.

- It fits well in a small room.
- It places the person chairing the meeting in a position of both separation and authority ('them and us').
- Sight-lines are poor if people sit in rows behind each other.
- The layout is all straight lines and feels regimented.
- There can be a sense of hierarchy based on how close to the front you sit.

Hence the meeting is likely to have a definite leader with poor understanding of people's feelings. It is likely to be formal in its ethos. But it is a possible layout for a presentation.



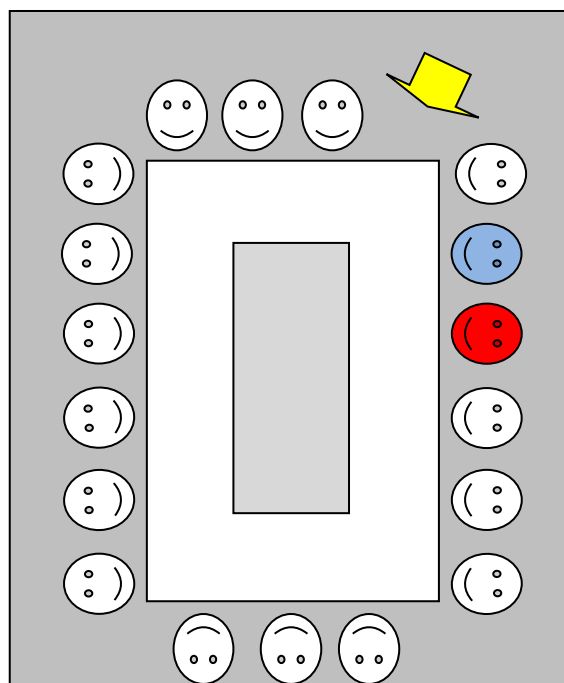
Variations: arc the chairs to give minor improvement to the sight-lines and make it less regimented. Or have a large semi-circle of chairs so there is just the one 'row' to lessen feelings of both formality and hierarchy, though in larger groups this may mean people are too far away from each other for easy audibility. In all these possibilities, however, be aware of the powerful 'statement' made by the table.

Boardroom

This places everyone around some form of table arrangement. Its features:

- There is less sense of hierarchy with the person chairing more obviously part of the whole group.
- Sight-lines are better but still poor along any one side of the 'square'.
- Everyone has a surface in front of them for handling papers or using laptops.
- It still feels a formal relationship with a major barrier to keep people apart.
- It still has straight lines and becomes less effective for larger meetings.

The meeting will have a sense of teamwork albeit within a reasonably formal setting. It is good for complex meetings needing considerable documentation.

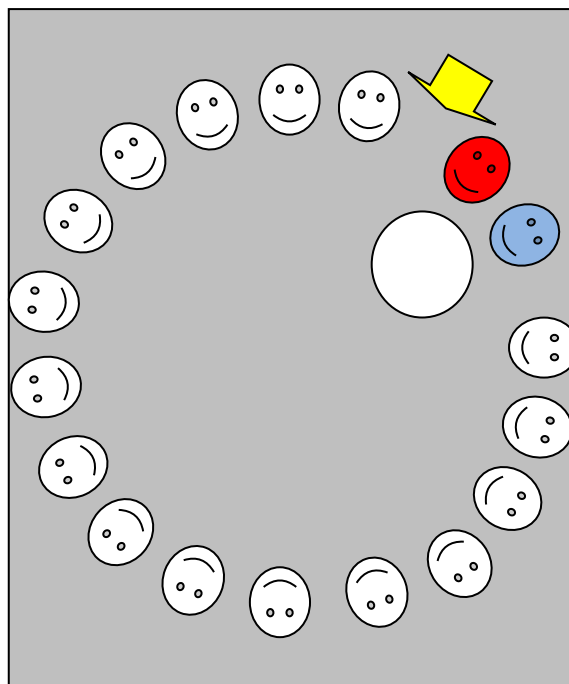


Variations: the overall shape can vary from square to oblong depending on the room size and shape. If you have angle-shaped tables you can turn it into a hexagon to improve sight-lines. The person chairing and the Secretary can choose to sit almost anywhere but if on a short side, that may create a sense of hierarchy again.

Circle

This is a variation on the boardroom layout where the table has been taken away and the chairs arranged in a circle. Its features:

- This speaks of equality with the person chairing only being any different if there are spaces either side.
- Sight-lines are good and the curve softens the formality.
- But it suits neither a large group nor a small room.
- The lack of table means that everyone is open to everyone else (though this can be intimidating for some people).
- It also means there is nowhere for people to place papers and equipment.



This is a good arrangement for open discussions and seeking ideas provided the group is not too large.

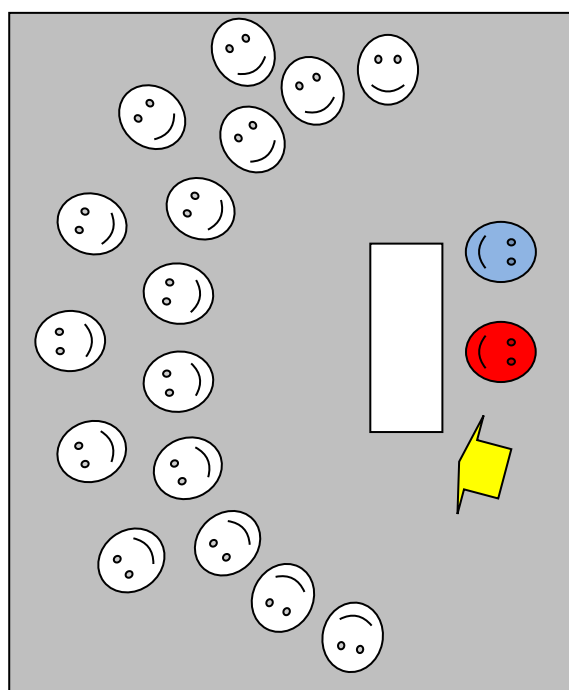
Variations: you might have one large round table to revert to circular boardroom or have definite gaps on each side of the chair to strengthen an idea of leadership. The circle can become an ellipse to fit an oblong room. The arrangement shown includes a small table but this can be removed, or several small tables placed round the circle.

Arcs

This arrangement is a hybrid of 'Top table' and 'Circle'. It keeps the number of rows to a minimum (shown here by placing the focus in the middle of the *long* side of the room).

Features include the following.

- It is good for presentations because people are focusing on one point.
- The person chairing is still in a position of authority.
- Sight-lines can still be poor though better than for the 'Top table'.
- Having curves gives a more relaxed feel than straight lines.
- It lacks surfaces for papers/laptops.

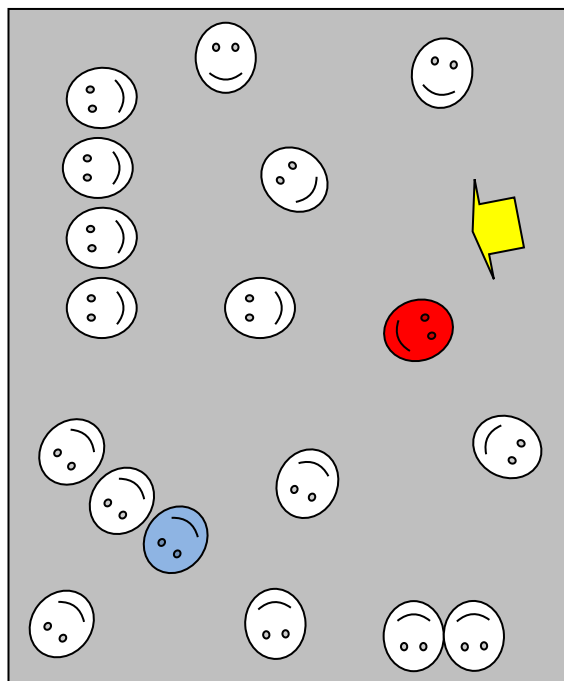


Variations: if the room is large enough people can sit in groups of about four round tables laid out in an arc formation to give a surface for papers and equipment. If the number of people is not too large you can have only one row to improve sight-lines though that may introduce audibility problems. You can vary the degree of curve: the more rounded (through to horseshoe shape) the greater the sense of participation. You can remove the table.

Living room

The diagram looks chaotic but imagine this is someone's living room. Seven people are sitting on the two sofas, some on other armchairs, others on high-backed chairs brought in from another room and some may be sitting on the floor.

- This is a relaxed setting which feels more like a social gathering than a formal meeting.
- Sight-lines are poor; people may be squashed into available spaces.
- Most people are relaxing in low chairs which will slow the meeting down.
- But it may be excellent for forming relationships and useful for less formal meetings with small numbers.

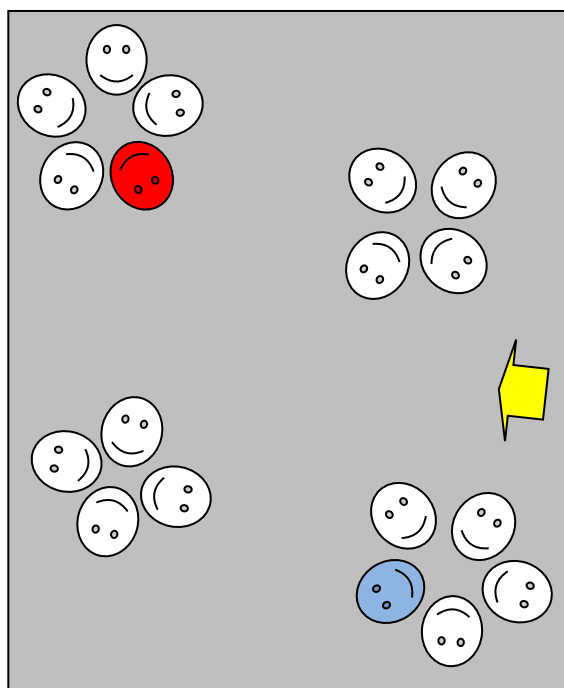


Variations: much will depend on the furniture available and on the size and shape of the room relative to the size of the group. For small groups much of the chaos in this diagram can be removed by careful arrangement of the seating. This layout is often used for weekly staff meetings in a confined space.

Buzz groups

This arrangement would be short-term but assumes the meeting has broken up into small groups to discuss a particular issue. The meeting may stay in this arrangement for plenary report back.

- Such groups allow quieter members to contribute without the fear of a larger gathering.
- It enables a more informal approach to a discussion because formal lines have been broken.
- It is good for building relationships but only within a limited group.
- The person chairing is simply one member of one group until the need for plenary report back.
- Noise levels can be a problem in small spaces.



Note: My preference for a training event I am leading is for an *Arcs* layout but set out with groups of four or five around tables. This allows quick moves into *Buzz groups* without moving any furniture, but assumes a main purpose of presentation not decision-making.

Seven related points

- 1 The layout needs to serve the group that is meeting and will therefore need to take into account the number of people (you cannot use some of these layouts with a group of 25+) and its need for formality (compare an official AGM with a group of friends planning an event).
- 2 The layout may be affected by the room itself and the available furniture. A small committee room may produce a different meeting from the same group and agenda in a large church hall. If in someone's house, it is worth pondering whether it is better to meet on hard chairs round the dining room table or sitting in low arm-chairs in the sitting room. And, yes, seating comfort is a major issue to consider anyway.
- 3 One important feature of this last point is the position of the door (consider the disruption caused by late-comers arriving) and windows (both for light and for disruption for what can be seen outside). Floor covering and height of ceiling are also important. If there is a clock on the wall this may not be helpful if right behind the person chairing!
- 4 In any layout consider where people who want to hide will gravitate towards (such as the back row in a *Top table* layout), and where people who want to exert control will try to sit (such as next to the person chairing or able to catch their eye). Note too when opinion groups sit tightly together. Some arrangements shown give more opportunity for hiding, controlling and grouping than others.
- 5 The layout needs to serve the purpose of the meeting: is this seeking to share ideas, to listen to a presentation and then discuss it, or to take decisions? Each of these may need a different layout. *Buzz groups*, for example, are excellent for involving everyone in discussion, but they are not good for the final stages in taking a decision.
- 6 This suggests that an effective meeting may need more than one layout because different agenda items will have contrasting purposes. The meeting hears a presentation (*Arcs*), discusses it in groups (*Buzz groups*) and then comes together to make a decision (*Circle*). But you clearly do not want to overdo this or you are shifting furniture all the time and so destroying any sense of flow.
- 7 The point that these notes seek to make is that the issue of seating layout is important. The right layout can help a meeting achieve its purposes; an unhelpful layout can hinder everyone. Whoever chairs a meeting needs to plan it carefully beforehand. And are you meeting in the most appropriate place or would it be better to move elsewhere?

What do you need to do about your group's seating layout? Perhaps you need to have a meeting to think about it..... but in what layout?

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN71. See also Articles A40/A41, *Going deeper into meetings*, and Training Notes TN49, *What's going on under the water*, TN61, *Mapping out a meeting*, TN88, *Advice to a new committee member*, TN118, *Why, exactly, are we meeting?* and TN128, *Effective staff meetings*.

Contact John if you would like to enquire about training in any aspect of church business meetings.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN71 under Structures.

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