The Researcher's Herald

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Chairing a Conference Session: Scary Business? Perhaps Not!

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Abstract:

In this premier newsletter edition, I will share my personal experience of chairing a conference parallel session for the very first time along with the lessons learnt, and some advice on how to prepare for and carry out such duties. This article is targeted at those of us who may be new to the role or are about to perform such duties for the very first time in an upcoming conference or seminars.

By reading this, you have most likely been chosen / volunteered to chair a parallel session at an upcoming conference for the very first time. If so, Congratulations to you! It is a massive honour and privilege to take up such a role - and I mean it sincerely without any sarcasm. Now of course, it is completely normal to feel nervous, uncertain, and anxious about all of this. I was a nervous wreck prior, and hence, able to relate to all of this. As such, the motivation behind this article is to share some useful tips and advice I had been given by peers and Professors whilst preparing for the role. This will be achieved by addressing the following three questions:

1. What to do?
2. How to do?
3. How to prepare?

Firstly, it is important to highlight that the role of a session chair is like that of a football referee or an orchestra conductor which involves the following:

- **To maintain the code of conduct and order within the room:**
  That means ensuring the audience respects the speaker by being attentive, or at least keeping their noise levels to a minimum.
- **To ensure the the proceedings flow as per scheduled:**
  That means keeping a close track of the time and being firm on the time limits awarded to the speakers and for the follow-up Q&A.
- **To introduce the speakers and their presentations:**
  That means to formally announce who the speaker is, what he/she is doing, and the title of the presentation.
- **To provide moral support for speakers, especially the first-timers/those who may be nervous:**
  That means keeping a close track of the time and being firm on the time limits awarded to the speakers and for the follow-up Q&A.

Now that we have familiarised ourselves with the roles and purpose of a session chair, here are some things we could do to achieve the objectives:

- **Communicate the rules 5 minutes prior to the start of the session:**
  Reminding the audience on keeping the noise level low + reminding the speakers on their time-limit.
- **Pay close attention and be Firm with the time limits and the programme schedule:**
  Give the speaker a first warning two minutes before their time is up, followed by another one minute prior so as to provide ample time for the speakers to wrap up. Following which, ensure that the questions are kept short and brief before firmly concluding the Q&A once the time is up. This is when the session chair will remind the audience that any further discussions may take place during the coffee break, etc. In my opinion, this is perhaps the most important of all tasks, to respect the time and the schedule.

- **Read up the work of the speakers prior to the session:**
  This, I confess, is the hardest and is dependent on how early the proceedings are made available. Do try as much as possible to read them and take notes so that we have some idea what the speakers are presenting. This helps when there is no one to ask a question and the session chair would have to ask one.

Finally, how does one prepare for the role? Here are some of the following things which can be done which may include:

- **Observe and Reflect:**
  Think about session chairs you have observed in previous conference or watched on YouTube, etc. Reflect on what was good and what can be improved. Write them down and visualise about how a perfect session can look like - do be creative within the boundaries of the role specifications.

- **Ask:**
  Don't be afraid to ask for advice from peers or Professors who have done it before.

- **Practice:**
  Do try to simulate a session with peers, or volunteer for such role in seminars organised by your institute. The idea would be to condition yourself to the environment you would be exposed to at the conference so that you may know what to expect and gain some experience in performing the role. Think of it as a training session before playing an actual football game.

At this point, you might ask what are the qualities that make a good session chair? To me, other than being confident and vocal, the more important aspects are the following:

- **Being Passionate:**
  Showing that you want to do this, and to do this with all your heart. The audience know and can feel it.

- **Being Committed:**
  Showing that you are clear with the roles and what is to be done in your capacity as a session chair. This helps establish some form of authority and control of the room.

- **Respecting the role:**
  Showing that you are serious about the job, although that is not to say that you cannot include a sense of humour to the role and the room. What is meant in this is to carry out this role with pride and to be dedicated to it, and not appear to be doing this because you are forced to and make it all like a chore.

These are just some personal perspectives and reflections from my experience as a session chair, which may hopefully serve as a starting point of your preparation journey to the role. It may feel overwhelming at the start, but rest assured it gets better with practice and experience. Think of all of this like a set of muscles which become stronger with every training/gym sessions. It is the exact same concept in this context and hence, be excited and look forward to the improvements you will make with time.

All the best to you, and enjoy the experience! :)

P.S. Should you have any further points to add to this, please do not hesitate to contact me and share what you have learnt from your experience!