

Group and Organizational Learning Processes

The Future Search Conference

The Future Search Conference, one of the best known 'whole system change' approaches, was developed by Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff as a means for diverse stakeholder groups to search for common ground. The conference, which is planned and implemented by a steering committee consisting of representatives of main stakeholder groups, is focused on a theme that might be phrased as 'The future of ...' Typically, up to 64 people meet for two to three consecutive days (including 2 nights) to work their way through the five stages of the Future Search process;

Marvin Weisbord describes a future search as 'a large group planning meeting that brings a whole system into the room to work on a task-focused agenda'. Participants sit around tables in mixed stakeholder groups, with about eight people to a table. Much of the work is done at the wall on very large sheets of paper. Stage 1 is a review of the past using three 'timeline' charts – one for personal milestones, another for important organisational or community developments, and a third for global events – divided horizontally into decades, typically the 1970s, 80s, 90s and 2000s. During stage 2 the participants then create a single giant mind map to show the current reality in all its messy complexity, and this is followed by session where people say what they are proud and sorry about regarding the current situation. Stage 3 involves creating ideal future scenarios and mixed groups make creative presentations that convey their vision of the future, usually five, ten or twenty years ahead. In Stage 4, the groups work to identify common ground and develop a shared vision with unresolved differences acknowledged and listed. The final stage 5 involves action planning that completes the Future Search is normally conducted in functional or self-selecting groups.

In contrast to Open Space Technology, Future Search Conferences have a clearly defined agenda and specific group tasks. The composition of the working groups contribute to a dynamic that is unique for Future Search; The work begins with mixed groups of representatives from all stakeholder groups, continues in homogenous groups, and concludes with mixed groups towards the end.

A Future Search Conference needs careful preparation (which can take up to six months) and two highly-skilled process facilitators (usually a man and a woman). The method has been applied to non-profit as well as business development processes. Because of the empowerment and motivation participants experience during the conference, it is the method of choice for a development project which is meant to be truly participatory, and should be applied in particular for the project identification. It is also highly applicable for community and regional development as well as for private businesses that want to improve collaboration with their various stakeholders.

In a Future Search, people have a chance to take ownership of their past, present, and future, confirm their mutual values and commit to action plans grounded in reality. The main conditions for a successful Future Search Conference are; Firstly the whole system should participate with a cross-section of as many interested parties as is practical. Secondly, all future scenarios – for an organisation, community or issue – are put into a historical and global perspective. Thirdly people self-manage their work and use dialog (not problem solving) as the main tool. Fourthly the process focuses on finding common ground rather than resolving conflict as the primary frame of reference.

For more information on this method get hold of the book; **Future Search: An Action Guide to Finding Common Ground in Organizations and Communities** by Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1995) or go to the website www.futuresearch.net .