

FUTURE SEARCH

Weisbord, M. and Janoff, S. (2000): *Future Search*. Berrett-Koehler

Future Search is an innovative planning conference used worldwide by hundreds of communities and organizations. It helps to transform the capability of organizations for cooperative action in a relatively short time. Future search is - similar to scenario conferences - especially helpful in uncertain, fast-changing situations. Because people build on what they already have, they need no prior training or expertise.

In Future Search conferences, topics focus on a wide range of purposes but the title is always "The Future of...". Because Future Search is largely culture free, people from all walks of life in North and South America, Africa, Australia, Europe and South Asia have adopted it with success. We applied the method, for example, in the context of educational reform in Pakistan. In this conference, we had diverse stakeholder groups, ranging from high-ranking ministry officials to parents and teachers. There were even women who never before had left their home village! The approach empowered them to work on their own issues and discuss them freely with the other participants.

How Future Search Works

A future search usually involves 50 to 70 people. The magic number is 64 participants, because then 8 times 8 working groups can be formed. Equal numbers of participants are invited from all relevant stakeholder groups. In a business context it could be: employees, management, shareholders, suppliers, customers, the public, etc. It is intended that within stakeholder groups a cross section of gender, ethnic groups, powerful and non-powerful people, etc. be represented. The method can be applied in a planning process. It allows planners to learn about the issues that really concern people. The trick that distinguishes Future Search from similar methods is that for some of the tasks, participants are grouped according to their stake (e.g., in our workshop in Pakistan all teachers met separately, all parents, all ministry employees all donors, etc.), and for other tasks, groups are mixed to the highest degree possible (i.e., one member of each stakeholder group).

The conference is designed around principles that enable people to work together without having to defend or sell a particular agenda:

Future Search Principles / Conditions for Success

- Get the "whole system" in the room. Invite a significant cross-section of all parties with a stake in the outcome.
- Explore the "whole elephant" before seeking to fix any part. Get everyone talking about the same world. Think globally, act locally.
- Put common ground and future focus front and center while treating problems and conflicts as information, not action items.

- Encourage self-management and responsibility for action by participants before, during, and after the future search.
- Urge full attendance - Keep part-time participants to a minimum.
- Meet under healthy conditions - This means airy rooms with windows, healthy snacks and meals, adequate breaks.
- Work across three days (sleep twice) - People need "soak time" to take in everything that happens.
- Ask for voluntary public commitments to specific next steps before people leave.

The Future Search Agenda

The work is done in two and a half days. There are five tasks. The first establishes a common history: participants draw time lines on big sheets of wall paper. The second task is done in plenary: a mind map of world trends affecting the whole group is produced. This creates confusion and mixed feelings. People can sense the complexity in which they are living. The third step is the first time that stakeholders work in their peer groups. It calls for an assessment of what they are doing now that they are proud of and sorry about, an important and powerful step that helps the other groups to understand more of each other's motives. Next, people devise ideal future scenarios and bring them to life through role plays. Then all groups identify common ground themes--key features that appear in every scenario. The whole group confirms their common future, acknowledges differences and makes choices about how to use their energy. In the final segment, they sign up to work together on desired plans and actions.

Day 1: Focus on the Past

People make time lines of key events in the world, their own lives, and in the history of the future search topic. Small groups tell stories about each time line and the implications of their stories for the work they have come to do.

Focus on Present, External Trends

The whole group makes a "mind map" of trends affecting them now and identifies those trends most important for their topic.

Day 2: Focus on Present, External Trends

Stakeholder groups describe what they are doing now about key trends and what they want to do in the future.

Focus on Present

Stakeholder groups report what they are proud of and sorry about in the way they are dealing with the future search topic.

Ideal Future Scenarios

Diverse groups put themselves into the future and describe their preferred future as if it has already been accomplished.

Identify Common Ground

Diverse Groups post themes they believe are common ground for everyone.

Day 3: Confirm Common Ground

Whole group dialogues to agree on common ground.

Action Planning

Volunteers sign up to implement action plans.

Changing Our Assumptions

“For decades it was assumed that the best way to bring a large group together was in the presence of an expert speaker or panelists who would answer peoples' questions. The belief that someone else has the knowledge we need is deep in us. So is the belief that if others tell us what to do we can do it. Future search turns those assumptions upside down. Instead of speeches, we have working sessions among a wide range of parties who have information, authority to act, and a stake in the outcome, regardless of their status, skills, or attitudes. In addition, we assume that complex planning issues require value choices more than expertise and "data." We believe that people make different choices when they are in dialogue than they would make working alone or only with familiar faces. We assume people already have the skills and motivation to do more than they are doing now. What they need is opportunity. We assume that each person has a piece of reality, and that each needs access to all in order to get a more whole picture. We assume that we need go toward the mess together-- the confusion and chaos-- and do something about it. These are common sense assumptions that hold up well in practice.” (Weisbord and Janoff, 2000)

Philosophy of Facilitating

Future Search facilitators believe that:

Every person and every group is doing the best they can with what they have every minute of every day.

People do only what they are ready, willing and able to do.

People need not change their own minds or anyone else's for a group to discover its common ground and potential for action.

A Theory of Facilitating

The facilitator's task is to keep the group whole and working together, not to fix problems, resolve differences, or motivate action.

Groups stay whole and develop greater capacity when they (a) discover their real differences in belief, skill, and function, and (b) integrate their capabilities for a common purpose.

Groups tend to fragment around differences, whether real or imagined. The facilitator's job is make sure no person becomes a scapegoat due to a personal trait, feeling, or point of view.

Facilitators are responsible for boundaries of time and task, not for content, analysis, direction, interpretation, meaning, or synthesis.

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