

Three Perspectives on Future Search:

Meeting Design, Theory of Facilitating, Global Change Strategy

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For more than 20 years we have been experimenting with a set of principles for helping large groups plan and act on common ground despite differences of age, culture, education, ethnicity, gender, and social class. In this article we will tell some of the things we have learned about this way of working, which we call “future search.” Elsewhere in this issue Bengt Lindstrom has described an application in Scandinavia.

Future search can be seen as an outgrowth of the work of the late social psychologist Kurt Lewin, developer of field theory and action research, which has influenced organizational consultation for 50 years (Lewin, 1948). Among Lewin’s disciples were Eric Trist and Fred Emery (1964, 1973), whose work on “turbulent environments” led to social-technical systems analysis, a method for restructuring work systems, and on Search Conferences for strategic planning. Lewin also mentored Ronald Lippitt and Eva Schindler-Rainman (1980), who pioneered a practice of future-oriented planning with community groups of 200 to 300 people in the 1970’s, long before futuring or large group interventions were fashionable. Though all of these pioneers are now gone, we were fortunate to have had them as our mentors and guides going back to the 1970’s. More detail on the evolution and method can be found in our book *Future Search* (Weisbord & Janoff, 2000).

Our work with future search has led us to a major revision of Lewinian change theory. This theory held that a system could effectively be changed using data from a consultant-led diagnosis to “unfreeze” the system’s rigidity. The consultant then would help people design actions to move to more productive norms and practices and “refreeze” their system at a higher level of functioning. Under conditions of non-stop change systems no longer stand still long enough to be refrozen.

Future search for us and many colleagues has become a global learning laboratory to refine techniques, strategies, group methods, and theories of action responsive to the extreme speed-up of life nearly everywhere. It evolved as a means for “getting everybody improving whole systems” (Weisbord, 1987) and grew from our conviction that people have widely shared values for mutual respect, dignity, community, cooperation, and effective action. To find methods equal to these aspirations has been a challenge in the last 30 years. As the rate of change accelerates to warp speed, many old planning methods—based on expert analysis and recommendation—have not been equal to tasks like land use planning, AIDS prevention, water quality improvement, creating employment, local leadership development, renewal of religious congregations and sustainable economic growth. These are the sorts of issues that people have been able to address using future search. Today the method is used worldwide—from Australia to Zimbabwe, including all the countries of Scandinavia and Northern Europe, India,

Bangladesh, Singapore, the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Kenya, Ethiopia, Algeria, and South Africa, as well as the Americas.

We have learned to think about future search in three ways, each necessary to its usefulness in the world: 1) A principle-based meeting design, 2) a philosophy of facilitating and 3) A global change strategy

One: A Principle-Based Meeting Design

Future search, firstly, is our name for a *principle-based meeting design*. Our purpose is to enable organizations and communities to quickly transform their capability for action. The meeting has five phases and requires 2 1/2 days. (We have found shorter meetings will rarely produce the desired outcomes.) The goal is always an action plan for the future of “X,” meaning an institution, a network, or simply people who have an issue in common. One or more diverse groups of 60 to 70 people look together at their (1) past, (2) present, and (3) future, then (4) discover common ground, and (5) make action plans. The techniques are largely familiar, and include time lines, a mind map, dramatizing future scenarios, and work in small groups and large. One aspect that makes future search different from some large group methods is that every person works on the same tasks until action planning time, thus creating a shared umbrella of values and goals. The choice to have everyone work together on the same tasks is not arbitrary. It derives from designing the meeting based on a set of principles, which are more important than the techniques. Here are the principles of future search:

- **Getting the “whole system” in the room** -- a cross-section of as many interested parties as practical. That means more diversity and less hierarchy than is usual in a working meeting, and a chance for each person to be heard and to learn other ways of looking at the task at hand. The “whole system” is defined as people who among them have in relation to the focal issue authority, resources, expertise and the need to act together if they choose.
- **Thinking globally before acting locally** -- learning about the “whole elephant” together before acting on a part. The theory is that for people to develop trust and understanding they must all talk about the same world. This enhances shared understanding, a greater commitment to act and increases the range of potential actions.
- **Focusing on the Future and Common Ground** -- rather than past problems and conflicts. Participants discover shared aspirations, values and direction when they are freed from having to manage old conflicts or solve past problems before making new commitments. Nothing is put under the rug, but problems and conflicts are considered information, not action agenda items. No one has to negotiate differences for this meeting to be a success.
- **Self-Managing and Taking Responsibility for Action** --relying on other participants rather than facilitators to do the tasks at hand. Facilitators

encourage people to make their own choices including how much or how little they will participate. No one is asked to do anything they do not already know how to do and wish to do.

Two: A Philosophy and Theory of Facilitating

We and our colleagues have devised both a theory and philosophy of managing and facilitating future searches that might be called “doing more by doing less.” Our method brings alive the fourth principle, having people take responsibility for their own work. We believe that for groups to accomplish more, it is essential that facilitators resist doing for a group what its members are capable of doing themselves.

We practice several applications of differentiation-integration theory, at the individual, group, organization and community levels. From the biological sciences (Von Bertalanffy, 1957) we have learned that every living thing starts as an amorphous entity and develops by differentiating into the parts needed to function, while integrating those parts into a more complex whole. Cells become organs which become systems that together make up a human being. Similar dynamics occur within groups, organizations, communities and societies. For a system to integrate itself, however, it must first differentiate its parts. So in doing complex community or organizational planning, it is helpful if people better understand the great variety of functions, needs, backgrounds and perspectives they bring to any task. Then they can create mechanisms to assure that energy and information flow throughout the system. Hence our use of time lines, mind maps, and small group reports of first hand experience to get out the great variety of knowledge, hopes, fears and positive motivations in the room.

Future search is first of all a *structural* intervention. We don't try to change people's behavior (we can't), but we do enable people to change the structures under which they interact. We see our job as creating conditions where people can get the whole picture from one another and cross boundaries with new forms of relationship and cooperation.

Philosophically, we believe all people are doing the best they can with what they have. It is not our job to make people better than they already are by training them in communications, interpersonal other skills. Rather, we provide opportunities for people to discover capabilities they did not know they had. Therefore, we require no diagnosis of group needs. If we can get the whole system in the room, we (and they) will soon learn what they are capable of doing. (We are not against education. Nobody can have too much interpersonal skill. However, we find that no training is necessary for people to get great benefits from future searching.)

Finally, we believe people will only do what they are ready, willing and able to do. So our job as facilitators is to (1) make sure there is a compelling task to do that is worth people's time and energy, (2) help assure that we have in the room people with authority, resources, expertise and need who have a stake in the work, (3) start and end on time, and (4) manage whole group conversations so that everyone who wishes to speak has a chance to do so in the time available.

The work of Solomon Asch (1952) has also influenced in how we structure future search. Asch's research more than half a century ago led him to understand better the conditions under which people could honestly report what they believed to be true. This sparked Fred Emery to translate Asch's findings into criteria for effective dialogue in planning meetings, as follows:

Conditions for Effective Dialogue

- a) All parties are talking about the same world – people back up their opinions with examples.
- b) People experience their common humanity and similar needs for food, warmth, shelter, protection for their children, and meaning in their lives.

When a) and b) happen in a meeting, then c) the facts of one person's world become part of the other's. When all talk about a world that includes all of their perceptions they become capable of genuine dialogue and realistic action.

Three: A Global Change Strategy

How can separate meetings lasting a few days become a global change strategy? One answer comes from the collective accomplishments of Future Search Network members. During the last decade, there have been at any one time at least 350 dedicated practitioners who have agreed to apply the basic principles of future search in their work and carry out future searches as a form of public service. Together they have run future search all over the world in numerous cultures and languages, working for whatever fees people can afford. FSN members agree to share their learning, collaborate on projects, and mutually reinforce each others' efforts.

This has led to ripples around the world involving tens of thousands of citizens in shaping their own futures. Work on water quality in Bangladesh, for example, inspires conferences to improve the lot of battered women and street children in Iran, and leads eventually to the demobilization of child soldiers in the Southern Sudan. A participant in a future search on the strategic direction for the Women's Sector in Northern Ireland follows by sponsoring one on integrated economic development in County Fermanagh. This leads to a future search for Northern Ireland's Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure that stimulates work in other government departments and in arts communities in other countries. Reports of future searches in communities such as the Helmholtzplatz Neighborhood in Inner City Berlin sparks community conferences in Nobosibirsk, Siberia and the Altai Region and the Russian Far East. Future searches have been run with the Aboriginal peoples of Australia, Native Americans in the US and the Inuit in Canada. They have been run in business firms, cities, towns and provinces, schools and hospitals. From each future search flows a stream of actions once thought unattainable, such as widely-supported strategic plans, cooperation between public and private sectors, creating new avenues for funding, community health initiatives, parental involvement in schools, and so on (www.futuresearch.net).

In our enthusiasm for this work, we do not wish to imply that it is always easy, that every group will benefit, or that there are not moments of high anxiety, ambiguity and tense drama in the course of a future search. Leadership, a shared goal, and perceived interdependence, as in any activity, are still required for success. When these are missing, no facilitator is skillful enough to make up for the lack. For that reason, the seeds for success are planted in the planning that goes into each meeting. The trick is to match the task with the people doing it, a job neither too big nor too small for those in the room. When we have worthwhile planning to do and the right people to do it they will nearly always surprise themselves with what they can create in a future search.

To sum up, future search offers large-group participants a new and easily-learned way of working together. It enables unprecedented action across many boundaries once thought hard to cross. It enables us to enact deeply-felt needs for dignity, meaning and community. It provides a big, empty container into which people, whatever their backgrounds, can pour their hopes, aspirations, energy and passion. By sharing our learning through a network of social activists we connect our tiny local streams to the great ocean of constructive possibility that exists on every continent. That future search is used in so many diverse cultures suggests that we are tapping into archetypal processes, enabling people to connect with parts of themselves that have been buried by an avalanche of technological quick fixes. Future search, by contrast, nourishes the human spirit. That, we believe, more than any theoretical framework, accounts for its success.

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