

Future Search

Overview

Future Search brings the “whole system” into the room to look at the past, present and future experiences of participants, through a task-focused agenda. The design is based on the intention to have all participants take ownership of this past, present and future, thereby finding common ground for collective future action. A Future Search conference has a specific theme which all stakeholders work on over a 3-day process. An important principle of the process depends on all the participants accepting an open invitation to spend a few days together in an explorative process.

Future Search was designed by Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff as a process where diverse groups of people with a stake in a community or organization can plan their future together. They have written a book called *Future Search* which explains the process in detail, and is summarized in this short overview.

A Future Search process has a specific structure to follow, which has been designed and evolved based on the experience of hundreds of similar gatherings. The process would typically bring together 60-70 participants. This number works on the principle of bringing the “whole system” into the room, by selecting at least 8 stakeholder groups, who are equally represented by approximately 8 participants each. The agenda works through the following steps:

- Review of the past
- Explore the present
- Create ideal future scenarios
- Identify common ground
- Make action plans

The Process

The Future Search process recommends that the agenda includes at least 2 “sleep-overs”, and spans over three days. A typical Future Search agenda would look as follows:

Day 1, Afternoon (1-5pm)

- *Focus on the past.* Mixed groups sit, share life stories and discuss milestones which they have experienced over a specified number of years. Each person from these groups then plots their experiences on massive flipcharts on the walls, which have been divided into categories of society/self. The end result will be a long row of experiences which have filled flipcharts on the wall. This gives everyone in a room a sense of the collective past experiences, and the parallels between individual trajectories and societal trajectories.
- *Focus on present, future trends:* The whole group together now reviews trends which currently affect our lives and communities. These experiences are documented by the facilitator onto a “mindmap”. After these have been put onto the mindmap, participants are given stickers of colored dots to “vote” which trends they feel are most important. The session ends here, and gives participants the opportunity to reflect on this overwhelming diagram of complexity overnight.



Example of Mindmap above with sticker dots

Day 2, Morning (8:30am-12:30pm)

- *Continued – trends:* The larger group is now divided into their stakeholder groups (around similar interests/context). These stakeholder groups review the trends and decide which ones are important and which they want to take ownership for.
- *Focus on present, owning our actions:* Each stakeholder group then discusses which of their group’s contributions to these trends they feel proud of or sorry about. This is where each stakeholder group takes personal responsibility for the current issues at hand. The groups present their “prouds” and “sorries” to the bigger group, which relates to the trends they have been prioritising.

Day 2, Afternoon (1:30-6pm)

- *Ideal future scenarios:* The group returns to their mixed groups from the day before. The purpose of this exercise is to imagine their desired future 10-20 years from now, and act out this scenario to the bigger group as if it is happening today. It is important to encourage the groups to think with their minds, bodies and emotions, tapping into unconscious aspirations. They also need to highlight which barriers they overcame from the time of the Future Search up until the time of the scenario.
- *Identify common ground:* Once these scenarios have been acted out, the mixed groups highlight what the common future themes are that have emerged. They also look at potential projects or strategies which will help them get to these futures. Finally, they note what disagreements still remain.

Day 3, Morning (8:30am-1pm)

- *Continued – confirming common ground:* The whole group reviews the lists from the previous afternoon. A discussion is facilitated to try to understand what each statement means, and whether or not there is agreement. If there is no agreement, then it is noted, and the group moves on. This exercise also explores the tension between the actual and the ideal. The group needs to decide whether they want to delve further into the conflict areas or focus on the common ground already created within the limited time remaining.

- *Action-planning*: Participants now have the opportunity to invite others interested in a particular project or theme to join them in action-planning. This process is similar to “Open Space”, explained in a separate section, and the purpose is to encourage people to work across boundaries in addressing these themes. These groups then report back, highlighting how this information will be implemented and disseminated, and then the conference is closed.

Conditions required for a successful future search conversation

1. The “whole system” needs to be in the room.

Future Searches only work if “the whole system” is in the room. It is critical that as many key stakeholders of an issue are present in the room and that the different voices of a “whole system” are contributing. Diverse perspectives allow new relationships to be built, and a stakeholder can learn more about itself and the world by interacting with other constituencies.

If there is only part of the story being told by a group of people who normally interact with each other, a collective future cannot be envisioned, and a Future Search can't work.

2. The “Big Picture” as context to local action.

To get participants on the same wavelength, it is important to get everyone talking about the same world. Therefore it is important for the group to describe this world in as much detail as possible before doing anything about it. The conference therefore starts by exploring the “global trends”.

3. Exploring current reality and common futures, not problems and conflicts

Future searches delve into future scenarios, rather than problem-solving or conflict management. The process acknowledges differences, but does not work through them, as the purpose of the meeting isn't about team-building. Common ground is the backdrop for planning in this process.

4. Self-managed explorations and action plans

Self-managed groups are used throughout the process, reducing passivity, hierarchy and dependency on facilitators. The intention is to shift control from external facilitators. Small groups are recommended to rotate roles of facilitator, reporter and timekeeper.

5. Attending the whole meeting

It is important that every participant be involved in the shifts which change their perspective on what needs to be done, and to build common ground. For this to work, everyone needs to be there for the whole meeting. It is also discouraged to have non-participants or observers present.

6. Meeting under healthy conditions

As has been highlighted in the introduction to this toolkit, good food and a healthy atmosphere with natural light help people's energy and ability to concentrate. The space should be easy to move around and have the flexibility to change for small or large groups, with lots of wall space for flipcharts.

7. Working across 3 days

It is not the amount of time which is important, but the space to absorb the learning over 2 nights which is a benefit. We assume that the unconscious works on unfinished business overnight, which is how the programme is designed.

8. Taking responsibility publicly for follow-up

Having people select the action groups they sign up for and to publicly acknowledge their next steps helps to share ownership and commitment to the follow-up process.

Preparation for a Future Search

The preparation process of a Future Search conference is key to the success of the meeting. Getting all the stakeholders taking ownership of the meeting, as well as attending, is a process which takes time. A Future Search is usually “sponsored” by a particular organization or person (sometimes a key stakeholder), who pulls together the other stakeholders, and “hosts” the preparation. It is recommended that at least 2 preparation meetings with a representative from all stakeholders are present to do the following:

- define the purpose and expectations
- introduce facilitators
- agree on programme
- decide on an invitation list
- organize logistics

Applications

Future Searches have been used extensively around the world, on each continent. Countries include Sudan, Russia, Sri Lanka, Botswana, Sweden, Northern Ireland and Australia. It has also been used within sectors for example healthcare, education and business. For a more extensive list of applications, please see:

<http://www.futuresearch.net/method/applications/world.cfm>

Case Examples – Nation-building in Bangladesh and the Inuit in Canada

These cases are adapted from the Future Search book, 2000.

Nation-building in Bangladesh

UNICEF agreed to sponsor a Future Search training in Bangladesh, a country with a population of 110 million people, and many social challenges. The intention was to train local facilitators who would in turn host future searches to envision new realities for Bangladesh’s future, and move the largely poor population out of poverty.

In 1994, 50 Bangladeshi consultants, trainers and managers came together for the training. One of the challenges was that participants struggled to envision large future dreams, for example, a country without child labour. The participants agreed that “we need to learn how to dream”. A number of follow-up conferences were planned, and future searches were run on topics including “Stopping Children with Diarrhea from Dying”, “Early Childhood Development”, “Child Labour”, “Stopping the Spread of HIV/AIDS, and others. These conferences have proved to be very popular as planning tools in Bangladesh, and have subsequently spread to other parts of South East Asia, including Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

Regional Economic Development: the Inuit People, Canada

When the Inuit people of the Arctic region were granted a new homeland, they embarked on a Future Search to develop a strategy for economic development. The Future Search process was conducted in both the local language and English, and included drum dancing and other traditional features. The conference included a range of stakeholders of the newly formed homeland, and produced frameworks for education and training, social development, preservation of culture and language, small business development, transportation, infrastructure and other organizational aspects of action-planning.

The Inuit people have sponsored several subsequent future searches, and local community leaders have learnt the future search techniques of facilitating community-based planning at many local levels.

Commentary

A Future Search is quite a structured process with a sophisticated meeting “architecture”, that has been consciously designed to flow in a particular order. This is a strength, but it can also appear too rigid. It’s important to realise that while the instruction on how to do a Future Search may seem to imply that there is only one way to do it, the Future Search website and newsletter include active discussions among practitioners who have adapted it in various ways to different cultural contexts. There is clearly some variety in how it is applied.

One of the aspects of Future Search which we find most powerful is it’s use of visual techniques and creative processes. The history timeline which the group puts together on the first day across an entire wall usually tells a striking story, as does the colorful mindmap of current trends. Similarly, the challenge to people to act out their scenarios of the future rather than just drawing them up on a flipchart invites in multiple intelligences and invokes imagination.

It is important to note what Future Searches cannot do. For example, future searches cannot make up for weak leadership. If leadership doesn’t act on the actions from a Future Search, or buy in to the process, it will not work. This process stops at the point of action planning and leaves the implementation as the responsibility and ownership of the stakeholders participating.

Future searches also cannot reconcile deep value differences. If people disagree deeply based on religious or political differences, it is unlikely to be solved in a Future Search. Future Search quite explicitly chooses to put disagreements aside and focus on commonalities. In many contexts this is sufficient but if underlying issues or disagreements will block action, it may need to be replaced or complemented by other processes.

Finally, great facilitation trainings are available for Future Search, but we also feel that if one has strong general facilitation skills, it is possible to be able to facilitate a Future Search based on the excellent written materials available in the book and on the website.

Resources

Weisbord, Marvin and Sandra Janoff. *Future Search*.

<http://www.futuresearch.net>