

Chapter 15

FUTURE SEARCH CONVERSATION

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And so it was that the people devised among themselves a way of asking each other questions whenever a decision was to be made on a New Place or a New Way. We sought to perceive the flow of energy through each new possibility and how much was enough and how much was too much.

– Underwood, 1991, p. 38

1. INTRODUCTION

We can have any future we want. We just have to identify it and design it—purposefully. "Future Search," as popularized by Marvin Weisbord, provides a framework for creating a system's future. The purpose of a Future Search conference is for the system to identify and aim for an ideal future. Two primary goals are to a) help large, diverse groups discover common values, purposes, and projects and b) enable people to create together a desired future that can be implemented immediately (Weisbord & Janoff, 2001). No prior training or expertise is needed to participate meaningfully in a Future Search. In fact, there is evidence that when people "begin working on real tasks relevant to a shared purpose," the skills needed to participate in the Future Search process "appear naturally and effortlessly" (Emery & Purser, 1996, p. 16). The process has been used to address a variety of issues (health care, education, public transportation, water quality), in a variety of settings (schools, hospitals, publishers, churches, government, non-profit organizations), in a variety of locations (North and South America, Australia, Africa, Europe, South Asia).

2. BACK TO THE FUTURE

As developed by Weisbord, Future Search is an integration of several approaches to cooperative planning. It borrows from the "leaderless group" principles developed by Wilford Bion and Eric Trist during WW II, which are now principles for self-managing teams (Weisbord, 1992b). It takes the idea of a global context setting (looking at the global context before the local) from the Search Conference model developed by Fred Emery and Eric Trist (Weisbord, 1992b). The democratic (vs. autocratic) leadership style was adapted from the work of Ronald Lippett and Kurt Lewin (Weisbord, 1992b). From Ronald Lippett and Eva Schindler-Rainman, Weisbord used images of potential explored by whole communities (Weisbord, 1992b). Because Weisbord was most heavily influenced by the Lippett and Schindler-Rainman's large-scale community futures conferences and Emery and Trist's Search Conference, he named his innovation "Future Search" (Weisbord & Janoff, 2000). The spin Weisbord provided was boxing all these elements together in one room: A Future Search Conference brings "into one room people who each have pieces of a complex puzzle" (Weisbord, 1992a, p. 10). Making the benefits of systems thinking and creating space and place for people to work under an umbrella of shared values and goals are two primary goals of a Future Search Conference (Weisbord & Janoff, 2000).

Typically, a Future Search involves 60-70 people. This allows for many perspectives while still keeping the group small enough that the full group can be in conversation throughout the process (Weisbord & Janoff, 2001). It lasts for two and one-half days, which allows for building trust and committing to actions (Weisbord & Janoff, 2001). The process is based on an assumption that "when groups share a common purpose or ideals about a more desirable future, they can learn to work together, respect each other, and cooperate toward the achievement of shared goals" (Emery & Purser, 1996, p. 16). The task is always to identify the future of the system by considering where the system has been, where it is now and present trends that affect the system, identifying "Prouds" and "Sorries", determining the ideal future, and staking out the widest common ground possible for action planning (Weisbord & Janoff, 2001).

3. COREVALUES, ASSUMPTIONS AND CONDITIONS FOR FUTURE SEARCH CONFERENCES

Embedded in the Future Search model is certain core values, assumptions about learning, and conditions for success. Each of these will be described below.

3.1. Core values

Seven core values are at the foundation of the Future Search model. The first is epistemological: The real world is knowable to ordinary people; their knowledge can be collectively and meaningfully organized (Weisbord, 1992a). It would follow then that people can create their own future (Weisbord, 1992a). The third core value assumes that people look for opportunities to engage their head, hearts and hands. They want to be part of organizational decision-making and in fact, are extraordinary sources of information about what is happening in the organization (Weisbord, 1992a). The fourth core value follows-up on this idea: Everyone is an equal; planning should not be left to the elite of the organization (Weisbord, 1992a). Given the chance, people are more likely to cooperate rather than fight is the fifth core value (Weisbord, 1992a). The sixth core value reminds us that the process should empower people to feel more knowledgeable and certain about the future (Weisbord, 1992a). The last core value is about diversity: divergent views and opinions are to be welcomed, respected, and valued (Weisbord, 1992a). These core values send the message that the wisdom of ordinary people is not expendable (Norum, 1997); rather, it is essential to creating exciting organizational futures. These core values also provide clues regarding the assumptions about learning from which Weisbord operates.

3.2 Assumptions

Seven assumptions about how we learn are foundational to the Future Search Model (Weisbord & Janoff, 2000).

Assumption 1: Everyone has a unique learning style. To honor this belief, a variety of methods are used during a Future Search Conference.

Assumption 2: People learn at different rates. In the Future Search model, this means that some people may be confused or lost in the early stages if this is a very different style and model of learning for them. Thus, patience with one another is essential.

Assumption 3: Everyone learns different things from a common experience. We can all be in the same meeting and each come away with a different interpretation of what happened. The sharing of perceptions is part of the Future Search process along with accepting different interpretations and viewpoints as valid.

Assumption 4: We learn best from our own experiences and need to test new ideas and viewpoints against our own knowledge. The goal is to avoid falling into the trap that there is "one best way" and remain open to several options that will probably work.

Assumption 5: You will learn more in a single Future Search Conference than you will be able to apply. To avoid being overwhelmed, local action within a global context helps to focus what learning can be applied and how it is relevant.

Assumption 6: Everyone has the ability to teach others. Participation and drawing on each other's expertise is one way to help and teach others. This type of interaction is built into the process.

Assumption 7: We all benefit from trial and error if given the support and opportunity for success. The Future Search Conference provides a low-risk setting in which to try out new ideas.

These assumptions about how we learn along with the core values reveal a belief that Weisbord shares with many others: We do not need to rely on experts to design our social systems (Banathy, 1996; Carr, 1997; Owen, 1997; Weisbord, 1992a; Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996; Whitney, 2001). "Each person is born with sage-like wisdom waiting to be awakened" (Daft & Lengel, 1998, p. 72). Organizations are coming to realize that what its employees know "is at the heart of how an organization functions" (Davenport & Prusak, 1998, p. x). In fact, Davenport and Prusak suggest that many organizations are misdirected in seeking the expertise of consultants: "much of the knowledge they [need] already [exists] within their organizations" (1998, p. xii). The problem may be in accessing this knowledge. A Future Search Conference provides a way to access the knowledge already existing about the organization's future. Meeting certain conditions for success will ensure the knowledge that exists is accessed.

3.3 Conditions

From several years of experience creating Future Search Conferences, Weisbord and Janoff (2000) believe there are eight conditions for success. Three of these are the most critical. All will be described below.

Condition 1: Get the "whole system" in the room. The "whole system" is the "broadest temporary planning community feasible" (Emery & Weisbord, 1992, p. 66). A broad cross-section of stakeholders is needed for diverse perspectives. A variety of perspectives will allow for each snapshot view to contribute towards creating a new picture of the whole (Senge, 1990; Weisbord & Janoff, 2000). This also allows for new relationships to develop as well as the cross-pollination of visions and imaginations (Whyte, 1994). Weisbord and Janoff admit it may not be feasible to literally get the "whole system" in the room but insist on a diagonal slice of the system. They suggest a diagonal slice of 60-70 stakeholders provides for ample diversity as well as ensures face-to-face dialogue and a balance of small group and whole system time.

Condition 2: The "Whole Elephant" as context for local action. This condition refers to the Sufi story of the six blind men describing an elephant.

In order to pool individual experience to create a shared reality, the task of the group is considered in the context of society as a whole. Trends within and between the system and trends outside of the system are explored.

Condition 3: Explore current reality and common futures. The Future Search Conference is not meant to be a problem-solving or conflict-management experience. Thus, differences are acknowledged, but are not worked through during the conference. They are put on hold. Instead, the focus is on imagining and inventing new ideal futures. The widest common ground everyone can stand upon is identified and used for action planning purposes.

Condition 4: Work in self-managed and small groups. Everyone is responsible for sharing and interpreting information. Everyone participates in action planning. This reduces dependency, hierarchy, conflict, and task-avoidance. It increases the chances of people experiencing discovery, learning, and cooperation. Small groups determine how to delegate the tasks and are encouraged to rotate the roles group members play (discussion leader, recorder, reporter, time keeper, data manager).

Condition 5: Attend the whole meeting. People need to be there to act. A fully shared experience is the goal. This fully shared experience creates a common future and an understanding of how that common future was identified.

Condition 6: Meet under healthy conditions. People will be spending up to three days together; daylight and good food are conducive to a productive meeting.

Condition 7: Work across three days. Weisbord and Janoff contend that a 2 1/2 day process is critical to allow for "soak time" (2000, p. 55). The evening session commonly ends when people are working on important tasks to keep the learning alive overnight, while the creative process continues. The 2 1/2 day format also ensures that action planning will not come at a time when people are overloaded and too tired for it.

Condition 8: Take public responsibility for follow-up. At a Future Search Conference, people will be asked to publicly share what they will do next. The role each person will play when they go back to "work" is declared. Having public accountability increases the odds that each person will follow through on implementing the action plan.

Weisbord suggests that of these seven, three are "minimum critical specifications" (Emery & Weisbord, 1992 p. 66). These are *getting the whole system in the room* (Condition 1), *exploring the local context within the global* (Condition 2), and *working in small self-managed groups* (Condition 4). Weisbord asserts these three particular conditions interact to allow for a wide group of stakeholders working interdependently in a wide field of inquiry (Emery & Weisbord, 1992). This increases the likelihood of the conference

going "beyond participation to the farther reaches of common ground, creativity, and committed action" (Emery & Weisbord, 1992, p. 66).

4. THE FUTURE SEARCH PROCESS

Five key tasks make up the structure of a Future Search Conference. These tasks are accomplished by people working in small mixed groups—groups that reflect the diversity of the stakeholders. Their first task is to review the past to establish personal histories, identify key world events, and share milestones in the history of the organization. This past becomes prelude to the future (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999) as each group develops and shares a picture of where the organization has been and how it got to the present moment.

The second task is to focus on the present by creating a mind map of trends that are currently affecting the organization. The trends are global and once the map has been created, each person identifies the trends they think are most critical to creating a new future. The entire group becomes engaged in producing a collective reality. The map is then reinterpreted by common rather than mixed stakeholder groups to allow peers to hear what each other is thinking. Each stakeholder group then reports how they believe these trends are affecting the system now. A common surprise is through this exercise, different stakeholders discover they share concerns, "worry about the same issues and want to live in the same kind of world" (Weisbord & Janoff, 2000).

The third task is to focus on "prouds" and "sorries": each stakeholder group is asked to share what they are doing presently that they feel proud of or sorry about, particularly in relation to creating the new ideal future. The purpose of this task is for people to take responsibility; not to do anything to make amends, etc. Weisbord and Janoff believe "our perceptions of our own behavior, good news and bad, need to be public for people to get beyond blaming and complaining" (2000, p. 96). While the mind-map is a descriptive exercise about the present, "Prouds and Sorries" is affective, getting at what the group feels about what they are doing (Weisbord & Janoff, 2000).

Groups are mixed again for the fourth task: creating a desired future. As people discover what they are ready, willing, and able to do, they start moving themselves toward their new ideal future. Groups imagine they are five, ten, or twenty years in the future and create a concrete image of the new organization. They also identify major barriers they had to overcome to get to this new future. The scenarios are presented to the large group and as they are presented, people make note of themes they hear that were present in their group's scenario as well as ideas, projects, innovations they like. Three lists are created: Common Future (what everyone agrees they want in the future organization), Potential Projects (proposals for how to get what everyone has agreed they want) and Not Agreed (differences and conflicts that still exist). Similar themes are grouped and a picture of a shared ideal future emerges.

Now it is time to act on creating the identified new desired future. In this fifth and last task, action planning is based on only what has been identified as the common ground. People take responsibility for what they intend to do to make the desired future a reality—next steps are decided upon, the work is divided up, goals are set, who else needs to be involved is determined. These commitments and timetables are made public so everyone is on the same page and knows what needs to happen when they return to the organization.

"We have created this world together and we now face it together, listening to each other, building on each other's perceptions" (Weisbord & Janoff, 2000 p. 93). Confusion, chaos, and contradictions are embedded in the Future Search process. Differences and disagreement are acknowledged as paradox but not reconciled. In order to stake out the widest common ground, conversation becomes strategy: if the knowledge sought already exists in the system, people are probably already engaged in a "collective search for meaning about the direction of the [system]" (Thomas & Roberts, 1999, p. 519).

5. STAKING OUT THE WIDEST COMMON GROUND

Conversation is a powerful low-tech way to change entire systems (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996b). In the Future Search process, it is the pathway to discovering common ground.

One of the key features of the Future Search model is that differences are acknowledged, but not dealt with at that point in time. Learning Assumptions Three and Four (described earlier) are central to this concept. Learning Assumption Three encourages the sharing of perceptions and accepting different interpretations and viewpoints as valid. Learning Assumption Four reminds us to challenge our assumptions. We all carry mental models, images of how we believe the world works, around with us (Senge, 1990). These mental models are deeply embedded in our memory banks (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998). They are reflected in our beliefs and ultimately, the actions taken based on those beliefs. Thus, challenging our mental models is critical to discovering common ground. Daft and Lengel (1998) state "mind potential is released when people open to new information and multiple perspectives" (p. 69). Seeing the limitations in our own perceptions (Daft & Lengel, 1998; Senge, 1990) allows us to "loosen our grip on our certainties" (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998, p. 68) and hold differences in paradox.

When we engage in the kind of conversation that allows us to challenge assumptions and recognize differences but not focus on them, different kinds of questions are asked. The questions asked illustrate the group is involved in mutual inquiry or exploration. The questions reflect an open-minded curiosity,

a wide-eyed innocence rather than cynicism or a desire to impose an agenda. The questions are directed towards making me clear about what the other person is saying—questions that indicate a softening and opening up of the mind (Bohm, 1990). This is dialogic conversation, directed toward discovery and new understandings (Bohm, 1990; Burbules, 1993; Senge, 1990).

The radical approach to acknowledging conflicts but not working through them then and there means that people learn to hold their position instead of being held by their position (Senge, 1990). Conflict is put on hold while common ground takes center stage (Weisbord & Janoff, 2000). Fears are allayed as "commonalities take precedence and human diversity is appreciated" (Emery & Purser, p. 17). This creates space for each person to talk (Bohm, 1990; Burbules, 1993). In the process of sharing perspectives and having others respond, people learn about their own perspective by re-evaluating its viability, thus coming to understand it more fully (Dixon, 1996). "A dialogue not only gives voice to the other, but is an exchange based on the presumption that each participant has something meaningful to give" (Oliner & Oliner, 1995, p. 116). Wisdom emerges from this way of listening. Wisdom born of paying attention and responding to changes in our surroundings:

Usually we think of wisdom in terms of lofty abstractions, not survival skills ... and yet, the central survival skill is surely the capacity to pay attention and respond to changing circumstances, to learn and adapt, to fit into new environments. (Bateson, 1990, p. 231)

Common ground is the product of listening deeply to one another. We listen deeply and actively when we invite others to talk consistently and frequently; listen naively, without intention to preach; give feedback; and ask "dumb" questions to understand the thinking behind the assumption (Oliner & Oliner, 1995). We are all capable of such conversation, but may need to develop skills as "strategic conversationalists" (Thomas & Roberts, 1999).

Thomas and Roberts (1999) suggest that engaging people in five key activities will develop their skills as strategic conversationalists. First, they must learn to continuously scan their "world." In the Future Search process, the scan takes place when working through the second task of identifying trends (local and global) that affect the system. The data received from scanning needs to be interpreted to determine how or if it is relevant to the organization. Determining relevancy means respecting different views of what is important. This key activity is also reflected in the Future Search process. Strategy involves making choices. Thomas and Roberts suggest that the key activity be a conversational process where options are considered in detail and the thinking behind them explored. Choices must also be made in light of the organization's desired future. This third key activity is embedded throughout the Future Search process and particularly in the "Prouds and Sorries" task. Strategic choices need to be operationalized and planning through open

conversation is a key activity proposed by Thomas and Roberts. The Future Search process is ultimately an open conversation directed at planning the future of the system. "Intelligently executing" (Thomas & Roberts, 1999, p. 522) the action plan is the last key activity for strategic conversationalists. The Future Search Conference parallels this activity with the Action Planning task. Thomas and Roberts contend that the largest group of people in an organization is "strategically dormant": they can learn to be effective strategists but need to be involved in strategic conversations (2000, p. 523). This mirrors Weisbord's belief that all people are capable of creating the future of the organization, if given the opportunity.

When a diverse group of stakeholders is assembled in the same room for over two days, multitudinous and divergent perceptions are revealed as realities are shared with one another. In being quiet long enough to listen to what others deem significant, common ground emerges. Creating action plans only around what has been staked out as the widest common ground typically creates a momentum such that those at the Future Search conference may become "evangelists and warriors" (Daft & Lengel, 1998) for insuring the action plan does not collect dust. It may be that the paradox created by acknowledging but not focusing on differences "unifies a diverse group of complexity of cultures" (Banathy, 1996, p. 220) such that collaboration and fusion is achieved among diverse parts of the system (Daft & Lengel, 1998).

6. FUTURE SEARCH AS DESIGN CONVERSATION

As described by Jenlink and Carr (1996), the focus of a design conversation is to create something new. The Future Search model can be considered to be a type of container (Banathy, 1996; Jenlink & Carr, 1996) that allows for conversation focused on designing a new future. This container "intentionally creates conversations where we can speak about what has importance and meaning for us," (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998, p. 96) particularly regarding the desired future of the organization. It creates what Apatow (1998) calls the ideal of "friendship": a state of unity such that we become absorbed in what we are doing. The container also allows for risk-taking. A diverse cross-section of stakeholders makes for "many tinkerers focused on figuring out what's possible" (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996a, p. 25).

Designing the system's ideal future is the particular focus of the design conversation associated with Future Search. This does not need to be a one-time conversation. Part of the action planning process includes determining when the ideal future may need to be sought once again. In ever-changing environments, the future that made sense today may not make sense

tomorrow. Using conversation as strategy means it will be used as a means to determine when the organization is off course or needs to change course.

The Future Search process is well suited for social systems design. Its foundations acknowledge that all systems are embedded in larger systems. The local context is used to explore the global context as it applies to the desired future of the system. The belief that design should not be the realm of the elite of the organization is reflected in Weisbord's "minimum critical specification" of getting the whole system in the room (or at least a diagonal cross-section of it) (Emery & Weisbord, 1992; Weisbord & Janoff, 2000). Further verification of the Future Search model's appropriateness for social systems design is found in the types of organizations that have used the model. Examples of the many and diverse organizations that have engaged in Future Search activities can be found in Weisbord's book, *Discovering Common Ground*, as well as at the Future Search Network website (<http://www.futuresearch.net>).

The Future Search model devises a way for people to ask questions when decisions are to be made on a New Place or a New Way (Underwood, 1999). The process of working in small self-managed groups over a long period of time creates the ideal of "friendship" (Apatow, 1998) and allows for a flow of energy through each new possibility to be evaluated (Underwood, 1991). These new possibilities create a "messy playfulness" that "creates relationships that make available...new capacities" (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996a, p. 18). Through purposeful conversations, an ideal future emerges; a future that is attainable because it is the progeny of the engagement of diverse stakeholders' heads, hearts and hands.

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