



What is a Future Search Conference?

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Future search is a unique planning conference that is used world-wide by hundreds of communities and organizations. It meets two goals at the same time, (1) helping large diverse groups discover values, purposes, and projects they hold in common; and (2) enabling people to create a desired future together and to start action planning right away.

The conference is especially helpful in uncertain, fast-changing situations. Participants need no training or expertise. Conferences focus on a wide range of purposes in schools, hospitals, churches, communities, government agencies, voluntary networks, foundation, business firms, and non-profits in every sector. Because future search is largely culture free, it has been adopted with success by people all walks of life in North and South America, Africa, Australia, Europe, and South Asia.

A future search usually involves 60 to 70 people – large enough to include many perspectives and small enough that the full group can be in dialogue at each step in the process. This makes possible a shared picture of the “whole elephant”. (For larger groups, conferences may be run in parallel or in sequence.) The optimal length is about 2 ½ days. When people stay engaged in a task for that long, they are more likely to make a notable shift in their trust of each other and in their capability for action. The task is always The Future of _____ (fill in the blank).

How a Future Search Works

The conference is designed to principles that enable people to work together without having to defend or sell a particular agenda. This opens the door to creative new opportunities.

Future Search Principles

- Get the “whole system in the room”
- Think globally, act locally.
- Work common ground/desired futures
- Self-manage discussions/action plans

The first principle involves “getting the whole system in the room”. That means inviting people with a stake in the agenda who don’t usually meet, thus enlarging everybody’s potential for learning and action. The second involves putting the focal issue in global perspective, helping each person to see a bigger picture than the one they usually consider. The third means treating the problem and conflicts as information rather than action items, while searching for common ground and desirable futures. The fourth invites people to manage their own small groups in discussing and acting on what they learn.

The Future Search Agenda

The work is done in four or five half-day sessions, 16 or more hours of actual work. There are five tasks.

1. Establishing a common history – telling the story of where the group has been
2. Mapping world trends affecting the whole group
3. Assessment by stakeholders of “prouds” and “sorries” – a step toward mutual understanding
4. Devise an ideal future scenario – what does the group want to do?
5. Action planning using defined common ground

Most groups are surprised at how much they agree upon and how many values they hold in common. Many communities and organization discover capabilities they did not know they had. They take actions they did not believe were possible. Having done numerous “change” projects over the last 30 years, in business, education, government, health care, social services and communities, we don’t know a better way to spend 16 hours than searching for common ground before making action plans.

Letting Go Stereotypes

Staging a future search means changing our assumptions about large, diverse groups. In these meetings we learn that most people can bridge lines of culture, class, gender, ethnicity, power, status and hierarchy if they will work as peers on tasks of mutual concern. They can do this despite stereotypes, prejudices, and “isms” that lie deep in all of us. They can do this despite skepticism and sometimes-gloomy predictions of what will or won’t happen. Freed from the impulse to put pressure on each other to solve intractable problems, people often find common ground none of them knew existed.

Moreover, we have concluded that the more diverse the group, the more important it is that the people in the room arrive at their own meanings,

conclusions, concepts, and goals. So we resist the temptation to “organize the data” for a group, or to impose our categories and priority-setting mechanisms. Instead, we help people understand what it is they are saying to each other and what choices they can make.

The most valuable thing we have learned is that it is much easier to change the conditions under which we interact than it is to change each others' attitudes, “styles,” and deeply-held beliefs. In creating a more-level playing field and equal chance to participate, we make it possible for people to see issues from many more angles.

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 to 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.

For more information about this program visit the Future Search Network website: www.futuresearch.net

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