

Second Edition
Updated & Expanded



FUTURE SEARCH

**An Action Guide to
Finding Common Ground
in Organizations & Communities**



Marvin Weisbord & Sandra Janoff

An Excerpt From

***Future Search:
An Action Guide to Finding Common Ground in Organizations and
Communities***

by Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff
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Introduction

“Without common standards and a common frame of reference, society dissolves into nothing more than contending factions.”

– Christopher Lasch

When the term “future search” appeared in *Productive Workplaces* (Weisbord, 1987), so many people sparked to it that we decided, after trying fancier names like “strategic futures conference,” to retain it. The response to the concept led to *Discovering Common Ground* (Weisbord et al, 1992), a work that pulled together principles and practices for value-based action planning. The earlier book presented a variety of high participation models and cases, most based on the Emery/Trist Search Conference, including early experiments with future search.

In this book we focus on our evolving future search model. Here we go deeply into our sources and rationale, our experiments with tasks and techniques, and examples of how we and many colleagues have employed this model and its variations. We also provide a philosophical rationale for our design and facilitation practices.

Changes to the Second Edition

FUTURE SEARCH

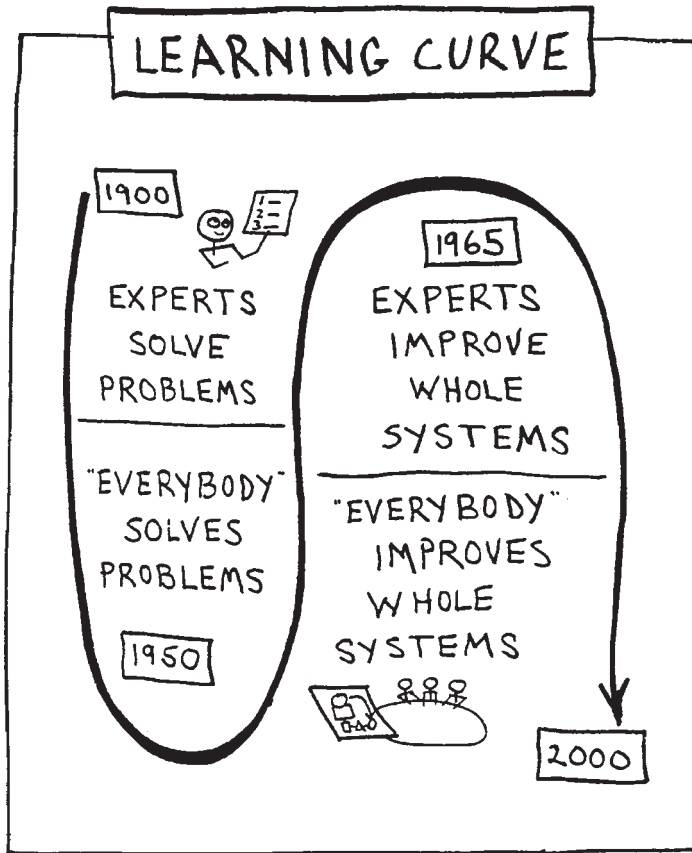
Although much of the original text remains, we have added to this edition in three important ways. First, we have shown the “ripple effect” of future search by following up on earlier cases. People seem able to transform their capability for systemic action very quickly. They tend to create innovative projects and sustain new forms of cooperation long after the meeting. This phenomenon is extensively documented by members of the Future Search Network, our worldwide service organization. Examples appear in Chapter 2.

Second, we present some new thinking about how this short meeting embodies so much action potential as a global change strategy. We believe future search “works” not because of any new paradigm “glitz,” but because it enables us to access innate needs for dignity, meaning and community while doing tasks we care about and can’t do alone. In looking at ourselves in relation to the “whole elephant,” we are able to create action plans that were not possible before. The Epilogue explores this tantalizing hypothesis.

Third, we have enlarged and deepened our ideas on facilitating, adding a second chapter on this topic. We place special emphasis on our underlying philosophy and theory, showing how these translate into simple, effective actions that most people can learn. In particular, we emphasize that this way of facilitating requires no diagnosis of what groups need and relatively little activity.

We have made no dramatic changes to our meeting design since 1995. However, we have devised subtle refinements that we believe enhance the flow and make managing groups of 60–70 people easier to do. These are covered in detail in Chapters 1 and 5. We also have added considerable new material based on our own and others’ recent experiences in many cultures.

Changing the world means starting with ourselves, in particular our assumptions about the conditions under which people will do things they never did before. In Chapter 10 we emphasize how we learn to manage ourselves in new ways if we wish to plan and manage effective future searches.



INTRODUCTION

Productive Workplaces showed how managing has evolved from experts solving problems for people toward everybody, experts included, improving whole systems.

In this book we focus more narrowly and deeply on processes that enable everybody to take more responsibility for themselves *and* for the whole – whether a community, network, or organization. Obviously, “everybody” is a metaphor. In practice we get as varied a group as we can, consistent with our purposes. We see future search as a learning laboratory for “getting everybody improving whole systems.” It is not the complete answer to anything. Yet the dynamics apply to many kinds of meetings and change strategies. To experience this method in a single meeting is to

open many new doors. Our society has hardly begun to explore what we can do with diverse parties working on the same task.

What Makes Future Search Different?

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Future search conferences enable organizations and communities to learn more about themselves from every angle. Bringing the “whole system” into the room makes feasible a shared encounter with aspects of reality we normally avoid – chaos, complexity, uncertainty. The key word is “shared.” When we explore common ground with others, we release creative energy leading to projects none of us can do alone. People simultaneously discover mutual values, innovative ideas, commitment, and support. Rarely in daily life do people encounter these key conditions for action all at once.

Our method is time efficient. We don’t have to teach people anything for them to participate. They need not master our conceptual scheme to do good planning. They need only show up and use the skills, experience, and motivation they already have. That makes a lot of sense when you can schedule only four or five half-days together. We are seeking what people already want to do and never dreamed they could. Future search is not a substitute for rational planning procedures. Rather we provide an umbrella for building commitment. Our forum allows people to work through the dynamic issues that stand in the way of implementing anything – dreams and schemes, systems and projects, visions and values.

Three Generic Uses

The uses of future search fall into three broad categories.

One, future search processes lead stakeholders to create and act upon a shared future vision for their organization or community. This simplicity of purpose ensures that many issues will be planned for in relation to each other. Santa Cruz County, CA, for example, came to agreements on transportation, multi-cultural cooperation, employment, and education, although

their conference topic started with affordable housing.

Two, future search meetings enable all stakeholders to discover shared intentions and take responsibility for their own plans. For example, Haworth Incorporated's customers, suppliers, and employees fixed major waste disposal problems out of a shared appreciation of environmental concerns in a conference built around quality.

Three, these events can help people implement a shared vision that already exists. In Kansas City, MO, 130 people from every sector created an implementation strategy for city-wide goals that grew from two years of work by thousands of citizens. People came to the conference committed to their vision and left with aligned strategies for getting there.

INTRODUCTION

A Short Overview

Our future search also has certain limits – of task focus and sequence, group size and composition, and length. Over several years we have sought to integrate these elements so that ordinary people can do extraordinary work. Our conference design depends on a set of mutually-reinforcing practices or “conditions for success.” The list captures our optimal criteria for realizing the full potential of this event.

CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS

- “Whole system” in the room
- Global context, local action
- Common ground and future focus,
not problems and conflicts
- Self-managed small groups
- Full attendance
- Healthy meeting conditions
- 3 day event (i.e. “sleep twice”)
- Public responsibility for follow-up

Structure

Our conferences typically involve 60 to 70 people. Our purpose is always joint action toward a desired future for a community, organization, or issue. We do five simple tasks:

FUTURE SEARCH

- Review the Past
- Explore the Present
- Create Ideal Future Scenarios
- Identify Common Ground
- Make Action Plans

Work on the past and future is always done by mixed groups that are a cross-section of the whole. Work in the present is done by “stakeholder” groups whose members have some shared perspective on the task. Action planning employs both stakeholder and self-selected groups. Every task concludes with a whole group dialogue.

“This process makes it really clear that we see everybody in the community as an asset. Most of all, we all have a personal responsibility to participate in our society to make it better.”

Riding the Roller-Coaster

The task sequence and group composition set up powerful dynamics that can lead to constructive outcomes. Uncertainty, frustration, and confusion are necessary by-products. So are fun, energy, and achievement. We experience the conference’s peaks and valleys as an emotional roller-coaster ride, swooping down into the morass of global trends at one moment, soaring to idealistic heights at another. Future search sets up a counterpoint between hope and despair. We believe good contact with our ups and downs leads to realistic choices.

We always have people with differing assumptions and ways of learning present at the conference. Some people, for example, need facts first, others tune in on feelings. We don’t know how to design a planning meeting exclusively for the needs of one group or the other. Fortunately, the solution is simpler than you might think. In a future search we live with the inevitability of differences, the recognition that no meeting design can reconcile them – and the belief that people are

capable of new action plans without “more data” or “more dialogue” – in a very short time, if they agree to keep working together.

They can do that in a future search because no training, inputs, data collection, or diagnoses are required. In short, people face each other rather than a set of concepts, expert advice, or assumptions about what they lack and what they ought to do. The method involves comparing notes and listening. People discover hidden capacities through a cold plunge into self-generated reality, including ideals and the mishmash of assumptions, misinformation, stereotypes, and judgments rattling around in all of us. Amazingly, it is *not* necessary to straighten all this out to succeed. What we aspire to in a future search is to acknowledge what we discover as an inescapable part of our shared world, whether we like it or not. In short, we look for buried potential that already exists without having to remedy perceived deficiencies.

Moving Toward Implementation

Future search conferences often enable people to experience and accept polarities. They help participants bridge barriers of culture, class, age, gender, ethnicity, power, status, and hierarchy *by working as peers on tasks of mutual concern*. The future search process interrupts the tendency to repeat old patterns – railroading, fighting, running away, complaining, blaming, or waiting for others to fix things. And it gives people a chance to express their highest ideals. Instead of trying to change the world or each other, we change the conditions under which people interact. That much we can control and it leads to surprising outcomes.

The single most worrisome aspect of planning is implementation. No process, however comprehensive, guarantees action. Still, we have seen more plans implemented from future searches than any method either of us has used in 25 years. The cases in Chapter 2 provide good examples. People act quite apart from whether they had a good time, liked the facilitators, collected handouts, resolved their differences, or

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**Margin quotes come from audio transcripts of conferences with Resources for Human Development, Whole Foods Market, Santa Cruz County (CA), Quaker Oats (Topeka, KS), and a Silicon Valley (CA) manufacturing initiative.*

felt finished. Nor is success a function of how complete an action planning format we use. Action requires people who understand and believe in their shared goals and trust each other enough to join in new steps. It also requires committing resources – of time and energy, and sometimes money. We think future search fosters this understanding, belief, and commitment.

How Future Search Pushes the Boundaries of OD

We see future search extending traditional organization development (OD) meetings in a new direction. First off, OD was conceived not as a single meeting but rather a strategy for large-scale cultural and/or systemic change. Future search describes a process for one meeting lasting fewer than three days with the potential for ongoing action. Second, where OD depended on many people accepting the “need for change,” future search depends on 60 – 70 people accepting an invitation to spend a few days together.

“One wonderful element of future search is that it gives individuals a chance to take responsibility. That’s an enormous difference from a task force list of recommendations for someone else to take care of.”

Thirdly, organization development, at least until recently, was based on diagnosing gaps between what is and what ought to be. Consultants supplied a diagnostic framework, applied interviews or surveys, and used the information to create dissonance between what people did and what they said. This was intended to “unfreeze” a system, leading people to want to reorder their relationships and capabilities. Consultants also accepted responsibility for prescribing action steps to close the gaps. These actions might include team-building, leadership, interpersonal and/or group skills training, or problem-solving task forces. Nearly always the action steps involved training, on the theory that people did not know how to do what they said they wanted to do.

To run a future search, we need no diagnosis of what ails people or categories for labeling participants (e.g., “cooperative,” “resistant,” etc.). Nor do we require strategies for fixing this or that situation. We have no preconceived issues to explore other than the past, present, and future as viewed by

participants. In truth, we can't imagine a set of concepts for organizing data or action plans that would meet the needs of diverse future search groups.

We don't work to improve relationships among people or functions. Rather we set up conditions under which people can choose new ways of relating. We don't abstract out social issues (e.g., diversity, trust, communications, collaboration, etc.) from economic and technical issues. We are unlikely to run a conference on "the future of diversity in X." Rather, we'd propose that diverse people explore together how they want to live and work as part of X. Whatever peoples' skills, education, or experience, they already have what they need to engage in this process.

Experiencing "Current Reality"

As facilitators of a future search, we don't judge information as good or bad, complete or sketchy, useful or futile, appropriate or redundant. Whatever people do or say – their words, their behavior, their wishes, and their reactions – belongs to them. Whatever happens is an expression of the stakeholders, for better or worse. We don't expect dramatic individual change, only a change in the action potential among individuals, based on discovering new alignments. For example, people will not suddenly give up authority/dependency needs because they spent a few days as peers. But they may learn more about their ability to work together with more shared authority.

So we are interested that participants experience what already exists – as fully, deeply, and humanly as possible in the time available. That includes the past, which is always present, feelings and behavior in the present, and future aspirations, which also exist only in the present. Then people are more likely to make rational choices about what they want to do. We believe that acknowledging all of the above to each other *before* figuring out what to do is a good way to stay sane in a world that is changing unceasingly whether we like it or not.

Sharing the Work

FUTURE SEARCH

Ours is an encounter with the whole – self, community, world. But we do not provide an expert systems analysis for people to consider. Rather, we set up a situation that involves the whole person on many levels. We ask people to share the work, move around, make their wishes visible, live with uncertainty. In a future search people experience a different version of “reality” than the one they are used to. They talk over issues they have not raised before with people they have never met. Many will take responsibility for matters previously avoided or ignored. They dramatize ideal futures as if they have actually happened, thus anchoring them in first-hand experience. They identify what they *really* want. It is common for people to voluntarily commit to actions made possible only because of the other people in the room. We have sought a design that moves us towards *all* of the above, because we believe *all* of the above adds up to sustained action.

“This is a great exercise in democracy... to let people come together to talk about what’s troubling them and their community, and they can plan for change.”

Our procedures evolved while working mainly with people who can read and write. However, the underlying principles do not depend on literacy. We believe this work could be done entirely with spoken and/or symbolic communication. The results have been repeated in many cultures and in culturally diverse groups. Indeed, *any* techniques that help people explore their whole system, experience their common stakes, share their ideals, internalize the experience, and take responsibility for what happens are worth applying.

We believe conferences designed on principles we have adopted lead to (1) participants taking personal responsibility, (2) fast implementation of action plans, and (3) lasting relationships across key boundaries. For now, this is a tantalizing hypothesis – an unproved theory. The only way to test it is to find out what participants do afterwards that they couldn’t do before. To this end Future Search Network sponsors an ongoing “Ripple Project,” action research on dozens of future searches to document what actually happens afterwards. Accumulating evidence indicates ripples

spreading widely, leading to projects and partnerships that last for years, often involving people not at the future search. (It also shows inaction when parties had no stake in working together on an issue or when key leaders went in contrary directions afterwards.) To evaluate our experiments, see if you can recreate our key conditions and track what happens over time.

A Learning Laboratory

Having said all that, we see future search as a learning laboratory. We set the wheels in motion for a variety of discoveries, starting with whether we can raise the right crowd. We never know in advance what people are ready, willing, and able to do. We never know what dynamics are likely to be central to a given group, or what issues they will emphasize when they talk about world trends. We still don't know all the conditions under which people will take responsibility for their own planning. We know at least one under which they won't: when a meeting is set up to replay old scripts.

A future search deliberately offers participants a new, unfamiliar, but learnable, way of working. Not everybody takes full advantage of the mode; not everybody believes in it; not everybody can tolerate doing so much so fast, or, as some see it, doing nothing at length. And yet. . . and yet, we know we are on to something. And so are the hundreds of others experimenting with this mode.

Design Limits – In Systems, In Us

Within our design limits there's a lot we can do. But our meeting design is not a panacea. We can't compensate, for example, for lack of purpose, leadership, broad stakeholder involvement, or courage. We can't affect people who don't attend nor can we expect others to take responsibility for plans made without them. We would not choose future search for people who have no reason to work together after the meeting ends. Why mobilize people to act unless they

intend to take action? Moreover, ours is not a method for negotiating compromises on intractable differences. Nor for working through all the assumptions that underlie our conflicts. We are actualizing what is waiting to happen, what people can do readily in the short time available.

Future search works on quite different principles from most meetings. We're not surprised when potential sponsors and consultants worry about the structure and process. We all fear losing control, opening up issues we'd rather not air, or hearing demands we can't meet. Future search takes us very quickly into uncharted territory. We cannot know what will happen until we get there. Rarely have we led a conference where, at some moment, we did not feel anxiety. There is nothing to do about this feeling except to recognize it as an old friend. The situation will change soon enough. Our "solution" is to encourage people to say what needs to be said and to keep working on the task. We have great confidence that people will do what's appropriate.

We believe the key principles of future search are widely applicable to the day-to-day management of both organizations and communities. To use them, though, we can't just work on systems "out there." We also need to work on ourselves. In particular, we have to learn to let go of the need to fix other people. We hear many questions that start, "Yes, but how do you get *them* to..." followed by "show up," "stay the whole time," "really listen to each other," "resist problem-solving," "test each other's assumptions," "not talk too much," "say what they really think in front of so-and-so," "make practical plans," "really understand systems," or "implement A, B, or C?"

Our answer is, "We can't." Even if we could, we wouldn't. The spirit of future search is self-management and discovery. We expect participants to share leadership and organize their own work. We tell people everything we know about success. We show up only when we think we will succeed. And we trust people to do whatever is in their own best interest. If folks will come to a future search, stay the whole time, and say what they wish, we ask no more.

Related Processes

Many conference processes overlap ours. One is the Search Conference pioneered by Eric Trist and Fred Emery (Weisbord et al, 1992) and developed further by Fred and Merrelyn Emery (1993). Our method owes a great deal to their work and differs from it in several respects – for example, our emphasis on the “whole system” in the room, the nature and sequence of small group tasks, and in our evoking personal experiences and creative future scenarios as a backdrop for action. Another related process is the Dialogue Group of the late physicist David Bohm, developed further by William Isaacs and his colleagues at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. We share with this model the norm that all issues are valid and that all views be heard. Unlike dialogue groups, future searches are task-focused, actively managed, structured, and time-bound toward action on the future.

Open Space Technology, invented by Harrison Owen (1992) is also related. In Open Space people select their agendas and groups, while in a future search predetermined groups work the same tasks toward a common future. Both models invite participants to manage their own small group tasks and both build a strong communal spirit. A fourth related process is the participative strategic planning conferences of Kathleen Dannemiller and Robert Jacobs (1993). We share with this model a common ancestor in the large-group meetings of Ronald Lippitt and Eva Schindler-Rainman (1980). In the Dannemiller/Jacobs conferences leaders take a central role in setting the context, giving information on future directions, and fielding questions. In a future search, leaders, experts, and special interests participate in all tasks along with everybody else. Also, the Dannemiller/Jacobs and Owen conferences can accommodate hundreds of people at once in contrast to our preferred 64 and the Emerys’ 32.

We continue to learn from, encourage, and support all these processes. Their similarities and differences seem minor to us compared to the fact that so many people are exploring methods for helping people experience wholeness

in a time of unprecedented complexity, bewilderment, and change. We believe that no combination of theories or techniques embraces the whole of reality. For us, the concept of “best model” is an anachronism. We think the metaphor for these methods is a kaleidoscope. We are all working with the same bits of colored glass, evoking new patterns as we gain experience. We believe that the “best model” for you is one that squares with your goals, values, and capabilities. Indeed, you can use no other.

Several people are merging large-group events into new change strategies, based in part on future search. Examples include Dick and Emily Axelrod’s “Conference Model” for work design, and a similar strategy devised by Margaret Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rogers. Ralph Copleman has experimented with sequencing future search and Open Space methods. Several others are experimenting with multiple conferences in parallel and in series. The strategic and logistical questions raised by such conferences, however, are outside the scope of this book. We urge the reader to learn how to run single events with manageable-size groups before getting into multiple anythings. We have a relatively narrow agenda here – how to plan and facilitate one 16+ hour event spread across three days. We see this as a basic building block of social and personal change.

How the Second Edition Is Organized

Section 1: “Learning” – provides a design overview (Chapter 1) and case examples (Chapter 2). We discuss conditions for success (Chapter 3). Chapters 4 and 5 deal with issues of translating theory into practice and the evolution of our design.

Section 2: “Doing” – goes into three equally important activities: finding conference sponsors (Chapter 6), planning conferences (Chapters 7 and 8), facilitating (Chapters 9 and 10), and what folks do to keep action plans alive (Chapter 11).

Section 3: "Resources" – Appendices A through D include logistics – room setup and materials – a participant workbook, our design, and a sample invitation. We also provide practical guidelines on finding and setting up conference rooms.

CHAPTER 1

The Future Search Meeting Design

An Overview of Tasks and Dynamics

“When you listen to somebody else, whether you like it or not, what they say becomes a part of you...the common pool is created, where people begin suspending their own opinions and listening to other peoples’....At some point people begin recognizing that this common pool is more important than their separate pools.”

– David Bohm

HERE WE WALK YOU THROUGH a future search conference, showing tasks and time-frames, what the output is, which groups do what, and the dynamic issues that emerge at each stage. The task sequence and timing are deliberate. We proceed from reviewing the past and owning the present to describing a common future and action plans. We have found that this sequence can produce superior planning when the key conditions are observed. (For an example of the work plan we use in running a future search, see Appendix C.)

By “future search” we mean our generic design, based on five segments of two to four hours each, spread over three days. We do not mean conference events that use the same language or worksheets and bypass the conditions for success (see Chapter 3). The design expresses four core prin-

principles – “whole system” in the room, “whole elephant” as context for local action, future focus, and self-management. We believe that many techniques could serve these principles and many designs are possible. This is the one we have confidence in, having evolved it through trial and error for 15 years and seen it replicated by hundreds of others. (Chapter 5 records our journey toward a method equal to our values and aspirations.)

“By constructing a vertical slice of the community, we put people on a level playing field where each one had a chance to be a leader. The future search process really brought out those leadership skills.”

TYPICAL FUTURE SEARCH AGENDA

Day 1, Afternoon

- Focus on the Past
- Focus on Present, External Trends

Day 2, Morning

- continued – Trends
- Focus on Present, Owning our Actions

Day 2, Afternoon

- Ideal Future Scenarios
- Identify Common Ground

Day 3, Morning

- continued – Confirm Common Ground
- Action Planning

Let us walk you through a typical session, covered in detail in Chapter 5.

Day 1 – Afternoon

The conference opens between noon and 5 pm on Day 1. The first day requires about 4 1/2 hours. People sit in mixed groups, each a cross-section of the whole conference, doing tasks that establish common ground.

The first task, focus on the past, takes about 2 1/2 hours. There are long strips of butcher paper on the walls, with titles: “Personal,” “Global,” and “X” (i.e., community, organiza-



Chapter 1

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MEETING
DESIGN

tion, issue), and dates every 5 or 10 years. People note milestones they have experienced over XX years on the long strips on the wall. Then, in small groups they talk over the trends and patterns that they see. They prepare public summaries of stories derived from everybody's experiences, and the whole conference discusses what they have learned.

This task gets every person in the room writing on flip charts within the first 45 minutes, showing that they all have valid information and experience. Moving around is encouraged. All items remain on the walls to the end. People learn right off that the walls, markers and charts belong to everyone and are not the exclusive property of the facilitators. The task builds community very quickly as people experience the world through each other's eyes.

We then move on to a focus on the present. Before the day ends, the whole group reviews external trends that are shap-

ing our lives and institutions now. We put the group's perceptions of world trends into a "mind map." Everybody gets to hear each person's observations and examples of trends they consider important. "My facts" and "your facts" become "our facts." (See Chapter 5 for details on mind mapping.)

FUTURE
SEARCH

This can be a mind-boggling experience. Some feel a strong urge to run away. Instead, people confront the complexity, approaching the map and affixing colored dots to trends they consider important. Everybody touches the map. Thus the stage is set for discussing and accepting responsibility for action. The point of the exercise is *not* to set priorities. Rather it's a step toward dialogue and manageability. The session ends here to provide the benefits of "soak time" over night.

A NOTE TO USERS OF EARLIER VERSIONS
OF THIS DESIGN

In the first edition we recorded changes to our practice through 1994. Since then, we find ourselves doing less, not more. By 1999 we had made the following modifications to improve the flow and ease of working:

Logistics: We bring from 6 to 20 sheets of 4' x 8' foamcore (or insulation boards), so that we can have instant wall space anywhere in any room.

We work without tables, using circles of 6 to 8 chairs, greatly increasing flexibility and shared control of the space by all.

Mind Mapping: We like to have two people writing on the map and one person managing the group so that every person who wants to talk gets a chance. When many hands go up, we go to a "deli system," asking each person to "take a number" and call out their items in turn.

Before working with the map, we ask participants to join us in identifying which branches have the most dots on them.

Review of the Past: We use time lines drawn on strips of butcher paper rather than vertical flip charts.

Focus on the Future: We call our future scenarios ideal futures because we want the highest aspirations expressed as counterpoints to the straightjacket of a gloomy present.

Identifying Common Ground: We work toward a common future and avoid the word consensus because it has too many other meanings. We ask people to make two lists, common ground (“what” they want) and potential projects (“how” to get there). Anything that stirs opposition is placed on a not agreed list. When common ground and potential projects are listed on flip charts, we ask that items be cut one per strip before posting, making it easy for people to sort related items into clusters. At action planning time, people take from the walls items they want to work on and quickly form groups. We don’t touch this wall. Participants do all the posting, clustering, adding, and editing. (We don’t homogenize or polarize the views expressed). We involve the whole group in making these lists rather than a task force or a few observers.

Action Planning: We like to do action planning in two phases, based on personal responsibility (not recommendations to others), typically in stakeholder groups first, then voluntary task forces.

Note: These are preferences, not prescriptions. We pay attention to context. We may change instructions or vocabulary to fit local cultures and languages. We know that the same words are tricky and may mean all sorts of things to different people. So we are reluctant to supply categories to organize the content people produce, preferring to let a group struggle with confirming meanings with each other.

Chapter 1

THE FUTURE SEARCH MEETING DESIGN

Day 2 – Morning

FUTURE SEARCH

In the morning we continue our focus on the present, confirming with the whole group the key trends noted the day before. We now reorganize into “stakeholder groups,” people with a shared relationship to the overall conference task. These groups identify trends important to them, and report to the whole what they are doing and what they want to do in the future about these trends. This is often a turning point in the conference. Groups experience each other owning up and taking responsibility. People often comment on this in the large group discussion.

Next, we revisit the present. Each stakeholder group makes lists of “prouds” and “sorries” about what they are doing in relationship to “X.” Each group’s lists are viewed as “current reality,” not as problems to be solved. Lists are reported and discussed in the large group. The purpose is ownership, not finger-pointing. We often hear some variation on the Pogo phenomenon, “We have met the enemy and he is us!”

“Even though there were a lot of disagreements, we still ended up with a consensus that we need to work on that and find solutions.”

Day 2 – Afternoon

Now we are ready to focus on the future. People return to mixed groups to prepare ideal future scenarios. They have about 2 1/2 hours, including lunch. They are asked to put themselves 10 to 20 years in the future and present their scenario concretely as if it were happening now. They tell how they overcame the major barrier that stood in their way years before, at the time of the future search.

By imagining and then acting out ideal futures, people anchor them in their brains, bodies, and psyches – tapping unconscious aspirations, making visible what they *really* want. People present their futures in whatever way they wish. We have seen scenarios that have been playful, funny, creative, fanciful, or serious, linear, and data-laden. At this point, people often rise to the heights of aspiration and idealism, the polar opposite of where they were a day earlier. After observing all the scenarios, the whole conference in mixed groups notes *common future* themes (what people

want), *potential projects* (how to get there), and what they see as *not agreed* (key disagreements that may remain). The lists are made by each group, then merged with other groups' lists and posted on the wall. Usually there is 80% or more overlap. Groups have as much time as they wish, most taking up to an hour, after which they are done for the day.

Day 3 – Morning

First thing in the morning the whole group reviews the lists again. A discussion follows on what we really mean by this or that statement. If we cannot agree on a value or feature of our common future, the conflict is not “worked.” We simply recognize who supports what and put the item on the appropriate list. Everybody knows where the others stand.

The ground rule is that we report the lists as understood in light of everything that’s been learned in the past two days. Anything that stirs up disagreement is reported as “not agreed,” items endorsed by some, but not all. In this task we explore the tension between the ideal and the actual. People experience a choice between repeating old patterns and taking new paths. They must decide whether to replay the conflicts that persist at the cost of working the newly-discovered common ground, or to work *on* common ground without resolving every issue. They are learning that they can’t do both now. There are only a few hours to decide on the next steps.

We now have from three to five hours for action planning. Stakeholder and/or self-selected groups make short- and long-range action plans for implementing their ideal future. People have a chance to “put a stake in the ground” and invite others who have energy for a particular project or theme to join them. They report to the conference before closing, and make plans for disseminating the outcomes.

In this task we are creating opportunities for people to collaborate across boundaries. Once they decide on their goals and commit to next steps, they are likely to sustain the energy to involve others and stay connected.

The conference closes between noon and 3 pm on Day 3.

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Making Choices

The future search conference puts people in a position of having to choose, as a temporary planning community, which way to go now. They have no authorities telling them what to think or do about their discoveries. They have little choice except to fight, abandon the task, or deal with each other in a new way. Our goal in running this meeting is to hold the task front and center in such a way that people must deal with each other in order to deal with it.

Cutting loose old ways of relating is no small feat. It opens doors to new experiences. When we suspend the sense of security engendered by reducing uncertainty to simple problems, we free ourselves to make more creative choices. We open up common ground none of us knew existed. This trip into unknown territory can be made because everyone works on tasks of mutual concern. When people accept the conference task, they are more likely to work together despite their skepticism, gloomy predictions, blind faith in leaders and experts, and other “shadows” that may hound any of us.

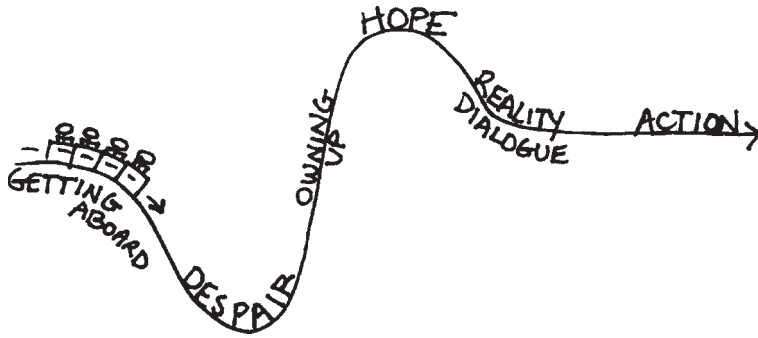
Riding the Roller Coaster

The task structure outlined here may produce information overload and heighten confusion. Facing such complexity alone, many people feel impotent; they would be overwhelmed if they weren't in company with a lot of other stakeholders. To understand a future search it's not enough to know there are five tasks. You need to appreciate that each task has a dynamic potential, analogous to particular moments on a roller-coaster. Taking the ride together leads to widely-supported action on common ground. We like the metaphor because it captures the ups and downs of the event.

The dynamic process can be visualized as “Riding the Roller Coaster.”

- **Getting Aboard.** People come aboard with their own experience – of themselves, their world, and the future search topic. Whether oriented toward “facts” or “feelings” or both,

RIDING THE ROLLER COASTER



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they soon find they can relate to strangers and even adversaries through their mutual experiences.

- **Plunging to the Depths.** After they establish their common world and connectedness, they face a complex mess that seems out of their control. They may plunge towards denial, fear, gloom, challenge, hopelessness, even impotence. The dominant mood becomes, "It's a mess!"
- **Owning Up.** As folks accept what they are doing, want to do, and how they feel about it, they discover that "we are all we've got." They encounter what's working and what isn't and begin a climb out of despair. Now, the mood changes and people may say, "It's our mess!"
- **Rising to the Heights.** People enact their ideals and discover attractive futures. They create portraits of the world they really want as if they already have it. They become energized, excited, and hopeful.
- **Dialoguing About Real Choices.** The group faces a choice. Will they act now on common ground or put their energy into the differences and problems that remain as a way out?

"It was an emotional roller-coaster in a sense. You come in expecting great things and you hear some things that are really discouraging... Then you see people come together and start working on solutions to problems that are identified."

People vacillate between talking and acting as they confront the reality that the world is neither all bad nor all good. It's as if the roller-coaster has a throttle and a brake, and the riders are using both at the same time. The choice is between going back towards familiar (and unsatisfying) patterns and inching towards an unknown (and attractive) future. Agreeing to work on common futures despite unresolved differences is a transforming step. Many groups conclude, "*This is the best we can do now!*" That's a priceless insight. It enables people to take back control of their world, feel more secure in their planning, and gain greater support for their visions.

- **Taking Responsibility.** Running a future search conference means accepting these critical dynamic ups and downs. For sponsors and steering committee members, the pre-conference dialogue often mirrors this dynamic. Once the decision is made to go forward, the other processes follow from our design. Consultants and facilitators need to learn how to manage the whole ride – in the meetings and in themselves. Conference sponsors will benefit from understanding that putting conflicts on hold does not exempt them from anxious moments. Indeed, without these moments, we would have no change worth having.

FACILITIATING THE ROLLER-COASTER RIDE

CONFERENCE DYNAMICS

WHAT WE DO

**Getting Aboard
(Review of the Past)**

We set up norms of task, time, and the validity of all ideas.

**Plunging to the Depths
(Mind-Map of Present)**

We stay with the dominant mood.

**Owning Up
(Prouds & Sorries)**

We encourage people taking ownership.

**View from the Heights
(Ideal Futures)**

We don't pat ourselves on the back for the good feelings. We're not finished yet.

**Dialogue About
Real Choices
(Common Future)**

We point out the choice between reworking old ground or moving toward new action plans.

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