

THIRD EDITION | The Complete Guide, Updated & Expanded

Future Search

*Getting the Whole System in the Room
for Vision, Commitment, and Action*



Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff

An Excerpt From

*Future Search:
Getting the Whole System in the Room for Vision, Commitment,
and Action*

by Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff
Published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers

Contents

Preface viii

Introduction 1

Part I Learning 15

CHAPTER 1 Any Sector, Any Culture: Future Search Cases from Everywhere 16

CHAPTER 2 The Ripple Effect: How One Meeting Can Change the World 35

CHAPTER 3 Conditions for Success 47

CHAPTER 4 Origins of Future Search Principles 56

CHAPTER 5 In Pursuit of the Perfect Meeting 67

Part II Planning 91

CHAPTER 6 Is Future Search for You? 92

CHAPTER 7 Generating Money with Future Search 101

CHAPTER 8 Planning to Succeed 106

CHAPTER 9 Attending to the Details 117

Part III Doing 129

- CHAPTER 10 Facilitating by
“Just Standing There” 130
- CHAPTER 11 Riding the Roller Coaster 143
- CHAPTER 12 Same Principles, Other Uses 158

Part IV Sustaining 171

- CHAPTER 13 Follow-up That Works 172
- CHAPTER 14 Listening to Leaders 181
- CHAPTER 15 Future Search
Research and Evaluation 194
- EPILOGUE: Could This “New Paradigm”
Really Be an Old One? 201
- APPENDIX A: Future Search 2010:
A Step-by-step Facilitator Guide 209
- APPENDIX B: Thinking Green 221
- APPENDIX C: Logistics 223
- APPENDIX D: Sample Workbook 229
- APPENDIX E: Sample Invitation 246
- Acknowledgments 249
- Photo Credits 253
- Bibliography 254
- Index 262
- About the Authors 273

Preface

Welcome to the third edition of *Future Search*, an action guide for those seeking to make the most of stakeholder engagement in a diverse, fast-moving world. With 10 new and five revised chapters, this is largely a new book. It reflects all we have learned in the past decade. We will show you how to achieve creative plans, high commitment, and fast implementation from a single meeting. You will learn how to get the “whole system in the room,” help people find common ground, and create long-lasting follow-up. With more than a quarter century of experience, we need not speculate on results. People are having successes all over the world. We hope you will be among them.

We use *Future Search* (FS) to describe:

- ▶ A principle-based planning meeting adaptable to any culture
- ▶ A philosophy and a theory for managing meetings proven to help people take responsibility
- ▶ A strategy you can use to change your world one meeting at a time

Here are a few examples of what people have done with Future Search since the 2000 edition of this book:

- ▶ Toronto, Canada, made a strategic plan for the future of its 300,000-pupil school system.

- ▶ IKEA, the world's largest home-furnishings company, redesigned its product supply chain and created an environmental sustainability plan with the recycling of all products its ultimate goal.
- ▶ The U.S. Federal Aviation Administration got agreement from airspace users for critical changes to managing air traffic that were needed but thought impossible to achieve.
- ▶ Derry-Londonderry, a city divided by sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland, formed collaborations among former antagonists to commit to the city's renewal during an economic recession.
- ▶ The Indonesian Ministry of Education, backed by UNICEF, implemented a plan for decentralizing school systems through countrywide Future Searches.
- ▶ Citizens of Lawrenceville, New Jersey, formed an ongoing cooperative—Sustainable Lawrence—that is reducing the city's carbon footprint and helping other communities do likewise.
- ▶ UNICEF in Southern Sudan organized the release of thousands of child soldiers from involuntary servitude.
- ▶ Departments of Correction in Massachusetts, Nebraska, and Washington State created strategic plans to quickly improve key aspects of public safety and prison systems.

Why Future Search?

How do you make your world, your community, your company, more successful? You can't do it alone. Yet involving lots of others can seem cumbersome and risky. Events unfold so fast now that the idea of planning "changes" to systems in perpetual motion seems crazy-making. How do you organize complex human activity as the ground shifts under your feet?

Many people see technology as both the source of and the solution to this dilemma. The world is awash in blogs, social

networks, and online forums. Despite technological progress, we daily encounter intractable dilemmas of war, disease, poverty, and environmental degradation that threaten the planet. The challenges to participative democracy and personal action have never been greater. Under conditions of relentless change and mind-boggling diversity, Future Search is one way to help people act with hope, support, and new resolve. This book describes how to do that in face-to-face planning meetings. We believe, however, that the principles apply online too, so we also note experiments to integrate Future Search and new technologies.

Some years ago in India, we ran a simulated Future Search for 70 executives, consultants, and leaders from foundations and non-government organizations (NGOs). At the end we compared the “common ground” of middle-class Indians from many regions, castes, and religions with a similar list from diverse Californians at a Future Search on housing. The group was astonished at the similarities: lifelong learning, employment at livable wages, health and housing for all, preserving the environment, and participatory government.

We have seen similar overlaps in Brazil, Canada, China, England, Singapore, Sweden, and South Africa. Indeed most of us want the same things. Doing this work, we have come to know how our aspirations for a better world align with those of millions of others; as this collective awareness grows, so does everyone’s range of choices. Each time you sponsor, organize, or run a Future Search, you bring more people to a shared appreciation of the world we have and the world most people want. Anyone who organizes a “whole system in the room” meeting contributes to the betterment of all.

Who Can Benefit from Future Search?

We address three audiences:

- ▶ Leaders of community, nonprofit, and business organizations who want higher commitment and better results in less time and at lower cost than with traditional strategic planning

- ▶ Experienced consultants and facilitators seeking to enhance their repertoire
- ▶ Anyone aspiring to foster stakeholder engagement in large groups who wants design ideas and practical advice

Whatever your motives, you also may find here a rationale—and perhaps the courage—to insist that planning meetings employ principles that maximize success. You will learn that success in Future Search comes more from its principles than any particular techniques. Still you need techniques, so we will describe the ones we know best and tell how we found them. You can supplement the text by viewing streaming video of Future Searches at www.futuresearch.net.

Origins of This Book

This book started in an experimental workshop at the Cape Cod Institute of the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in 1991. Our goal was to find out whether we could give people enough guidance in a few days to do successful Future Searches. Several of nearly 100 participants went on to apply what they learned and to report positive outcomes. Thus we began a journey of evolving both the meeting and the training designs to enable people to do afterward what no one had done before.

We began imagining Future Search as a systemic change strategy in 1992. Philadelphia Region Organization Development Network members led by Marilyn Sifford asked if we would help them learn FS methods. Together we organized a short training and self-managed internships for consultants who would work pro bono for local nonprofits. Some 30 Future Searches resulted. After review meetings with users proved that people were getting good results, we repeated the program over several years in California, Colorado, New Jersey, New York, Ontario (Canada), Washington State, and Washington, D.C.

Future Search Network

In 1993 we founded SearchNet, an international nonprofit organization, under the umbrella of Resources for Human Development, Inc., a Philadelphia-based human service agency (www.rhd.org). In 1999 SearchNet became Future Search Network (FSN) to differentiate us from Internet services that did not exist when we began. As word spread we were invited to do FS workshops in Africa, Asia, and Europe. By 2010 we had introduced Future Search to more than 3,600 participants. Now people worldwide are running Future Searches in schools, hospitals, churches, businesses, and communities. Anyone can join FSN by signing an agreement to employ the basic principles and use them to serve society.

We see Future Search as a building block of theory and practice for a house that will never be finished. We think of this book as a progress report from a global learning laboratory. We believe that Future Searches are good for us and good for society. We hope this edition will inspire you to join in making a better world one meeting at a time.

Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff
Wynnewood, Pennsylvania
June 2010

Learning

1 Any Sector, Any Culture

Future Search Cases from Everywhere

Provides an overview of results in many sectors and cultures

2 The Ripple Effect

How One Meeting Can Change the World

Follows cases that ripple through society for many years after an initial Future Search

3 Conditions for Success

Describes the conditions for a successful Future Search

4 Origins of Future Search Principles

Offers a historical perspective on translating theory into practice

5 In Pursuit of the Perfect Meeting

Updates our continuing design evolution and why we do what we do

Any Sector, Any Culture

Future Search Cases from Everywhere

In 1953 our friend Bapu Deolalikar, then head of human resources for the parent company of Calico Mills in Amedabad, India, witnessed one of the world's first participative work design projects. Uneducated loom-shed workers, faced with a new technology, implemented their own multiskilled teams in a few days after a briefing from A. K. "Ken" Rice of London's Tavistock Institute (Weisbord, 2004, ch. 9).

Nearly 40 years later, having consulted to development projects on many continents, Bapu startled us when he called Future Search "culture free." He pointed out that Future Search enables people to work entirely from their own experience and belief systems. "I could use this model with people anywhere," he said. That day Bapu did for us what Ken Rice had done for the loom-shed workers. He opened us to a universe we did not know existed.

Within a year Future Search Network members were taking FS everywhere. Over the next decade in Africa, Asia, and Europe, we learned firsthand what Bapu was talking about. People were using Future Search within and between diverse cultures, adapting the method to any sector, issue, or problem they chose. Nor was it necessary that facilitators be a part of the culture. They needed only to respect the traditions and the experiences of the people in the room.

Where Have People Held Future Searches?

Future Searches have been held in Australia, Austria, Bangladesh, Botswana, Brazil, Canada, China, Colombia, Denmark, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Finland, Germany, Ghana, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Iran, Ireland, Israel, Japan, Kenya, Malaysia, the Maldives, Mali, Mexico, Mozambique, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Nigeria, Norway, Pakistan, the Philippines, Poland, Russia, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Sweden, Trinidad, the United Kingdom, the United States, the West Indies, and Zimbabwe.

Which Sectors Have Used Future Search?

- ▶ **Arts and culture.** Museums, zoos, choirs, and arts councils
- ▶ **Business.** Service, manufacturing, technology, retailing, construction, insurance, and banking industries
- ▶ **Community.** Employment, healthcare, housing, transportation, and economic development
- ▶ **Congregations.** Many denominations, singly, locally, and statewide
- ▶ **Economics.** To attract business, tourism, investments, and jobs to specific locales
- ▶ **Education.** Public and private schools, entire districts, and colleges and universities
- ▶ **Environment.** Cities, regions, and watersheds on sustainability and issues like open space and water quality
- ▶ **Government.** Local authorities and agencies for integrating public services
- ▶ **Healthcare.** Hospitals, statewide systems, insurers, and medical and dental schools
- ▶ **Social services.** Housing, families, employment, and family planning

- ▶ **Technology.** Trade groups, software developers, and service providers
- ▶ **Youth.** Daycare, Head Start, Girl Scouts, and community centers

What Questions Do People Take On?

■ *Transcending a Divisive Past in Northern Ireland*

Seventeenth-century walls surround Derry-Londonderry, Northern Ireland's second-largest city, where the Irish civil rights movement and, some say, "the troubles" began. On Sunday, January 30, 1972, a civil rights protest turned violent and ignited nearly three decades of conflict between Catholic and Protestant communities. In 1998 the Good Friday Peace Agreement enabled local citizens to believe that an economic turnaround and a brighter future for their children were possible.

One government initiative was Ilex, a company set up to promote the area's physical, economic, and social regeneration. "In June 2008, Sir Roy McNulty, recently appointed chair of Ilex, reported to the government that the city lacked leadership and had no agreed-upon structure for creating the city's future," said Director of Regeneration Gerard McCleave. "We began asking ourselves how a city divided symbolically and physically by its river could get all of its key stakeholders to agree on a regeneration road map."

Future Search was suggested by Permanent Secretary of Employment and Learning Aideen McGinley, who sponsored her first FS as chief executive of County Fermanagh in 1999. Later, as permanent secretary of a new Department of Culture, Arts, and Leisure in the Northern Ireland government, she sponsored Future Searches to create the first arts strategy, followed by a national soccer strategy, geographic information systems, a library and archives policy, and a vision/action agenda for the Ulster-Scots language and culture (see her comments in Chapter 14).

"We all recognized," recalled Sir Roy, "that running such an event was a real challenge given the city's history, the high levels of deprivation, the failure of past initiatives, and the cynicism that



Despite Northern Ireland's divisive history, FS participants found common ground. "Some call it Derry, some call it Londonderry," said Northern Ireland's deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness, "but we all call it home."

engendered." Nonetheless, 120 people agreed to meet in February 2009 for an experience unprecedented in Derry-Londonderry. They called the conference "Changing Patterns—Changing Outcomes." Despite the area's divisive history, people found common ground in unlikely places. Their biggest surprise was how political controversy, even over the city's name (Derry to some, Londonderry others) receded into the background. After acknowledging the painful past, people came together on key priorities: education, skills training, infrastructure, enterprise, jobs, eliminating poverty, and making the city a welcoming place for citizens and visitors alike. For the first time, key influencers from across the political spectrum found common ground.

They agreed on lifelong learning for all, regional integration, sustainable employment, and leveraging a cultural heritage of arts, sports, and tourism. They imagined the Foyle River and connecting roads, footpaths, and rail lines as an integrated transport system. Their overarching value, however, was to ensure that equality and the needs of the most deprived people were addressed in every action plan. "Some call it Derry, some call it Londonderry," said Northern Ireland's deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness, "but we all call it home."

The Future Search spawned 12 sectoral working groups. Ilex adopted the meeting's output as the basis of its regeneration plan.

Within months 450 people were meeting regularly. Within 18 months their number had swelled to involve more than a thousand. People were collaborating to identify the needs, inequalities, and future initiatives required to realize their common-ground vision. “The work during the past year and the results we saw at the review meeting have stood up remarkably well to this extreme challenge,” noted Sir Roy. “We are driving a plan forward on the enthusiasm and commitment that our Future Search helped generate.”

There is more to this story. Derry-Londonderry in July 2010 was named the United Kingdom’s first ever “City of Culture.” The award cited unprecedented collaboration among citizens on a cultural program that would address their difficult past, appreciate their heritage, and create a compelling new story.

Putting Sustainability into Global Business Plans

IKEA is the world’s largest home-furnishings company. For years it has had a corporate culture that supports good relations with customers and employees. The company was introduced to Future Search in 2003 by its human resources manager, Tomas Oxelman. It was immediately embraced by Josephine Rydberg-Dumont, then head of IKEA’s design, production, and distribution arm (see Chapter 14). At her urging the company ran a Future Search “to look clearly at the entire global operation from design to customer through the lens of a single product, the Ektorps sofa” (Weisbord and Janoff, 2005). In 2005 Rydberg-Dumont and Supply-chain Manager Göran Stark then used Future Search to redesign IKEA’s supply process and again in China to improve supplier relations. Of the latter effort, Stark said, “We put quality in focus, assuring that ‘Made in China’ actually stood for quality in our stores.”

The company also had a public commitment to sustainability. “We had been thinking about environmental questions,” said Torbjörn Löf, Rydberg-Dumont’s successor, “but we had never been able to put it into a strategic context. We didn’t have a common language. We lacked a holistic view.”

In 2008 IKEA decided to make itself a global leader by reducing its carbon footprint. “We could have done what we have always done and written the strategy centrally,” said Sustainability

Manager Thomas Bergmark. “What we really wanted was to integrate sustainability fully into the way we do business.”

In May 2008, IKEA organized a Future Search with internal stakeholders from all functions, suppliers, and external partners such as the World Wildlife Fund, Greenpeace International, UNICEF, and the European Union Commission. The aim was to imagine how a fully sustainable IKEA would do business. People worked intensively on how to reduce the carbon footprint of 300 stores, 10,000 products from suppliers in 55 countries, and 130,000 staff servicing 600 million customers per year.

“If you succeed in furnishing the homes of all the people on earth the way you do business today,” asked one external participant, “will we have any resources left?”

As the dialogue progressed, the NGO members had an “aha” moment when they realized that their individual wishes for IKEA made it impossible for the company to satisfy any of them. Said one environmentalist, “We want you to be successful. It’s your moral obligation to be both profitable and sustainable.”

IKEA and its partners then built a common-ground agenda. They committed to a long-range “cradle-to-cradle” concept of having every product made from recyclable, reusable, or renewable materials. “Our materials strategy completely changed as a result



At this IKEA Future Search, all management groups accepted sustainability goals and action steps as integral to their business plans. “We had all the key people from inside and outside who are now strong drivers of the ongoing process.”

of this,” said Lööf. “We began tracking and rating the environmental impact of all products.”

All management groups accepted sustainability goals and action steps as integral to their business plans, on par with quality, range of products, and price. Each core process and function was charged with setting and implementing its own sustainability goals. “In 2000,” said IKEA President Anders Dahlvig, “the levels of insight and understanding and the attitudes were totally different. We weren’t ready for this discussion. Now we are putting the responsibility for what we can achieve fairly and squarely on our own shoulders. We can make huge progress toward making the world a better place to live in.”

Said Bergmark, “In the Future Search, we created the foundation. We had all the key people from inside and outside, who are now strong drivers of the ongoing process. Sustainability is no longer just my department’s job. It is a core part of our product development and materials procurement strategies.”

■ *Renewing Congregations in the United States*

In 1995 Brian Roberts, a new pastor at a 200-year-old village church in Absecon, New Jersey, sponsored a Future Search with 80 members of the congregation. They decided to grow into a large, regional congregation to include new nearby residential developments. “We dreamed big dreams in that meeting,” said Roberts. Attendance at worship grew from 220 to 350. A congregation that had trouble meeting its budget completed a \$3 million building project over the next seven years. This project required knocking out the wall of a 150-year-old sanctuary and moving graves of some founding families. Congregants, based on their FS experience, held 12 meetings with the project architect, then voted overwhelmingly to move forward. “In everything we did,” said Roberts, “we took to heart the core assumptions of Future Search: Always get the whole system in the room. If we can’t, then take the issues out to the people.”

In 2005 Roberts became pastor of St. Peters United Methodist Church in Ocean City, New Jersey. Within two months he



“In everything we did,” said Pastor Brian Roberts, “we took to heart the core assumptions of Future Search: Always get the whole system in the room.”

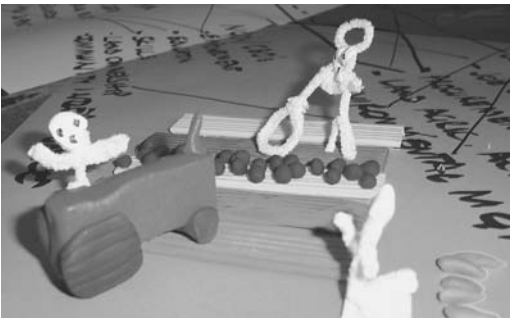
had agreement to hold another Future Search. Some months later 90 members gathered for a weekend to envision their congregation 10 years out. They took on many new challenges. Instead of one large congregational service, for example, people opted for three varied services at different times, in different styles and settings. (One would come to meet outside on the boardwalk in summer, looking out at the Atlantic Ocean.) Within two weeks of the Future Search, the planning team had the whole congregation designing a worship service around its new vision. Action plans were posted in the church hall, where everyone could see them. During coffee hour congregants could read the plans, talk to participants, and watch video highlights of the Future Search. They also could join an action team, a name they chose over *committee* to signal their intent.

The board formally endorsed the vision, “owning it as a whole community of faith.” They created a new board role—vision shepherd—“the person who helps us keep our dreams alive, making sure people don’t see the FS as a single event but rather the beginning of our journey.” Added Roberts, “Future Search takes a lot of focus and intention. This is an inherently spiritual process that honors the sacred nature of each person, giving participants voice and allowing them to taste real, authentic community.”

Demobilizing Child Soldiers in Southern Sudan

In 1999 Sharad Sapra became director of UNICEF's Operation Lifeline Sudan. He had moved from Iran, where as regional director he had sponsored three Future Searches: to reduce child abuse, to ameliorate conditions of child labor, and to ease the plight of street children. He came to Sudan at a time when the North and the South were in the midst of a 17-year civil war. Children were the obvious victims. Many were orphaned and forced to serve as soldiers. They had lost schools, medical care, families, and villages. "They are losing a generation of children to the turmoil," said Sapra. Having involved the children in Iran, he determined

Sudanese children build a vision of hope for themselves and their war-torn homeland.



to have their voices heard here. He imagined two Future Searches on the fate of children: one for children only, the second for adults and children together.

He recruited young people from refugee camps and rural areas, most poorly educated and without families, having lived their entire lives in a war zone. Coming from diverse tribes, each spoke one of six languages, requiring translators in each small group. They met in Nairobi, Kenya, outside the war zone. They shared a tale of privation and grief, and they built a vision of hope. In particular they wanted peace, their families back, access to healthcare, and—above all—a chance to go to school and learn. They selected five boys and five girls to attend the adult conference that convened two days later. Here they joined social workers, teachers, diplomats, healthcare workers, and tribal chiefs, along with Sudanese expatriates concerned about their nation's fate.

Despite bitter historic conflicts among southern ethnic groups, the presence of the children moved the adults to focus on a higher purpose. They went on to plan new schools, supported by curriculum material and textbooks supplied by expatriate Sudanese; training courses for agriculturists and farmers; and the mobilization of healthcare professionals to help local citizens erect their own health centers. All came together on the common ground of peace and reconciliation within five years.

A year later we returned to Kenya and trained 50 United Nations (UN) development workers from the North and the South in managing Future Searches. The following week several trainees ran an FS in Rumbek, Southern Sudan, on demobilizing child soldiers, conscripts as young as 12. There had been many such efforts over the years, benefiting only a few. Often children were freed only to be scooped up again. Now, for the first time, tribal chiefs, military commanders, teachers, parents, civil society workers, and young people faced their mutual responsibility to act. They spoke about creating a future for the kids that included education and meaningful lives apart from being warriors. The army agreed to set up a system within which demobilized children would not be conscripted again.

In a short time, 3,500 children were demobilized; and within two years, 16,000 children from the Southern Sudanese Rebel Army were sent home. Five years later, echoing the vision of the original Future Search, the North and the South signed a peace agreement ending the war. At this writing the conflict simmers, threatening the agreement, though most of the world has turned its attention to Darfur in the west.

■ *Reclaiming Community Values in Japan*

Traditionally, Japanese revere their home provinces where ancestors lived for generations. Today, as young people live in nuclear rather than extended families and move to find jobs, that tradition is broken. In 2008 community elders in Komaki-city, a Nagoya suburb with 150,000 residents, feeling love for their community and realizing that young people did not, determined to reconnect their community to the values of the past. The superintendent of schools learned about Future Search from participants in a workshop organized by Toshimitsu Tsumura and Kazuhiko Nakamura of Nanzan University. He realized he could use FS to engage the

Komaki-city, a Nagoya suburb, called upon a rich history and tradition to shape the community's future by honoring the past.



elders and other stakeholders to help children learn to honor their rich history and traditions.

From that Future Search, “For the Future of Children and Community,” came many local engagement projects. The junior high school, for example, opened its doors to elders at school events, and elders invited young people to join them in community volunteer work and traditional festivals. Among the simplest and most meaningful of the common-ground statements was: “All residents in this district greet each other across generations and status. We fill this town with rich communication.” From this came an ongoing practice called “Greeting on a Street Corner.” Residents, young and old, volunteer to be on “greeting staffs” whose presence had created a new sense of community.

Renewing a Russian Snack Food

Hrusteam, a crisp snack launched by FritoLay Russia (FLR), is reminiscent of a traditional treat baked by Russian mothers from leftover pieces of dark bread. The company needed an innovative product. Lay’s Potato Chips, its major product, was growing but met only 50 percent of consumer needs. Executives had hoped that Hruseam would breathe new life into the snack business, but after two years Hruseam was seen as a bust. Marketing was stale. Distributors had trouble placing the product. Production said it was wasting time and space. Most people wanted to kill the “baby.”

Dominique Bach, then-president of Pepsico Foods in central and eastern Europe, believed in Hruseam. From a friend he learned that Future Search might be the way to solve a wicked problem. “I knew,” said Bach, “that we could not end up in a more disorganized situation than we had.” Part of the dilemma was tension between marketing and distribution over the product’s future. Executives agreed to a daylong meeting, after which they would decide whether to proceed with a Future Search.

“I’m curious,” said Alexei Mekhonoshin, head of the distribution company, PBG, “about how this can foster the right level of dialogue and eliminate barriers between our two divisions.”

A participant presents a future scenario about marketing Hrusteam on Russian television. As the product development, marketing, and distribution teams began to work together, “the dispersed energy suddenly became concentrated.”



Said another executive, “No one has heard all the voices. With this process we can take a step back instead of doing what we always do—acting without planning.” After a long conversation, the executives decided to go forward.

“The Future of Hrusteam: Repeating the Success of Lay’s” convened in November 2007. Stakeholders included central European management; the FLR leadership; the sales, manufacturing, marketing, transportation, and warehousing teams; retailers; and consumers. There was simultaneous translation in Russian and English. The group discussed Russian snacking habits, global and local economic crises, the increasingly complex market, and the competition. FLR argued that the distribution company was not focusing on the product. The distributors group held that competition and poor marketing made their job difficult.

To their surprise, everyone discovered numerous areas of agreement: emphasizing healthy offerings, improving product visibility, and profits for all members of the value chain. Perhaps the most significant strategic decision was to expand the crisp bread snack market in Russia. This would require integrating the product development, marketing, and distribution teams. “I saw this as

a turning point,” reported Bach. “The dispersed energy suddenly became concentrated.”

Recalled distribution head Mekhonoshin, “I was surprised by how quickly people were able to break from their silos and divisional viewpoints and contribute to the whole.”

Five action teams formed to be led jointly by FLR and PBG. In November 2009, Marketing Director Malgorzata Lubelska described an improbable turnaround. “Hrusteam is the hero!” she said. “It is the savior of the Russia business this year, the key to our growth.” It had become Russia’s best-selling crisp bread, driving company growth in tough economic times. Future Search was the turning point. Said Lubelska, “I think that forming the cross-functional teams was a defining moment for us. Using information from retailers and consumers, and not just the boss, turned those difficult discussions into an amazing experience.”

Early in 2010 Hrusteam, now packaged in seven flavors, was growing 35 percent despite a declining market.

Recasting Publishing Strategy in the United States

“The task of figuring out who were the various stakeholder groups for the Jossey-Bass Future Search in 1990 changed my point of view forever of what was an organization, what was our company, and who mattered,” said Steve Piersanti, former chief executive officer (CEO) of Jossey-Bass, now president and publisher of Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc. (BK). “From then on I’ve thought of a publisher as consisting of many stakeholder groups—employees, owners, investors, authors, customers, suppliers, and the service providers, sales partners, and community infrastructure that we rely on.”

Piersanti has since sponsored two Future Searches in the company he started in 1992, based on the principle of operating in the interests of all stakeholders. Berrett-Koehler held its first Future Search to create a strategic plan in the midst of the dot-com bubble. “What came out of that FS was contrary to everything going on around us at that time,” said Piersanti. “We concluded we

At the Berrett-Koehler Future Search, a task force focuses on translating the common-ground agenda into actions related to multimedia publishing, including e-books.



would not bet the farm on the dot-com world; instead we would concentrate on our core publishing business and sell subsidiary rights to others to produce digital products. Within a few months, as the dot-com collapse spread, that turned out to be a prophetic direction from the FS.”

Berrett-Koehler’s 2008 Future Search focused on updating its strategic plan, and participants included investors, media, and publishing colleagues as well as authors, customers, employees, service providers, and sales partners. “An important initiative that came out of our second FS,” said Piersanti, “is the *Bill of Rights and Responsibilities for BK Authors*, a document unlike any I’ve ever seen in book publishing. One big bugaboo in publishing is a mismatch of expectations with authors. The *Bill of Rights* has become a very useful tool for us in setting expectations.

“Then an executive with the American Society for Training and Development [ASTD] reported back to her CEO that amazing things were happening at BK,” Piersanti continued. “ASTD is the largest association of its kind in the world—70,000 members in national and local chapters. The CEO flew out and met with us, and what emerged is a broad-based partnership in seven areas, valuable to both of us.”

The Future Search also addressed staff workload issues and digital publishing initiatives. It set up an “Ownership Structure Task Force” to increase BK’s financial resources. It also started the ball rolling on creating a sister organization to expand the impact of ideas in BK publications; this initiative has led to creating the “ASTD/Berrett-Koehler Leaders Alliance,” which is a partnership among ASTD, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, and the BK Authors Cooperative to create advanced learning programs for leaders and those who train and help leaders.

Preserving a Rural Presence in an Urbanized Netherlands

In the autumn of 2004, consultants Gemma van der Ploeg and Eric Spaans were asked by a local government to help develop an action-oriented vision for an ancient peaty area, Midden-Delfland, now surrounded by the cities of Rotterdam, The Hague, Delft, and Westland. They organized 125 stakeholders—farmers, residents, entrepreneurs, administrators, politicians, civil servants, artists, and scientists—who met in a rural cow barn to dramatize the importance of preserving open farmland. “The central conclusion,” reported the organizers, “is that the scenery matters!”



Conducting the Future Search in a rural cow barn, with smaller groups meeting outdoors, helped participants conclude that “scenery matters!”

Several task forces began work, and the entire community was sent newsletters inviting people to join in preserving the area.

The final report on “Midden-Delfland 2025” was recognized as a model for the Netherlands. It was presented to Queen Beatrix when she visited the area during the Silver Jubilee of her Regency.

Results were still rippling in 2010:

- ▶ NGOs and government agencies had joined forces to market the region for its scenery and recreational opportunities.
- ▶ Six cities surrounding Midden-Delfland plus the water authority officially agreed in 2009 on a detailed regional plan, building on the common ground from the Future Search.
- ▶ Midden-Delfland became the first Netherlands area to join the international “slow city” movement.
- ▶ Preserving Midden-Delfland had escalated from a local vision to a countrywide policy supported by 12 municipalities, the water authority, and the regional, provincial, and national governments.

■ ***Improving Local Economies in Latin America***

AED is a global nonprofit working to improve social and economic development. Bette Booth and her colleagues at AED have sponsored several Future Searches as part of larger USAID initiatives. “International donor projects,” said Booth, “traditionally use an expert-driven approach where objectives and activities are defined by the project. Future Search turns this paradigm upside down, putting stakeholders in the driver’s seat.”

AED found that local people across a variety of cultures were attracted to the core principles of the “whole system in the room,” so it began using the abbreviation *WSR* for its events. Future Search thus became an essential part of AED’s USAID projects in developing countries, working on hygiene and sanitation, environmental education, water-use efficiency, sustainable tourism, reproductive health, and sustainable natural resource management.



Rather than use the traditional expert-driven approach, “Future Search turns this paradigm upside down, putting stakeholders in the driver’s seat.”

A notable example was the USAID Global Fish Alliance Spiny Lobster Initiative in Honduras and Nicaragua in 2009. At issue were destructive practices that were threatening the health of the lobster population, indigenous Miskito Indian divers, and the industry. The initiative team facilitated local working groups to organize in each country 70-person Future Searches with diverse stakeholders, from government, private-sector buyers and processors, environmental NGOs, community leaders, and fisherfolk.

Future Search galvanized the fishing sector in both countries. Political unrest after the Honduran meeting led USAID to cut off funding directly to the government. Instead of folding for lack of money, the Spiny Lobster Initiative kept the work alive by networking with all stakeholders. “It was so incredible,” said Booth. “Things happened as a result of the FS without further AED support. They didn’t ask us for a penny. The people are finding resources within their organizations.”

Some of the immediate results of the Future Search included restructuring of credit for lobster fishermen by the largest bank; the Merchant Marines, Fisheries Directorate, and Honduran Navy

cooperating in lobster fishing boat inspections; the Roatan Marine Park and the Honduran hotel and restaurant associations conducting a “Responsible Restaurant” campaign to increase responsible serving and consumption of lobsters; and Caribeña, Darden Restaurants, and the Mosquitia Divers Association contracting to produce lobster traps as an alternative income.

Repeating Future Searches

We know of other instances where an organization or a community has opted for regular Future Searches. Whole Foods Market, the natural-food chain based in Austin, Texas, for example, has held an FS every five years since 1988, involving customers and suppliers with its own members to rethink its strategy. We managed the first three.

The Utah Transit Authority (UTA), a public agency, has had three Future Searches, managed by FSN members Drusilla Copeland, OD consultant to the UTA, and Bengt Lindstrom of Ander & Lindstrom Partners. The CEO of UTA, John English, has become a strong proponent of FS methodology, using it in 2001 for strategic planning; in 2004 to explore how seniority is earned, rewarded, and recognized among members of its major union; and in 2008 to improve services to people with disabilities.

In the next chapter, we give many examples of how one Future Search can spawn constructive activity for years to come.

this material has been excerpted from

***Future Search:
Getting the Whole System in the Room for Vision, Commitment,
and Action***

by Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff
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