

Submitted by John Inman

Description:

Future Search is a large group-planning meeting that brings a 'whole system' into the room at one time to work on a task focused agenda. The focus is on the future, articulating what it means for each stakeholder present and working out how to influence it.

Future Search follows a progression of events approach from past into the future. People have a chance to take ownership of their past, present, and future, confirm their mutual values, and commit to action plans grounded in reality. Everybody is invited to share leadership and participate as peers. Participants often set in motion many new kinds of working relationships and projects. Thus this meeting provides a glimpse of a world more realistic and attainable than many people believe is possible.

Including the 'whole system' means bringing together total strangers or people with a history of conflict. Diverse agendas are welcomed, as is the generation of confusing and contradictory information. Reduction of complexity to a few manageable issues to resolve disagreements or to solve long-standing problems is not the role of the facilitator nor is giving people a management model for organizing their diverse perceptions.

Your role is to set up a series of open dialogues encouraging listening and understanding of what others are saying. Participants will work toward the discovery and use of common agendas and shared ideals rather than the replay of old patterns of interaction. People discover what they are ready, willing, and able to do now. Under these conditions many people make choices previously unavailable.

This is a long format workshop typically scheduled for three days for a maximum of 60 to 70 participants.

Uses:

This format of intervention is an excellent strategy to use when a complex community challenged with complex issues and conflicts are in need of building positive action for the future based on common ground. Task forces, city and regional planning meetings, organizational mergers, resource allocation negotiations, complex planning scenarios, educational program / curriculum development meetings, and complicated forecasting processes are all excellent uses for Future Search.

Materials:

Allow at least two hours for set up of the conference room. Your conference room must have extensive wall space and be large enough to accommodate up to eight five-foot tables with lots of room to spare. You will need:

For Participants

- Participant invitation letter
- Administrative assistance at Conference registration
- Name Badges

For Participant Workbooks

- Participant workbook binders
- Conference participant list
- Table assignments for mixed groups and stakeholder groups.

For Room Set-up

- Five foot round tables that will seat eight to nine comfortably. No more than eight groups of eight or nine participants. Each table is set with:
 - Table number in the middle
 - One box of water-soluble magic markers
 - One roll of masking tape
- Twelve Foamcore boards, 4' by 8' by 3/16" or 1/4" thick.
- Three time lines are pre attached to the walls. These are 2' by 24' sheets of butcher paper. Recommend mounting the Central Time line on Foamcore boards.
- Mind map paper mounted to the wall. Two 12' by 4' sheets of butcher paper with a circle drawn in the middle for the Future Search topic. Recommend mounting on Foamcore boards.
- Two boxes of water-soluble magic markers for the facilitators.
- One roll of masking tape for the facilitators.
- One flip chart easel with full flip chart pads for each table and two for facilitators.
- Colored dots (3/8 or 1/2 inch): a different color for each stakeholder group, seven dots per person.
- Supplies for future scenarios - enough for each mixed group: construction paper, scissors, scotch tape, glitter, glue, pipe cleaners, stickers, and anything else you can imagine.
- Amplification system: one microphone for facilitators and two for the group - one for each side of the room.
- One small table for the facilitators, two rectangular tables - one for mementos and one for scenario supplies.

Instructions:

A conference typically involves 60 to 70 people. The purpose is always joint action toward a desired future for a community, organization, or issue. You will do five simple tasks:

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

Mixed groups that are a cross-section of the whole always do work on the past and future. "Stakeholder" groups whose members have some shared perspective on the task do work in the present. Action planning employs both stakeholder and self-selected groups. Every task concludes with a whole group dialogue.

Detailed instructions are far too complex for this outline, please follow the details in the reference materials. An outline of the process follows.

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

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

Tips:

It is highly recommended that a new facilitator has a chance to be mentored in this complex process before attempting on their own or have an experienced Future Search facilitator work with you on your first conference. Study and learn in detail the process outlined in the references. This is not a wing-it process. Pre conference planning, coaching of participants, and participant selection is critical to the success of the process.

References:

Weisbord, Marvin R. & Janoff, Sandra (1995) Future Search: An Action Guide to Finding Common Ground in Organizations & Communities. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Future Search Online Network. www.futuresearch.net