

calliope learning

Future Search Briefing Paper



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Future Search Briefing Paper

The consultant's role in large scale interventions is to create structures that enable systems to collect and analyze their own data and make their own decisions. Large group interventions may begin as events but they can become new ways of managing in complex times. (Bunker and Alban, 1997, p. 10)

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. (Weisbord and Janoff, 2000, p. 4)

Introduction to Future Search

As part of our commitment to our own professional development, we both attended a Future Search workshop in New York last month. The setting was beautiful. The Mohonk Mountain Resort is a couple of hours north of Manhattan and the train ride along the Fraser River was stunning. It turned out that having a really comfortable venue for a Future Search is all part of the strategy. Nether of us was complaining.



Mohonk Mountain Resort <http://www.mohonk.com/>

Marvin and Sandra describe Future Search as having three aspects, a facilitation style that allows for high levels of participation and dialogue, a specific method based on a set of principles, and a global movement for positive change. The principles are deceptively simple but very powerful. I made a note early on in the workshop that a Future Search is *simple but not easy*. Most of this short article is a description of the principles and the method as described by Marvin and Sandra.

The facilitation style is based on a few premises. The first is a belief that everyone does the best they can with what they have – that’s all there is to work with. Future Search does not make people better, but it does allow a group of people to do the best they can with what they have now. The second premise is that people will only do what they want to. Future Search focuses on what is important to people who attend the Future Search! Thirdly, how an individual views a situation, their *facts*, will differ from other people’s *facts* because we all have different perspectives. Only when these different perspectives are shared and respected can a common ground be found on which a brighter future can be built.

Finally, movement is important. Talking is all very good, but getting participants moving around is important too. In a Future Search there should be opportunities to “move, sit still, speak, listen, dance, sing, imagine, react, act.” (Weisbord and Janoff, 2000, p. 157) Personally what struck us most about the facilitation was that it allowed for emotional responses. In our simulation there was a lot of laughter, but there was also some anger and some heated discussion. This was good. It gave us all energy.

Related to this idea of movement is a nourishing space to hold a Future Search. Sandra and Marvin insist on a space that contributes to the hard work people need to do – a room that is big enough, and has some natural light and air. They will not work in hotel rooms with no windows (we can agree with that one!). They also insist on nourishing food and drink.

The Four Core Principles of the Future Search Method

The first principle says that if you’re going to change a system then you have to engage with the whole system. You need to have “the whole system in the room.” In reality this involves careful planning to define the boundaries of the system and identify all the stakeholder groups. It’s then recommended to narrow this to eight representative stakeholder groups each represented at the Future Search by eight individuals. The target is 64 people in each Future Search conference.

The second principle is related to the fable of the blind men and the elephant or “exploring the whole before acting on any part.” A considerable effort is made in the early stages of the Future Search to allow the different stakeholder groups to hear about the perspectives of other groups. Later on in the Future Search participants are encouraged to consider what they can influence.

The third principle is a future focus. Although the past is important, and is honoured, the purpose of the Future Search is to build a better future. There’s some overlap here with the dream phase of appreciative inquiry. The participants are encouraged to be creative when thinking about their ideal future scenarios. In our simulated workshop we had a lot fun presenting these ideal futures as humorous but poignant skits.

The fourth principle is self-management. Through very careful but quite minimal facilitation, the Future Search conference participants need to self-manage. The participants need to be

allowed to take control of their conference and their futures. Particular care was taken at the beginning of the conference to set up some ground rules and begin the trust building process, but after this, Marvin and Sandra had a hands-off approach. They were there to set up the experiences, answer questions and lead debriefings, but any other dynamics needed to be managed by the people there. If conflict arose in a small group, then that group needed to manage it.

If some people dominated a particular debriefing, Sandra and Marvin did not intervene. When we questioned them about this (there were a number of educators in the group who were concerned about people's voices not being heard and making sure everyone was learning), they were quite clear about the intent of the Future Search. It is a large system intervention, not an educational experience for individuals and, as such, it's the movement of the group as a whole, not individuals, that is important. Dave and I found this particularly important to remember (and empowering actually), as we spend about half of our time being very concerned about how individuals are learning and growing in educational settings. Facilitating this type of experience is quite different.

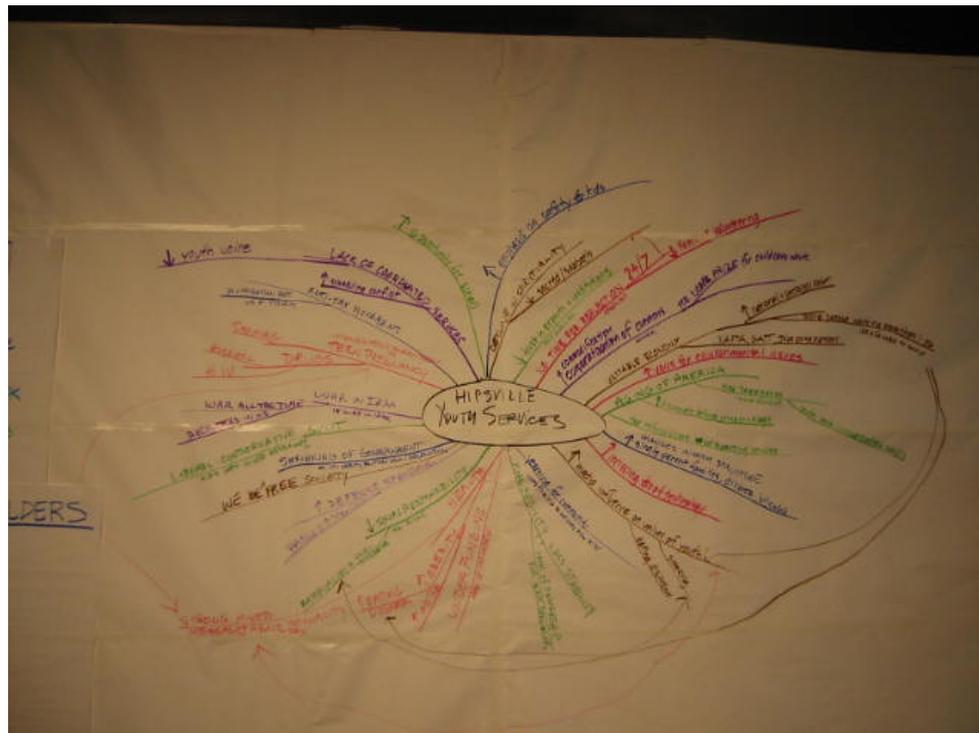
The Future Search Method

The only way to truly appreciate the Future Search method is to take part in a Future Search. Unfortunately this isn't very practical. Hopefully these brief words give a flavour for what is involved. Marvin and Sandra describe a method that spans "two days and two sleeps", beginning in the afternoon of day one and ending at midday on day three. There are variations, but this is their recommended format and the one described here.



After introductions and ground rules, the first task of the first afternoon is to focus on the past. All the participants complete three timelines, which span three walls. Each timeline goes back as far as is necessary, but usually only as far as anyone has experienced. One timeline is labelled Global, another is labelled Personal and the third is labelled with whatever is the issue of the Future Search. Participants write their milestones onto these long strips of butcher paper. Afterwards small groups discuss the patterns and trends they identify. Each group reports back to the conference. The task gets people moving around, shows them that they all have valid information and that the pens and paper belong to them and not the facilitators. The task also allows everyone to begin to experience the world through other perceptions of it.

The rest of the afternoon is spent in a mind-mapping exercise, which captures the current trends and issues that are shaping participant's lives. Everyone is encouraged to take part and the sharing of ideas is powerful. The facilitators capture the mind-map on a large sheet of paper. Our simulation looked at the issues around Hipsville Youth Services.



The final phase of the mind-mapping involves participants sticking coloured dots on the issues that are important to them. The dots are colour coded so that different colours represent different stakeholder groups. This phase is not about setting priorities for the conference but a further step towards dialogue and manageability. It was fascinating to see in our simulation how different stakeholder groups had clearly different priorities, but at the same time, there was obvious common ground. Everyone now breaks for the night and some well earned time to digest all that has happened.

The morning of day two begins with stakeholder groups working to identify trends that are important to them. Each group reports back to the conference, what they are doing now, and what they will do in the future. This is first time that the stakeholder groups meet and is an opportunity for them to see how they fit into the bigger picture and at the same time take ownership of their part of the picture.

After the report back and any discussion, the stakeholder groups reconvene to list their “prouds” and “sorries.” This is an opportunity for the stakeholders to really take ownership. The lists are reported back to the conference and discussed. In our simulation this exercise was very powerful and acted as a turning point to moving forward. In our debriefing, Sandra and Marvin indicated that this particular activity is usually very powerful, and acts as a catalyst for people to own their own roles in the system, instead of looking to others for the answers.

The afternoon of day two is spent in mixed groups (eight groups with one of each stakeholder in each). The task is to create an ideal future scenario and present it back to the conference in a creative way. This is where we had a lot fun! “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.” (Weisbord and Janoff, 2000, p. 22) After the presentations, each mixed group works on listing common future themes and potential projects. These lists are reported back and merged into a single list that is posted on the wall. Disagreements are posted on the wall too as these are still important to some of the participants and need to be validated. After a discussion of this common ground the participants have finished for the day and can take another well-earned break.

The final morning begins with a review of the common ground. Often this leads to discussion about what things really mean and a better understanding of what is common ground and where conflict might persist. Participants have to understand where everyone else stands. It’s also important for the participants to decide what to do with the next few hours, work on the newly discovered common ground or replay old conflicts. Usually they find themselves moving toward the newly discovered common ground.

The final action planning phase involves stakeholder or mixed groups coming together around specific themes to plan how to implement their ideal future. Short range and/or long range plans can be developed. The important part of the process is the opportunity for individuals or groups to “put a stake in the ground” and invite others, with energy and commitment around a particular project, to join them.

The last activity involves these self-selected groups reporting back to the conference and making some commitments to what they will be doing in the future. “Once they decide on their goals and commit to next steps, they are likely to sustain the energy to involve others and stay connected.” (Weisbord and Janoff, 2000, p. 23)

Global Change

Marvin and Sandra have founded the Future Search Network [<http://www.futuresearch.net/>], a voluntary world-wide Network offering public, non-profit and NGO future search processes and training for whatever people can afford. They are committed to creating a more open, inclusive and sustainable world through this network and do their best to ensure that if someone needs a Future Search, it will be facilitated. Visit their website for a glimpse into the types of activities happening worldwide.

In Summary

This was probably one of the best learning experiences we've had in some time. The combination of the beautiful setting, the diversity and engagement of our fellow learners, the fun and socializing during the entire three days, and the confident and centred approach of Marvin and Sandra all contributed to a meaningful and informative few days.

We're quite excited by the method because it resonates with our own philosophy, and fits in very nicely with some of the other work we're doing with other large group interventions like appreciative inquiry, ICA's Technology of Participation, and LearningEdge. We're looking forward to facilitating our first Future Search!

References

Bunker, Barbara Benedict and Alban, Billie T. (1997) Large Group Interventions. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Weisbord, Marvin and Janoff, Sandra. (2000) Future Search (2nd Edition). San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.