The Change Handbook

GROUP METHODS FOR SHAPING THE FUTURE

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INSIDE

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Future Search: Acting on Common Ground in Organizations and Communities[1]

Nobody can force change on anyone else. It has to be experienced.
Unless we invent ways where paradigm shifts can be experienced by
large numbers of people, then change will remain a myth.

—Eric Trist

Historical Account

Whole Foods Market CEO John Mackey wanted a shared vision, strategic direction, and set of action plans for his company. The year was 1988. Whole Foods consisted of eight natural foods supermarkets, mostly in Texas; 600 employees; and $45 million in revenues. He organized a future search called "Where We Be in '93" that included team members, team leaders, vendors, suppliers, board members, management, and customers from each store. Participants envisioned a fivefold growth in the business as central to their mission of providing healthy food to people (24 stores and $223 million in sales). They committed to using local organic producers, to setting aside a percentage of profits for environmental causes, and to engaging the community in healthy lifestyle education.

Five years later, having exceeded its growth, revenue, and social goals (32 stores, $240 million in sales, community action budgets in every store), Whole

Foods held another future search called "We Be Great in '98." Present were the same stakeholder groups, including people from three newly acquired natural foods chains. The challenge, they said, would be in learning from each other, preserving the local identity of various stores, and building a corporate culture that reflected the best of all members and made the corporate values of customer and community service, knowledgeable team members, and a commitment to healthy food and healthy living cornerstones for the future that were not to be compromised by rapid growth.

In October 1998, 140 people from 87 stores around the United States gathered in Estes Park, Colorado. The company now had 16,000 employees, $1.5 billion in revenues, and regional offices in most parts of the country. Many of its top executives had been there from the start. Once again they addressed the issues of growth, high quality, and their mission, now framed as "Whole Foods, Whole People, and Whole Planet." Their conference—"What We See for 2003"—addressed the many dilemmas of customer service, team development, and succession planning in a giant company growing 25 percent a year. In particular, they focused on how to maintain the core values that had made them successful—including support for organic farming, food safety, and nutritional and health education—while responding to the pressures for growth and globalization of the business.

In a recent CEO's conference, John Mackey was asked how his fast-growing company, which had defined a new niche in the supermarket industry, pulled together strategic planning and gained commitment in such a far-flung, decentralized business. "We hold a future search conference every five years," he said.

People in businesses, communities, and nonprofits all over the world use future search to transform their capability for action. They do it in a few days by involving a "whole system" in the same room working together on a task chosen in advance by a planning committee. Diverse groups explore their past, present, and future; confirm shared values; and commit to action plans. Everybody participates and shares leadership. The most significant changes occur in planning, when people agree to a set of unfamiliar meeting conditions. The key to the success of the method is matching the overall purpose with the right people needed to ensure action.

The Basics

Why future search? As a society we have painted ourselves into a technological corner. We have more ways to do things than ever before. Yet a lot of what mat-

ters to us is not getting done, despite the large sums we spend. We experience high walls between haves and have-nots, experts and amateurs, leaders and followers. In future search meetings we take down the walls. We take control of our own futures. We take back responsibility for ourselves. We discover that we can learn from and work with people from many walks of life.

In a future search we become more secure knowing firsthand where other people stand. We discover resources in ourselves and others that we didn't know were there. We begin to accept our differences—in background, viewpoints, and values—as realities to be lived with, not problems to be solved. We are more likely to let go of stereotypes. New relationships emerge. Surprising projects become possible. Future search is a simple way of meeting that has profound implications for organizations and communities everywhere.

Future search brings systems thinking to life. The method provides people a way of acting systemically. By uniting diverse parties who are each other's "environment," we enable people to experience themselves connected to a larger whole rather than talk about it as something "out there." When people all talk about the same elephant, putting together their perceptions of the head, tail, trunk, legs, and tusks, they enable actions that none of them previously thought possible.

TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE? DATA SUGGEST AN EMPHATIC NO!

Now, it is against common sense that much implementation would flow from one short planning meeting among people who have not met before. Yet this unusual, ongoing action, often on intractable issues, has been documented worldwide following future searches. We believe that this could not be happening unless future search enabled people to use skills they already have—skills always there and rarely accessible in more familiar structures.

We have found that extraordinary results happen when groups assemble and follow just a few key principles, namely,

- have the right people in the room—that is, a cross section of the whole system;
- create conditions where participants experience the whole "elephant" before acting on any part of it;
- seek and build upon common ground;
- take responsibility for learning and action.

USES OF FUTURE SEARCH

Future search has been used to help diverse groups find common ground and develop plans based on that common ground. Here are some examples:

Groups Searching for Common Ground	Specific Use of the Future Search
Bay State Skills Corporation technical assistance program, small and medium-size manufacturers, public and private service providers, and state government	Participants developed plans to create a centralized extension service to help small and medium-size manufacturers become more competitive. Their plans for coordinated services sparked political action that resulted in a $1 million state grant and a $10 million federal grant.
Inuit people of the Arctic region, land claims organizations, territorial and federal governments, banks, business firms, a mining company, aboriginal funding organizations, and other aboriginal groups	Participants developed an economic-development framework and action plan for education and training, social development, preservation of culture and language, development of small business and industry, investments, organizational development, transportation and infrastructure, renewable resource development, and protection of the environment.
Teachers, students, school administrators, citizens, commissioners, police, firefighters, highway officials, town department heads, and business leaders of Hopkinton, Massachusetts	Participants developed a plan for "Hopkinton 2000 A.D.," which addressed thorny issues such as the town's doubling in size between 1977 and 1992, a tax-limiting referendum that left education and other budgets level-funded for three years, and a 6 percent-a-year inflation rate that eliminated contractual raises for school employees. Within a year of the conference, residents raised the school budget 12 percent, and a local business firm partnered with the high school and donated $350,000 worth of computers, technology, and teacher training and pledged $300,000 for the next two years. A 1998 follow-up reports that the town maintains double-digit increases to the school budget and has an ongoing partnership with local businesses, which continues to provide approximately $150,000 a year to the system in support of libraries, technology, and teacher training. Henry Fredette, superintendent of the Water Department at the time of the future search, now on the Board of Selectmen, said, "We have succeeded in doing everything we set out to do." The most recent approvals include a $34.7 million high school and a master plan to preserve open space and scenic roads.

Groups Searching for Common Ground	Specific Use of the Future Search
The Alliance for Employee Growth and Development (a nonprofit venture of the Communications Workers of America, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, and AT&T)	The Alliance empowers AT&T workers displaced by technology to develop new skills and build their careers. The board—senior executives from the three partners—now conducts board meetings around the country based on future search principles. In these meetings the board convenes local employers and representatives from government, education, and social services in order to help them develop action plans for the mutual benefit of all.
Union officials and senior management from 3M Company's St. Paul Area Plant Engineering organization	Participants helped forward the common purposes of union and management to improve the quality of work life, productivity, and management practice. The groups defined the concept of "Unity Through Partnership" by working together in a future search. They produced a joint vision of a workplace redesigned around customer needs and devised processes for including people who did not attend. Plant Engineering subsequently moved into a large-scale redesign effort, with union and management working together, that included hundreds of employees.
Kansas City, Missouri, community members interested in youth empowerment, services integration, funding, regional collaboration, technology, and volunteer youth programs	Participants implemented the community consensus reached earlier in Kansas City to become "The Child Opportunity Capital." Some key outcomes: Children's Mercy Hospital put young people on boards dealing with oversight and procedures; a local Junior League chose youth empowerment as its next four-year community commitment, offering 90 volunteers and a $200,000 activities grant including an annual future search involving young people.

Table 1. Examples

THE PROCESS

Our conferences typically involve 60 to 80 people. We consider 64 an optimum number—eight groups of eight. Our purpose is always joint action toward a desired future for X—that is, a community, organization, or issue.

We do five tasks in the approximate timeframes shown below.

Day 1 Afternoon

Task 1—Focus on the Past

Task 2—Focus on the Present, External Trends

Day 2 Morning

Task 2 Continued—Stakeholder Response to External Trends

Task 2 Continued—Focus on the Present, Owning Our Actions

Day 2 Afternoon
    Task 3—Ideal Future Scenarios
    Task 4—Identify Common Ground
Day 3 Morning
    Task 4 Continued—Confirm Common Ground
    Task 5—Action Planning

The Focus on the Past, Ideal Future Scenarios, and Confirm Common Ground tasks are done in mixed groups, each a cross section of the whole. The Focus on the Present task is done by "stakeholder" groups whose members have a shared perspective. The Identify Common Ground task is the business of the whole conference. Action Planning employs both existing and voluntary groups. Every task includes a total group dialogue.

The task sequence and group composition are not optional. These set up powerful dynamics that can lead to constructive outcomes. We experience the conference's peaks and valleys as an emotional roller-coaster ride, swooping down into the morass of global trends, soaring to idealistic heights in an ideal future. Uncertainty, anxiety, and confusion are necessary by-products. So are fun, energy, creativity, and achievement. Future search relies on a counterpoint between hope and despair. We believe good contact with our ups and downs leads to realistic choices. In a future search we live with the inevitability of differences, the recognition that no meeting design can reconcile them, and the acknowledgment that people are capable of riding the roller coaster to important new action plans without "more data" or "more dialogue" if they agree to keep working together.

ECONOMIC BENEFITS

In the business world there is no way to calculate the benefits of future search in economic terms. Indeed, these conferences make possible levels of integration not achievable by other means at any cost. In the Hayworth Inc. future search, employees, customers, and suppliers in dialogue with company members discovered and solved a waste-disposal packaging problem that could have taken months in task forces and that may be worth millions of dollars at many levels of the economy. They reduced both cost and environmental impact in a few hours. However, this was only one of dozens of key issues addressed in the future search. When people discover new forms of cooperation, then time, energy, and resources are used profitably.

In addition, these conferences generate dollars that were not previously available. Examples include Bay State Skills; Hopkinton, Massachusetts; and Kansas City, Missouri, cited in the cases above. Many times we have seen money flow from haves to have-nots in an eye blink once people join in making realistic commitments. In one California conference a major foundation executive offered substantial financial support for an action plan that he said would not have been considered if it had come through regular channels. In an eastern city a deputy from the mayor's office offered a community $2 million in public funds, which, she said, had sat idle for lack of any practical plans for its use—until now. These examples are the tip of a very large iceberg that could, if fully understood, turn our assumptions about how to assure wise use of money, public and private, in constructive new directions.

Getting Started

In a future search we seek to take that first important step by
- getting the "whole system" in the room,
- creating a learning environment for participants to experience the whole system,
- searching for common ground from which to build action plans,
- asking individuals to take responsibility to act on the common ground articulated.

The change begins in the planning. Future search requires no training, inputs, data collection, or diagnoses. People face each other rather than concepts, expert advice, or assumptions about what they lack and should do. The method involves comparing notes and listening, sometimes to a 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. Commitment builds as we encounter chaos together, hang on despite our anxiety, and come out the other side with some good ideas, people we can trust, and faith in our ability to work together. In short, we uncover buried potential that already exists.

Roles and Responsibilities

The table below describes the key roles and their responsibilities before, during, and after the future search:

	Before	During	After
Sponsor	• Become clear about the risks and benefits • Decide what you hope to accomplish and how future search applies • Provide support and assurance that you believe in what people are doing	• Be a participant. Share your learnings • Empower people to act	• Have periodic review meetings that bring together stakeholders from the original conference and other interested parties
Designer/Facilitator	• Help people decide if future search will serve their needs • Help sponsors gather the necessary information, courage, and resources to proceed	• Manage tasks and time • Keep purpose front and center • Encourage self-management and responsibility • Allow the uncertainty until people decide what they will and will not do together • Help people resolve the struggle between old patterns and new paths	• Facilitate a review meeting six months after the conference
Steering Committee	• Frame the conference task • Get the right people in the conference • Set the planning time horizons		
Participants		• Take ownership of your past, present, and future • Confirm mutual values • Search for common ground • Develop independent or joint action plans based on the established common ground • Share leadership	• Take responsibility and follow through with your plans

Table 2. Roles and Responsibilities

Shifts in Organizational Power and Authority

During the future search conference, participants work as peers as they build the information base, communicate what they learn, make decisions and prepare action plans. After the conference there may or may not be formal changes in power and authority throughout the organization or community. Such changes would depend on the future search action plans and their subsequent implementation.

Conditions for Success

Our conference design embodies a set of mutually reinforcing practices:
  * getting the "whole system" in the room,
  * all looking at the same "elephant" before working on any part of it (e.g., thinking globally before acting locally),
  * exploring current reality and common futures, not problems and conflicts,
  * self-managing your own groups and action plans,
  * attending the whole meeting,
  * meeting under healthy conditions,
  * working across three days (i.e., "sleeping twice"),
  * taking responsibility publicly for follow-up.

If we want to help people act boldly and creatively, we have to get out of the way. So we do not strive to reduce complexity to a few manageable issues, to resolve disagreements, or to solve long-standing problems. Nor do we give people management models for organizing their varied perceptions. Instead, participants engage in a series of open dialogues on where they've been, where they are, and what they want to do. Future searches often include total strangers or people with a history of conflict who come with confusing and contradictory information. As they experience each other's diverse agendas, they realize that change means accepting each other where they are if they are to go forward together. Those who stay the course find that quick action is inevitable.

WHAT WE CAN'T DO WITH FUTURE SEARCH

Shore Up Ineffective Leaders

We cannot make up for weak leadership with a future search. A worldwide religious service organization's lawyer wanted to head off a drive to unionize by disgruntled central staff. A reluctant CEO went along with the "legal" advice to

sponsor a future search that would enable people to devise the workplace they wanted. People welcomed a chance to make their own plans. They were not surprised, though, when the boss acted on none of them. Nor was their attorney surprised when the staff voted in a union to fill the leadership vacuum.

Convince Skeptics to Go Forward

We have had no success "selling" future search to people paralyzed by worry about losing control. One troubled corporate giant planned to put thousands of people through a training event staged by a prestigious business institute. To the staff's proposal that the company substitute future searches—on the theory that people could get the company out of the box if given a chance—top management turned a deaf ear. Nobody could imagine anything useful happening that wasn't prescribed by experts. They opted for expert training. But nothing new happened. Having two years to "transform the culture or die," they gave up on training their way out of trouble after a year. Several separate departments ran successful future searches, but the company as a whole continued its downward slide.

Reconcile Values Differences

We don't know how to reconcile intractable values differences through future search. When people disagree about deep-seated religious, ethical, or political beliefs that they hold sacred, a future search is unlikely to help them reconcile their beliefs. In a school conference, people brought up highly charged feelings about sex education. The differences between those who did and did not want a particular curriculum were fierce, deeply felt, and long-standing. The parties believed each other to be wrong. At the same time, they agreed on a host of other goals, such as better use of school facilities and more involvement of parents in learning and teaching. They found that they were not going to work out their moral values in this forum but that they had a priceless chance to make progress on matters of benefit to all if they cooperated.

Change Team Dynamics

We can create new dynamics quickly only if we bring together a *new* group and give it a *new* task. Systems expert Russell Ackoff pointed out long ago that systems change only in relation to the larger systems of which they are a part. That explains why peer-only events—training, T-groups, team meetings—have little effect on the larger system. This seems to be true even when the narrow

group does a broad task, such as "scanning the environment." So our guiding principle is always the "whole system" in the room.

Using future search work sheets, for example, a consultant ran a single department through its past, present, and future. To make sure everybody "got it," she included a trust questionnaire and data feedback. "Same old stuff" was the word after the conference from the participants, who neither trusted nor distrusted each other more, although they had learned to trust consultants less. Same people + new inputs = same interactions.

Theoretical Basis

Future search is based on solid, proven theories about how people can best develop plans in groups. While practitioners of future search continue to enhance the conduct of the process, the process is based on just a few simple, but high-leverage principles.

HISTORICAL ROOTS

Our main sources of inspiration come from parallel innovations on both sides of the Atlantic. One is Ronald Lippitt and Eva Schindler-Rainman's large-scale community futures conferences in North America during the 1970s. Another is the pioneering work of Eric Trist, an Englishman, and Fred Emery, an Australian, in developing the Search Conference (hence the name future search). From Lippitt and Schindler-Rainman we learned to get the whole system in the room and focus on the future, not on problems and conflicts. From Trist and Emery we learned the importance of thinking globally before acting locally and of having people manage their own planning. We share with all of them a commitment to democratic ideals and their embodiment of the "action research" tradition of the famed social psychologist Kurt Lewin.

PEOPLE, WHOLE SYSTEMS, AND PLANNING

We see future search as a learning laboratory for "getting everybody to improve whole systems."[2] 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 for future action. We have chosen to stay with lowercase letters to emphasize that future search is not a "thing" carved in stone but a set of principles and opportunities for learning and action. Our society has hardly begun to explore what we can do with diverse parties working on the same task despite their differences.

Future searches enable us to experience and accept polarities. They help us learn how to 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 our tendency to repeat old patterns—fighting, running away, complaining, blaming, or waiting for others to fix problems. And it gives us a chance to express our highest ideals.

Instead of trying to change the world or each other, we change the conditions under which we interact. *That* much we can control, and changing the conditions leads to surprising outcomes.

In future search, major systemic changes occur in the planning process. A diverse group of 6 to 10 people meets from a few days to a few months. They agree on a task and invite a spectrum of stakeholders. They also agree to a novel set of conditions, e.g., meeting for 16 hours over three days, skipping speakers and expert input, putting off action until near the end, and working interactively. In a meeting structured this way, people discover new capabilities no matter what agendas come up. This opens the door to new, unpredictable, highly desired, and long-lived cooperative action that is a high order of systems change.

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) from economic and technical issues. We are unlikely to run a conference on "the future of diversity in X." Rather, we'd propose that a diverse group of people explore together what kind of X they want to live and work in. Whatever people's skills, education, or experience, they already have what they need to engage in this process. As facilitators, our main job is to maintain boundaries of time and task and to make sure that all points of view are supported.

SHARING THE WORK

Ours is an encounter with the whole—self, community, organization. But we do not provide an expert systems analysis. Instead, we set up a situation that involves the whole person on many levels. People experience themselves in action as part of a larger whole. They talk over issues they have not raised before with people they have never met. They take responsibility for matters previously avoided or ignored. They dramatize ideal futures as if they have actually happened, thus anchoring them in their bodies. They identify what they *really* want. They voluntarily commit to actions made possible only because of the other people in the room.

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.

A LEARNING LABORATORY

We believe conferences designed according to the principles we have adopted lead to (1) more participants taking personal responsibility, (2) faster implementation of action plans, and (3) longer-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 afterward that they couldn't do before. Enough good stories abound to keep us going on this path. So for us, future search is a learning laboratory.

HOW FUTURE SEARCH DIFFERS FROM ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

We see many differences between future search and traditional organization development (OD) meetings. First, OD was conceived not as a single meeting but rather as a strategy for large-scale systemic change. Future search describes a process for one meeting lasting fewer than three days. Second, where OD depended on many people accepting the "need for change," future search depends on 64 people accepting an invitation to spend a few days together.

Third, OD was based on diagnosing gaps between what is and what ought to be. Consultants applied a diagnostic framework, did 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 reorder their ways of working. Consultants prescribed action steps to close the gaps. Nearly always these involved training, based on the theory that people did not know how to do what they said they wanted to do.

A final difference from OD concerns our neutral assessment of "current reality." What might be seen through an OD lens as deficiencies to be remedied, we consider part of current reality. 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 are witnessing in action the best that this system is capable of. We don't expect dramatic individual change, only a change in the action potential within the system. 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.

Sustaining the Results

The single most worrisome aspect of planning is implementation. No process, however comprehensive, guarantees action. Still, we have seen more plans implemented from future searching than any method either of us has used in 30 years. People act quite apart from whether they had a good time, liked the facilitators, collected handouts, resolved their differences, or felt that they had finished. Nor is success a function of how complete an action-planning format is. People find ways to carry out their plans if they have clear goals, the right people are in the room, and they take the whole ride together. Action requires people who understand and believe in their plans and trust each other enough to join in new steps. We think future search fosters understanding, belief, and commitment.

So, while there are no guarantees, what factors contribute to sustainable results? We believe periodic review meetings that bring together stakeholders from the original conference and other interested parties is a simple, congruent way to keep action planning fresh, connected, and relevant for all. What happens after a future search depends largely on what people sign up to do. No sign-up, no action. The fact is, nobody knows how to get other people to do things they don't want to do. Future search theory holds that we get more implementation when we attend to each stage of the process, giving people ample opportunity to engage each other, create an umbrella of shared values, commit to action steps they believe in, and get together regularly to share what they are doing.

Some Final Comments

We see future search as a building block of theory and practice for a house that will never be finished. Practitioners are infusing future search principles into everything they do and enriching this process with many other perspectives. We cannot compare or contrast what we do with other processes because we believe that all large-group processes are independently valuable. Ours are not the only techniques for accomplishing our goals. They are simply the techniques we know best. The roller-coaster ride is inevitable in human affairs. Conceptual schemes and meeting designs come and go. The business of muddling through life's ups

and downs together strikes us as a universal process. We believe future searches are good for us and good for society. We hope this work enables thousands of constructive action projects everywhere.

About the Authors

Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff codirect the Future Search Network (formerly SearchNet), an international, voluntary nonprofit consulting network that helps people apply the principles of future search in communities around the world. They also are co-founders of Future Search Alliance, a consulting group that supports community initiatives through private sector efforts. They are coauthors of *Future Search: An Action Guide to Finding Common Ground in Organizations and Communities* (Berrett-Koehler, 1995), and they put on future search training workshops around the world.

Marvin Weisbord has worked as a consultant to business, education, government, and health care in North America and Scandinavia since 1969. He was a founding partner of the consulting firm Block Petrella Weisbord, author of *Organizational Diagnosis* (1978) and *Productive Workplaces* (1987), and creator/editor of *Discovering Common Ground* (1992), a landmark for the practice of open-systems planning methods with large groups.

Sandra Janoff, Ph.D., plans, designs, and leads large system change efforts in school systems, corporations, and communities. She has run future searches with business firms, government agencies, communities, schools, hospitals, and nonprofit agencies, on issues of employment, manufacturing, housing, education, health, and many other topics.

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1. Adapted from *Future Search: An Action Guide to Finding Common Ground in Organizations and Communities,* by Marvin R. Weisbord and Sandra Janoff, Ph.D. (Berrett-Koehler, 1995).

2. Weisbord, Marvin R. *Productive Workplaces: Organizing and Managing for Dignity, Meaning, and Community.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987, pp. 237–252.