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World of Diverse Perspectives

PARTNERING TO ENHANCE CROSS-CULTURAL FACILITATION: BUILDING ON
LESSONS FROM A FUTURE SEARCH/OPEN SPACE FOR THE UN SYSTEM IN
PAKISTAN

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Abstract

Building on lessons from the partnership that evolved among an external, an internal and a local facilitator for a Future Search for the UN system in Pakistan, a practical demonstration of Appreciative Inquiry will allow participants of all levels to share experiences in partnering and in cross-cultural facilitation, and generate propositions to enhance professional practice and mentoring in these areas.



FUTURE SEARCH

Future Search is an innovative planning conference used worldwide by hundreds of communities and organizations. It helps large diverse groups discover common values and projects, create a desired future together, and start implementing right away. Future Search has been adopted with success by people from all walks of life in North and South America, Africa, Australia, Europe and South Asia. A Future Search usually involves 60 to 70 people and is especially helpful in uncertain, fast changing environments. The optimal length is about 2 1/2 days, which allows people to make a notable shift in their trust of each other and in their capability for action. The task is always The Future of _____(fill in the blank).

Future Search Principles:

- Get the whole system in the room -- invite people with a stake in the purpose that don't usually meet, enlarging everybody's potential for learning and action.
- Think globally, act locally -- put the focal issue in global perspective, helping each person to see the same larger picture of which they have a part
- Work toward common ground/desired futures -- treat problems and conflicts as information rather than action items, while searching for common ground and desirable futures
- Self-manage conversations/action plans -- invite people to manage their own small groups in talking about and acting on what they learn.

These principles are played out in a series of tasks: (i) establishing a common history through the use of timelines; (ii) creating a mind map of present trends affecting the whole group and the conference theme; (iii) stakeholders assessing what they are doing now that they are proud of and sorry about; (iv) small groups devising ideal future scenarios, and identifying common/key features from these presentations; (v) whole group confirmation of their common

future and acknowledgement of differences; and finally (vi) work together on desired plans and actions. (For this last stage of the Future Search in Pakistan, we adopted a modified Open Space design, which allowed people to convene and self-manage into small action planning groups in various areas).

Staging such a conference means changing assumptions about large, diverse groups. Most people can bridge lines of culture, class, gender, ethnicity, power, status and hierarchy if they will work as peers on tasks of mutual concern. The more diverse the group, the more important it is that the people in the room arrive at their own meanings, conclusions, concepts, and goals. People make different choices when they are in dialogue than they would make working alone or only with familiar faces. With a more-level playing field and equal chance to participate, it becomes possible for people to see issues from many more angles.

Thus facilitation of a future search – normally shared between two facilitators --, and facilitation of an open space – often done in partnership -- therefore, focuses on setting the conditions under which people interact. Facilitators resist the temptation to "organize the data" for a group, or to impose their categories and priority-setting mechanisms, and instead help people understand what it is they are saying to each other and what choices they can make.

While such facilitation appears to be quite “minimalist”, sound partnerships in the work can help create the best possible conditions in which people can interact. The more diverse the group the more of a challenge this can be. Hence we want to use the experience of those attending the session to identify the best partnering practices for cross-cultural facilitation.

Our Facilitation Partnership

The “three-legged stool” facilitation partnership that evolved in the Future Search (FS) sponsored by the UN system in Pakistan in November 1998 came about more by default, than



deliberate design, but may be worth considering in similar cross-cultural situations. In our story, Kim Martens was the lead, external consultant who brought considerable expertise in using FS in development settings, especially in Asia. Linda Starodub was well versed in FS but had less experience in facilitating it, and in any case wanted to keep a low profile to do her dissertation research. She had, however, a breadth of knowledge of the UN system and its organizational cultures, which allowed her to promote the use of the method in this application and serve as a "translator" or "interlocutor." Although FS normally uses two facilitators, Kim requested a local facilitator based on extensive experience facilitating Future Searches in Asia. The sponsors in Pakistan suggested that a Pakistani from a UN regional project, who had some facilitation experience, join us. He ensured that we paid proper attention to cultural sensitivities and national perspectives on the UN, and got "real-time, on-the-job training" in FS. In acquiring this capacity he was expected to be on hand afterwards to conduct/advise on follow-up (e.g. a proposal emerged for a FS on the city of Karachi).

We seemed to divide up the facilitation pieces fairly seamlessly – choosing to do components that felt most comfortable or where we wanted to gain experience. We "passed" where we felt less confident or wanted to observe and learn from how someone else did it. We all learned a lot from Kim's handling of the delicate reality dialogue, which covered contentious issues such as de-nuclearization (between Pakistan and India), and the meaning of gender equity in a modern Islamic state. In addition to showing select video clips, overheads and handouts we will highlight findings from facilitator debrief sessions and follow-up interviews with a sample of participants from the different cultures represented in the FS.

Appreciative Inquiry

In presenting the above model we also want to draw on the valuable experience participants have to share about how they have facilitated with partners, and worked in cross-cultural situations – with or without partners. For these purposes cross-cultural is defined as ethnic/national cultures, organizational cultures, and other dimensions that may operate as cultural filters in various settings, e.g. gender, age, socio-economic status, health/ability status, family status, profession, religion, sexual preference, etc.)

Our inter-active session will allow best experiences of those participating to emerge and be enjoined with our own lessons, through a practical demonstration of Appreciative Inquiry. In contrast to a problem solving approach that looks into what is wrong, Appreciative Inquiry seeks to highlight life-giving forces (in organizations, communities or in this case – cross-cultural facilitation and partnerships). The process involves “identifying and valuing the very best of what is”, in order to “imagine the best of what might be”. In addition, the process fosters open and supportive dialogue on “what should be”, and innovation around moving closer to those ideals –“what will be”.

Participants in this workshop will be asked to pair with someone they don’t know (itself a form of partnering) and complete a short interview protocol to inquire into their respective own experiences of what gives life to cross-cultural facilitation and partnerships. They will also be asked to envision what they would wish for such cross-cultural facilitation and partnerships under ideal circumstances. The pairs will then be invited to form small groups to identify common themes that seem to be present when partnering and cross-cultural facilitation are or could be at their best. From this base, provocative propositions will be generated about what should and will be in this regard. Thus the session is a form of real-time participatory action



research on professional learning and mentoring in the areas of partnering and cross-cultural facilitation. The results of this session will be added to this brief after the IAF conference in April.

Key References

Future Search

Future Search: An Action Guide to Finding Common Ground in Organizations and Communities by Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff, (Berrett-Koehler, 1995)

Website - <http://www.futuresearch.net/>

Open Space

Open Space Technology: A User's Guide, Copyright 1992 by Harrison Owen (Abbott Publishing)

Website - <http://www.openspaceworld.org/stories/englishintro.html>

Appreciative Inquiry

The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry by Sue Annis Hammond, Thin Book Publishing CO. (1998)

Website -- <http://www.appreciative-inquiry.org/>

The Presenters

Linda Starodub, with a background in urban/environmental planning and NGO management, has worked in international development for 25 years. Presently an organization development advisor with the UN Development Programme (UNDP) in New York, she is also finalizing her Ph.D. in organization development at the non-traditional Union Institute in Cincinnati. She helped pilot UNDP's use of large-scale video conferencing, and has facilitated in a variety of cross-cultural development settings using Future Search, Open Space, Technology of Participation, Appreciative Inquiry, and Creative Problem Solving.

Kim Martens has over 20 years of facilitation, training and community development experience. Over the past eight years, Kim has specialized in large group interventions and in particular the Future Search Conference approach. She has managed over 20 Future Searches in Canada, Asia and Africa. She has published more than a dozen articles in “Future Searching.” She is a member of the Open Space Institute of Canada, the Future Search Alliance and the Southern Ontario Future Search Network for which she facilitated a Learning Event in Toronto in 1998.