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The Art and Mastery of Facilitation – Worlds of Change
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World of Community Building

FACILITATING A FUTURE SEARCH CONFERENCE: FACILITATION IN THE
NARROWEST SENSE...

L'ATELIER DE PROSPECTION DU FUTUR, UN NOUVEAU DÉFI POUR LES
ANIMATEURS!

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Abstract

Future Search, a multi-stakeholder approach to planning the future, is one of the recognized large group interventions. Shared vision and commitment to action are usual outcomes. Facilitating a Future Search differs from facilitating strategic planning or team building. In fact, it is facilitation in the narrowest sense. The values and skills needed and ways to sharpen skills are explored.

La Démarche de prospection du futur, un processus d'orientation stratégique impliquant plusieurs partenaires, est un des modes reconnus d'intervention avec de grands groupes. Il en résulte généralement une vision partagée et un engagement à passer à l'action de la part des partenaires. Lors des quatre étapes clés de la Démarche, le rôle des animateurs diffère du rôle joué par exemple dans un exercice de planification stratégique classique ou dans une activité de consolidation d'équipe. Il s'agit de facilitation dans le sens propre du terme. Les valeurs et habiletés requises ainsi que les façons de les développer seront explorées.

FUTURE SEARCH – Setting the Context

What is a Future Search

Future Search is a unique planning process that is used worldwide by hundreds of communities and organizations. It meets two goals at the same time, (1) helping large diverse groups discover values, purposes, and projects they hold in common; and (2) enabling people to create a desired future together and to start working toward it right away.

Future search is especially helpful in uncertain, fast-changing situations. Participants need no training or expertise. Future Searches focus on a wide range of purposes in schools, hospitals, churches, communities, government agencies, voluntary networks, foundations, business firms, and non-profits in every sector. Because future search is largely culture free, it

has been adopted with success by people from all walks of life in North and South America, Africa, Australia, Europe and South Asia.

The conference, a key step in the process, usually involves 60 to 70 people--large enough to include many perspectives and small enough that the full group can be in dialogue at each step in the process. This makes possible a shared picture of the "whole elephant." (For larger groups, conferences may be run in parallel or in sequence.) The optimal length is about 3 days, with a minimum of four half-day sessions. When people stay engaged in a task for that long, they are more likely 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).

How Future Search Works

The conference/process is designed to principles that enable people to work together without having to defend or sell a particular agenda. This opens the door to creative new opportunities. The first principle involves "getting the whole system in the room." That means inviting people with a stake in the agenda that don't usually meet, thus enlarging everybody's potential for learning and action. The second involves putting the focal issue in global perspective, helping each person to see a bigger picture than the one they usually consider.

The third means treating problems and conflicts as information rather than action items, while searching for common ground and desirable futures. The fourth invites people to manage their own small groups in discussing and acting on what they learn.

The Future Search Conference Agenda

There are five tasks. The first establishes a common history, the second, a map of world trends affecting the whole group. The third step calls for an assessment by stakeholders of what they are doing now that they are proud of and sorry about, an important step toward mutual



understanding. Next, people devise ideal future scenarios, living their dreams as if they have already happened. Then all groups identify common ground themes and values--key features that appear in every scenario. The whole group confirms their common future, acknowledges differences and makes choices about how to use their energy. In the final segment, they sign up to work together on desired plans and actions.

Letting Go Stereotypes

Staging a future search means changing our assumptions about large, diverse groups. In these meetings we learn that most people can bridge lines of culture, class, gender, ethnicity, power, status and hierarchy when they work as peers on tasks of mutual concern. They can do this despite stereotypes, prejudices, and "isms" that lie deep in all of us. They can do this despite skepticism and sometimes-gloomy predictions of what will or won't happen. Freed from the impulse to put pressure on each other to solve intractable problems, people often find common ground none of them knew existed.

Changing Our Assumptions

For decades it was assumed that the best way to bring a large group together was in the presence of an expert speaker or panelists that would answer peoples' questions. The belief that someone else has the knowledge we need is deep in us. So is the belief that if others tell us what to do we can do it. Future search turns those assumptions upside down. Instead of speeches, we have working sessions among a wide range of parties who have information, authority to act, and a stake in the outcome, regardless of their status, skills, or attitudes. In addition, we assume that complex planning issues require value choices more than expertise and "data." We believe that people make different choices when they are in dialogue that they would not make working alone or only with familiar faces.

Assumptions Underlying Facilitating a Future Search

The role of the facilitators in Future Search is based on different assumptions about helpful facilitator behaviour. Indeed effective Future Search facilitators do not facilitate “people.” Rather, they focus on creating conditions under which people will take care of themselves. They work on structure not behavior, seeking to control only those aspects of a work group that do not require people making dramatic changes in their skills, knowledge, or personality before they can accomplish a task.

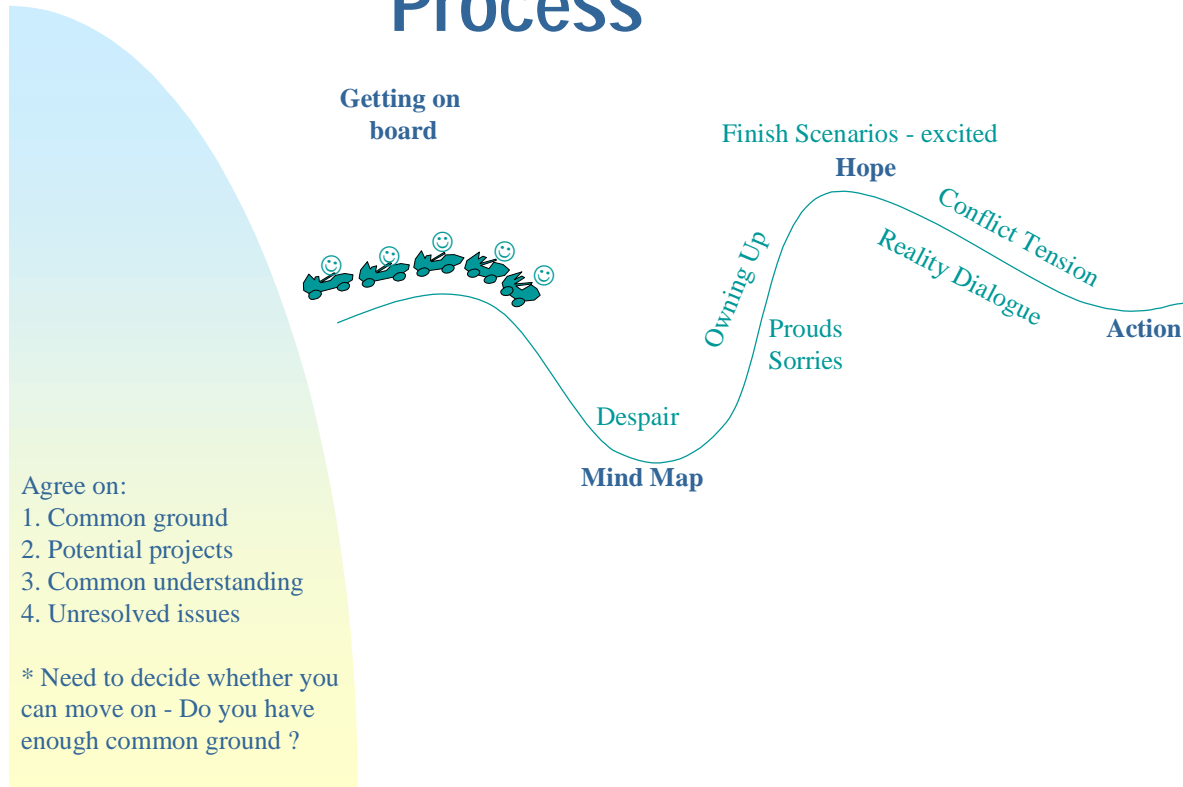
How to Manage the Roller Coaster

The purpose of our facilitation is to help people resolve the struggle between old patterns and new paths. We do this by:

- ◆ Keeping the conference task front and centre;
- ◆ Encouraging self-management and responsibility;
- ◆ Staying with uncertainty in ourselves and in the group until people decide what they will and will not do together.



Process



Focusing on Purpose

The purpose of a future search conference is to evolve a common future for an organization or community and develop self-managed action plans to move toward it.

- ◆ We are not “process consultants” on interpersonal dynamics.
- ◆ We don’t lead exercises where people examine their own behaviour.
- ◆ We don’t ask people why they do this and that.
- ◆ We don’t take positions except on the overall goal.
- ◆ When participants do, we listen.
- ◆ We don’t react.
- ◆ Our job is to keep people moving toward action on a common future.

- ◆ We make space for what folks want to say.
- ◆ We don't make assumptions about what they could or should say.
- ◆ We accept each person's right to sit on or reveal whatever *he or she* considers relevant.

Encouraging Self-Management

A group of six to eight can organize its own work without a facilitator at their table when the task and deadlines are clear. Shared self-management contributes significantly to the success of the hard work people do, the visible amount of output they produce, and the high degree of implementation that follows future searches. Our role is:

- ◆ To enable those results by staying out of the way.
- ◆ To become involved only if invited by a group.
- ◆ To bring "larger " issues to the group for them to solve.

Self-Management Roles

Each small group manages its own discussion, data, time and reports. Here are useful roles for self-managing the work. **Leadership roles are generally rotated.** Groups divide up the work as they wish.

DISCUSSION LEADER

Assures that each person who wants to speak is heard within time frame available. Keeps group on track to finish on time.

TIMEKEEPER

Keeps group aware of time left. Monitors reporters and signals time remaining.

RECORDER



Writes group's output on flip charts, using speaker's words. Asks people to restate long ideas briefly. Labels all flip charts with task and group.

REPORTER

Delivers report to large group in time allotted.

DATA MANAGER

Sees that all flip charts are posted. Helps keep related information together on wall.

Staying with Uncertainty

The function of many facilitation techniques is to reduce chaos and anxiety as fast as possible. In future search, it's our job to live with uncertainty and not "fix" it. We hold off solutions until action planning time.

- ◆ We encourage people to give concrete examples of what they mean.
- ◆ We hear a spectrum of reactions to every comment.
- ◆ We don't judge (out loud) what anybody says.
- ◆ We hold a neutral and safe place.
- ◆ To the extent that we can, we don't take negative or positive comments personally.

Managing Informal Subgroups

One level of group transformation is easy to describe - people realize they can live with their positive and negative feelings at the same time. In a future search we open the door to that realization, giving those who wish a chance to go through it. To do this we need:

- ◆ To learn to live with our own contradictions and polarities so that we can open the door by validating whatever people bring up.

- ◆ To accept that new groups usually start with faulty assumptions, stereotyping, low trust, and avoidance of anxiety by fully experiencing our own potential for this.
- ◆ To learn to live on the edge of uncertainty and just wait so that we are better prepared to stay with a group's struggle and to wait for somebody from the group to say what needs to be said.
- ◆ To keep the door open by listening without acting.

Supporting Contrarians

Our first impulse may be to smooth over tension, dismiss it, or try to dissuade the non-conformist. In future search, we learn to welcome contrary remarks as advancing the future search task. They give people an opportunity to modify their stereotypes and assumptions for themselves. What we need to do is:

- ◆ Accept every statement as part of the shared reality whether we like it or not.
- ◆ Seek allies for every point of view so that each person's reality is validated.
- ◆ Guard against scapegoating.

Validating Polarities – Seeking Common Ground

We value that controversial positions become public. We do not “work” them. Trying to negotiate a resolution, worthwhile work in other settings, is a waste of energy in a future search. As differences become part of our reality and enough people feel less suspicious, shy, stubborn, or threatened, they begin to experience that there isn't “one right way” to a desired future. They find surprising overlap in what they want, regardless of why they want it or how they want to proceed. They also experience how much collective energy they have if they accept each other as they are. To the extent people can live with polarities, they can act on common ground. Future search provides a rare and precious opportunity – to do something productive *right now*.



- ◆ We do not want to avoid, bury or deny conflict but rather contain it by inviting people to put on the back burner what they cannot resolve in favour of what is *already* resolved.

Working this way requires facilitators to see themselves as part of a whole system that can fragment or develop from moment to moment. Facilitators have a special role in maintaining system integrity that has nothing to do with diagnosing people's behaviours. Interpreting what "stage" a group is in, or proposing fixes for what goes wrong. This alternative way of working involves simple techniques for working with every conceivable difference in the room. We work towards freeing people from needing to change each other, hanging on to stereotypes, or carrying unrealistic expectations for themselves and each other. What this looks like in a room is facilitation in the narrowest sense.

The text above is adapted from a longer document by Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff, co-directors of the Future Search Network, a world-wide network based on community service, collegiality and learning. They are co-authors of FUTURE SEARCH: An Action Guide to Finding Common Ground in Organizations and Communities (Berrett-Koehler, 1995). For more information, call or write: Future Search Network, Resources for Human Development, Inc., Sally Theilacker, Programme Manager

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The Presenters

Kim Martens, owner of Martens Consulting Services, has worked both in Canada and internationally, and has extensive experience working in cross-cultural settings and with diverse groups. Kim has a Masters in Adult Education. Her work has focused mainly on participatory planning; issue-based stakeholder meetings; programme design and evaluation; and organizational development. For all overseas facilitation work, Kim has partnered with local facilitators and mentored them through the process to ensure capacity building within the country. For many of these assignments, Kim was among the first to introduce the Future Search

Conference methodology to that country. She is fluent in French and English. She is a member of the Southern Ontario Future Search Network and the Future Search Alliance.

Maureen Donlevy is President of her own firm, Donlevy Consulting Inc., based in Scarborough, Ontario and a member of the Southern Ontario Future Search Network. Her academic background includes a B.A. Honours from the University of Calgary; an M.Ed. in Counseling from California State University, San Jose and an M.Sc. in Organization Development from Pepperdine University Business School, as well as related studies from National Training Labs and the Future Search Network. Before starting her own consulting firm Maureen was employed as a specialist in Organizational Development for Imperial Oil Ltd., and the federal and Ontario governments. She brings with her an interest in how large organizations change and develop and cooperate with other organizations to bring about societal change. She is Member of the Board of Trustees of The Linden School in Toronto. She is fluently bilingual in English and French.

Jean-Pierre Beaulieu is founder and President of J-P- Beaulieu, Conseil en Gestion inc. (1987), which focuses on the creation of high performing systems in large organizations. Services include consulting in strategic planning, change management, work and organization design, and the upgrading of major organization processes. Jean-Pierre's consulting assignments are mainly in large industrial organizations (primary metals, pulp and paper, food, and aerospace) as well as public sector organizations. He has more than twenty years of experience as an internal staff consultant, as a manager and as an external consultant. He introduced the «Future Search» approach into Québec and is a member of the Future Search Network. Jean-Pierre holds a B.A from the University of Montreal, a B.Soc.Sciences from Laval University and an M.B.A. from Michigan State University. Jean-Pierre was previously



employed for fourteen years with Alcan and focused at both the national and international levels.

Since 1988, he has been an associate of The Niagara Institute (a division of the Conference Board of Canada), collaborating in leadership seminars for Management. He has recently co-authored La Démarche de prospection du futur with Émile Carrière currently going to print with les Editions Gaëtan Morin.