# Future Search Conferencing

By Olivier Serrat

To enlist commitment, organizations depend on a clear and powerful image of the future. Future Search conferencing has emerged as a system-wide strategic planning tool enabling diverse and potentially conflicting groups to find common ground for constructive action.

On Politics by Other Means

Nine times out of ten, large-scale gatherings for exchange of ideas in (darkened) assembly rooms only dispense information; powerful individual or collective learning experiences rarely take place there. Why should this be the case if the raison d'être of a conference is to generate and share knowledge that impacts behavior and links to results? One explanation is that organizers do not shine a light on the conditions for learning outcomes.[1] Another is that learning may not, from the outset, be the real intent: indeed, paraphrasing Carl von Clausewitz, it often seems conferencing is the continuation of politics by other means. And so, when the agenda is—unequivocally—to learn, the mode of operation is increasingly participant-driven meetings such as unconferences; Future Search conferencing bodes well too.
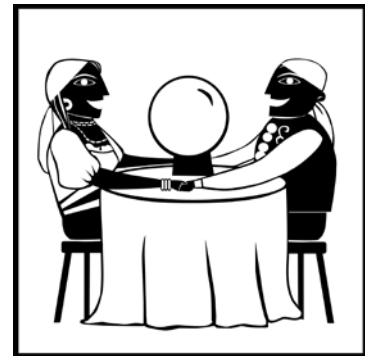
Back to the Future

Futures studies—aka futurology—is a transdisciplinary field of social inquiry for systemic study of medium- to long-term futures.[2] With foresight, futurists aim to discover or invent, propose, examine, and evaluate probable, possible, preferable, and prospective futures.[3] Specifically, since the future depends on what one does today, futurists argue with good sense

> *By the street of by-and-by, one arrives at the house of never.*
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> —Miguel de Cervantes

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[1] The shortcomings of assemblies are that: (i) conference programs are set by event planners and do not predict well what sessions are actually wanted; (ii) a distinction is made between presenters (teachers) and participants (learners); (iii) sessions are dominated by presenters—participants receive predetermined information passively; (iv) logistics revolve around general and breakout sessions; (v) content is broadcast in long, uninterrupted sessions; and (vi) chances to network are restricted to meals and social gatherings outside sessions. See ADB. 2011. *Learning in Conferences*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/publications/learning-conferences

[2] Bertrand de Jouvenel (1903–1987), a French philosopher, political economist, and futurist, signposted the emergence of the modern futures movement. In the 1960s, de Jouvenel's work critiqued the deterministic and fatalistic view of the postwar period and stressed understanding of the past and present as a mechanism to gain insight to future possibilities. See Bertrand de Jouvenel. 1967. *The Art of Conjecture*. Basic Books.

[3] These futures are all subject to cultural, psychological, and sociological influences but cannot be explored in the same way: the first (one future) entails trend analysis; the second (many futures) calls for imagination and flexibility; the third (an "other" future) springs from value positions, both critical and ideological; the fourth (futuring) hinges on preparedness to act, rooted in self-reliance and solidarity. The research methods associated with each orientation differ too.

that exploring alternative futures can help people make out and create their preferred future. "In the fields of observation chance favors only the prepared mind," Louis Pasteur remarked. It stands to reason too that, where the stakes are communal, they might want to apply common sense for organizational change as a group.

The Flux Capacitator

Strategic planning is customarily the prerogative of a few—much as chefs de cuisine, senior staff task sous-chefs, chefs de parties, cuisiniers, commis, appentices, plongeurs, marmitons, and other members of the kitchen brigade with activities, inputs, and outputs. Would they understand that strategic

> *Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.*
> —Søren Kierkegaard

planning is not haute cuisine: in that field, not many can ever describe—even less understand, enter into, and actively support—what they have summarily been told to lend force to. "You can fool all the people some of the time, and some of the people all the time, but you can't fool all the people all the time," Abraham Lincoln is thought to have said: what with the time-honored predilection for top–down strategic planning, people by now know beyond doubt when they are merely asked to lend legitimacy to someone else's vision.

> *To change an organization, the more people you can involve, and the faster you can help them understand how the system works and how to take responsibility for making it work better, the faster will be the change. It doesn't happen through isolated pilots projects.*
> —Marvin Weisbord

Quite the opposite, Future Search conferencing is a democratic approach to real-time, large-group change planning from a systems perspective.[4] It was developed by Marvin Weisbord[5] and Sandra Janoff in the late 1980s to help organizations (and communities) create shared visions of the future in complex situations, including those characterized by ambiguity and conflict, and plot organizational directions linked to results.[6] The process is anchored by three principles informed by behavioral science:

- Represent the system in one room.
- Explore the whole in context before seeking to act on its parts, focusing on common ground and desired futures and considering problems as information.
- Self-manage work and take responsibility for action.

In its most recurrent format, Future Search is a structured, 3-day event involving up to 64 participants[7] from the same organization. It requires a minimum lead time of 2 months, during which a steering committee of mixed stakeholders selects the Future Search topic, makes necessary preparations, and briefs participants in advance—participants must know what to expect. It benefits from having a facilitator[8] and cofacilitor/logistics manager. Last but not least, a working group must be set up before the conference to turn its outputs into a report

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[4] To note, Future Search conferencing is distinct from action learning. Action learning derives from the premise that there is no learning without action and no action without learning; assumptions must be tested against real consequences. In action learning, individuals present urgent, personal challenges to others in small teams and work collectively over a period of months to help one another resolve them in actual work conditions. In action learning, history offers no solutions: critical reflection leads to reframing and to just-in-time learning, unlearning, and relearning. Neither is Future Search conferencing like Appreciative Inquiry—another complementary (because participatory) form of action research that emerged in the mid-1980s—because that particular process concerns itself in smaller groups with what is already working well in an organization. (Notwithstanding, some have tried to marry the two—without conclusive effect in this writer's opinion.)

[5] See Marvin Weisbord. 1992. *Discovering Common Ground: How Future Search Conferences Bring People Together to Achieve Breakthrough Innovation, Empowerment, Shared Vision, and Collaborative Action*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

[6] Future Search conferencing has found applications in the arts and culture; business; community; congregations; economics; education; environment; government; health care; social services; technology; and youth sectors of private, public, and not-for-profit organizations.

[7] Practical experience suggests eight round tables of eight persons in a broad cross-section of stakeholders. (Groups of 10 find it harder to manage themselves.) True diversity that represents the broadest range of viewpoints means including staff from all levels and functions as well as clients, audiences, and partners. They should have as features among them the authority, resources, expertise, information, and motivation to act if they choose.

[8] For facilitators, a windfall is that Future Search conferencing requires little rehearsing compared to traditional gatherings. It involves learning, not teaching: there are no keynote speeches, shows-and-tells, overheads, training exercises, or dry-runs. The principal difficulty probably lies in energy management: for participants to remain attentive throughout the conference, and not lose momentum, requires stamina in the first instance and excellent facilitation in the next. However, Future Search conferencing's participative, inclusive, and open approach to discovery learning has compensations: people feel pulled by blank sheets of paper and whiteboards, hand-drawn charts, open questions, simple images, and uncertainty. (Moving so-called "experts" to the background appeals, too.)

and communicate that quickly.

Not a loose brainstorming exercise, Future Search conferencing is a carefully designed methodology linking inputs, activities, and outputs to result in a vision built on (i) appreciation of an organization's history; (ii) acknowledgment of present-day strengths and weaknesses; and (iii) considered opinion about major opportunities in the future. Toward these, in four or five sessions each lasting half a day, participants keep to the following in small groups or plenary sessions:

> *We already have the statistics for the future: the growth percentages of pollution, overpopulation, desertification. The future is already in place.*
>
> —Günter Grass

- **Focus on the Past: Highlights and Milestones.** In the first half-day, preferably after a warm-up allowing participants to converse with one another, the Future Search gets underway with a look at the past. The eight groups contribute historical information and compose timelines of key events in the world, their personal lives, and the history of the Future Search topic. The groups tell stories about each timeline and what implications the stories have for the work they have come to do. No items are too silly or too small and no one dominates: forbearance on the beliefs and positions of others deepens comprehension and acceptance. This process creates a shared, global context for the Future Search.
- **Focus on the Present: External Trends.** Later, the entire assembly draws a mind map[9] and ranking of ongoing trends affecting the system the participants operate or exist in and identifies which are most important in relation to the topic. This process clarifies what is impacting the organization.

> *You don't need to predict the future. Just choose a future—a good future, a useful future—and make the kind of prediction that will alter human emotions and reactions in such a way that the future you predicted will be brought about. Better to make a good future than predict a bad one.*
>
> —Isaac Asimov

- **Focus on the Present: Responses to Trends.** In the morning of the second day, the groups describe what they are doing about the key trends identified and explain what they plan to do in the future. This process helps assess current actions.
- **Focus on the Present: Owning Actions.** Later, the groups report on what they are proud of and sorry about in the way they are dealing with the Future Search topic. This process surfaces strengths and weaknesses in the organization and affords psychological safety for admission of errors.
- **Focus on the Future: Ideal Scenarios.** In the afternoon of the second day, the groups project themselves into the future and describe their preferred vision[10] of the future as though it had already come about. This process generates a clear and powerful image of a healthy organization—and its values—through which the participants would like to advance their joint purpose, to be made real over a 5–20-year horizon.[11]
- **Discover Common Ground.** Later, the groups post themes they believe hold common—but not necessarily easy—ground for all participants. Disagreements are acknowledged without further discussion. This process enables participants to locate springboards for action, having elucidated what assumptions—e.g., the nature of society, the means of social change, and the attributes and roles of knowledge—underpin each.
- **Confirm Common Ground.** In the morning of the third day, the entire assembly dialogues to agree on common ground. This process helps participants conceptualize new behaviors for cooperative ventures.
- **Action Planning.** In the afternoon of the third day, champions throughout the organization sign up to
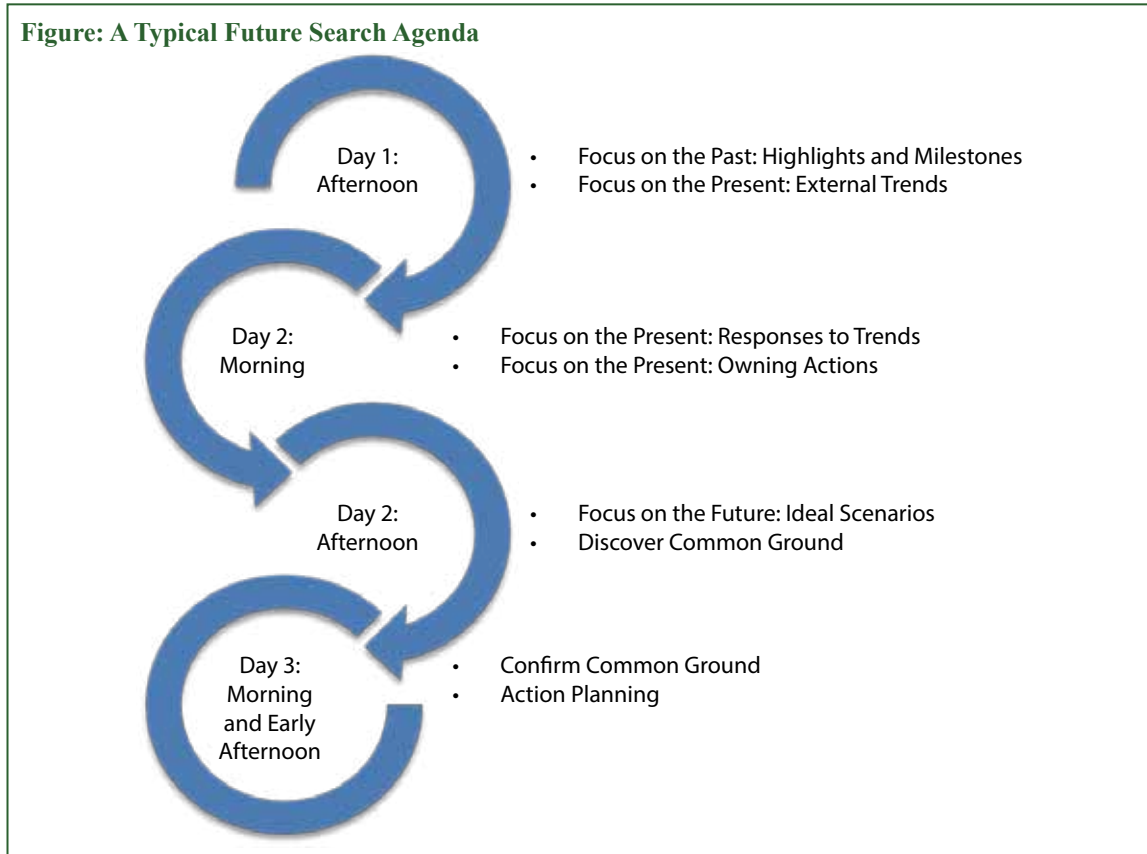
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[9] See ADB. 2009. *Drawing Mind Maps*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/publications/drawing-mind-maps

[10] An effective vision is (i) imaginable—it conveys a picture of what the future may look like; (ii) desirable—it appeals to the long-term interest of all who have a stake in the organization; (iii) feasible—it is realistic and attainable; (iv) focused—it is sharp enough to guide decision making; (v) flexible—it allows individual and collective initiative in light of changing conditions; and (vi) communicable—it can be successfully explained in 5 minutes.

[11] Not all topics call for the same time span. The maximum horizon should lie beyond the normal planning vista, but not stretch so far away as to seem irrelevant; one should still be able to make an impression with today's decisions. The factors that help define the perspective of a Future Search exercise are (i) the inertia or volatility of the system; (ii) the schedule of decisions to be made, the authority to make them, and the means to be used; and (iii) the degree of rigidity or motivation of participants.

implement action plans. Of course, authority, resources, and arrangements for action are confirmed by reality checks.[12] Participants walk out of the assembly room committed and ready to accomplish the envisioned future based on a more cogent framework that connects values and actions in new relationships and real time. This process formulates mutually supportive, practicable sets of rapid undertakings for individuals, groups, and the organization they are members of, close follow-up on which will determine whether change has occurred.

Figure: A Typical Future Search Agenda

Day 1:
Afternoon
- Focus on the Past: Highlights and Milestones
- Focus on the Present: External Trends

Day 2:
Morning
- Focus on the Present: Responses to Trends
- Focus on the Present: Owning Actions

Day 2:
Afternoon
- Focus on the Future: Ideal Scenarios
- Discover Common Ground

Day 3:
Morning
and Early
Afternoon
- Confirm Common Ground
- Action Planning

Source: Author.

To Infinity and Beyond

Summoning up what we are prone to forget, the very existence of organizations intuits they already have the resources they need to achieve their purpose. What they may be short of is access to key others and enough time—away from distractions—to discover or invent what else they are capable and willing to realize in multiparty cooperation. Future Search conferencing is predicated on meeting 10 conditions for successful, fast change: (i) senior management adopts a new model of leadership, (ii) the need for change is self-determined and the change process is self-managed, (iii) the change model is based on trust and cooperation, (iv) there is broad stakeholder involvement, (v) awareness of circumstances is comprehensive, (vi) the focus is on seeing and realizing future possibilities, (vii) the entire organization is involved in shaping the

> *Nothing is more terrible than activity without insight.*
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> —Thomas Carlyle

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[12] Questions that would frame the process include the following: (i) who else must we include in action planning? (ii) how will we organize our roles and functions to deliver our undertakings? (iii) how will we communicate the vision to others? (iv) what will we selectively abandon so as to realize the vision? (v) how will we continue to self-manage? and (vi) what are the criteria for monitoring and evaluating progress?

vision, (viii) systems thinking is employed, (ix) change is guided by and emerges from strategic conversations, and (x) planning and implementation are simultaneous.

> *It is always wise to look ahead, but difficult to look further than you can see.*
> —Winston Churchill

In today's ever more interdependent yet polarized societies, building shared understanding of and achieving multiparty action on complex issues is certainly not straightforward. But it is harder to achieve it using conventional, problem-centered interventions. Future search conferencing can catalyze the transition from bureaucratic to learning organizations. It is a human process that takes decisive steps toward informed; democratic, meaning, non-coercive; and reflective enterprise. Even if not many evaluations of Future Search conferences are at hand,[13] its growing popularity gives an idea about what is possible when the right people are in the room, take time to grasp the whole system, and become able to act in creative and innovative ways. What is more, people tend to commit to plans they—not higher-ups—develop.

Further Reading

ADB. 2008a. *Action Learning*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/publications/action-learning
———. 2008b. *Reading the Future*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/publications/reading-future
———. 2008c. *Appreciative Inquiry*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/publications/appreciative-inquiry
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For further information

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[13] To be meaningful, common ground statements should be sufficiently fleshed out; they should also prioritize claims to the same resources. To enhance ownership of and identification with common ground statements, more time than the typical Future Search methodology allows may also need to be given to clarifying differences.

Knowledge
Solutions

Knowledge Solutions are handy, quick reference guides to tools, methods, and approaches that propel development forward and enhance its effects. They are offered as resources to ADB staff. They may also appeal to the development community and people having interest in knowledge and learning.