

## **WHAT IS A FUTURE SEARCH?**

Future search is a unique planning meeting that is used worldwide by hundreds of communities and organizations. It meets two goals at the same time:

- helping large diverse groups discover principles, purposes, and projects they hold in common;
- enabling people to create a desired future together and to start working toward it right away

Future search is especially helpful in uncertain, turbulent situations. Participants need no training or expertise. Conferences 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.

A future search 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 2 ½ 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.

## **HOW FUTURE SEARCH WORKS**

The conference is designed according 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 who don't usually meet, thus enlarging everybody's potential for learning and action. The second involves putting the local 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 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 — 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 OF 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 if they will 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 ASSUMPTIONS LEAD TO ACTION

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 who would answer peoples' questions. The belief that someone else has the know-ledge we need is deep in us as 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. We believe that people make different choices when they are in dialogue than they would make working alone or only with familiar faces. And these choices lead to action when people take personal responsibility for bringing about the desirable changes they have identified during the future search.

Text above is adapted from a longer document by Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff, co-directors of **Future Search Network**, a world-wide network based on community service, collegueship and learning. They are co-authors of **FUTURE SEARCH: An Action Guide to Finding Common Ground in Organizations and Communities** (Berrett-Koehler, 2000).

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