

* An excerpt from *Listening! Engaging Dialogue to Build Collaborative Communities* by Paul Born. Soon to be released.

Future Search

About Future Search

Future Search is a planning meeting that helps people transform their capability for action very quickly. The meeting is task-focused.

This technique brings people from all walks of life into the same conversation – those with resources, expertise, formal authority and need. It invites people to tell stories about their past, present and desired future. In doing so, they discover their common meaning through dialogue, which allows them to make concrete action plans.



My Experience

One of the continuing highlights of my career as a facilitator is volunteering for a group of people who are trying to make their community one of the most accessible places in the world. This group is led by individuals who are blind, deaf, paraplegic, and who have cognitive challenges. Several of the leaders have multiple disabilities. The challenge for me, as a facilitator, revolves around effectively communicating with a group when its leaders cannot hear what I am saying, see what I'm writing, and so on. I admit, although this has been a challenge, I always have the most fun when facilitating this group.

I have learned so much from this group of people. The wisdom in their collective leadership is astounding. The main service they provide is to facilitate barrier-free audits of buildings. A team representing a variety of disabilities is created to assess a building by walking or wheeling around it to experience the location and then share their observations in a report. This report also provides practical solutions for overcoming barriers. Their collaboration and auditing abilities are exceptional.

I was asked to help this group develop a strategic plan and a path forward to make an even bigger impact in their community. We agreed on a Future Search process. We had a wonderful time over the two days we spent together. The highlight for me was building one of the best mind maps I have ever seen. I still keep it in my office as a reminder of this great experience.

The following is a memo we sent out to individuals who were invited to the Future Search process. The memo also does a great job of explaining this conversation technique:

MEMORANDUM

Re: Future Search for the Barrier Free Advisory Committee

The Barrier Free Advisory Committee (BFAC) has done a remarkable job in building awareness, and advising our municipalities and beyond concerning the importance of building communities that are accessible to all.

The approach has been simple and yet profound. No amount of academic training or third party learning could build such a team of experts and provide such a diverse team of individuals who experience barriers to accessibility in the community every day.

We are now asking ourselves: *What is the future of BFAC in our region and beyond, and how can we best engage BFAC and its stakeholders in determining this future course?*

We want to involve you in this process, and to find answers together. **We value collaboration, and invite you as a stakeholder and committed leader in our community to be a part of this future search.**

Our goal will be accomplished over two days using a process called future search and facilitated by Tamarack – An Institute for Community Engagement. During two days, we will: explore our achievements to date, determine what still needs to be accomplished, and decide who is best able to carry this work forward.

A key for this future search is to gather the “right” people in a room together, or in other words, to recreate the system we want to impact. To this end, we invite our friends and supporters, municipal staff and politicians, members of various Advisory Committees, local agencies, business people, and of course – our committee members, both past and present.

An agenda for the two days is scheduled as follows:

Our Future Search question:

What is the future for barrier free access in our community and beyond and how can we best engage BFAC and its stakeholders in reaching this future?

Day 1, morning (10:00 to 12:45)

Introductions

Focus on the Past: Personal, Global & Local Milestones: We will create time lines of key events in the world, our own lives, and in the history of the future of barrier free access. Small mixed groups will tell stories about different time lines. Together, we share stories and discuss the implications for the work we have come to do.

Focus on Present, External Trends: The whole group will make a "mind map" of trends immediately affecting them now and identify those trends most important for barrier free access. Stakeholder groups will describe how trends are affecting them, what they are doing about barrier free access in response to trends and what they still want to do.

Day 1, afternoon (1:15 – 3:30)

Focus on the Present, Current State of BFAC: Stakeholder groups will discuss what they are proud of and sorry about in the way they are dealing with barrier free access in our Region. Small groups share these "prouds and sorries" with the whole room.

Ideal Future Brainstorming: The whole group will create a broad picture of how they would like barrier free access issues to be dealt with in an ideal future, without constraints or obstacles.

Day 2, morning (10:00 to 12:30)

Ideal Future Scenarios for Barrier Free Access: Themes identified from the broad ideal future developed in Day 1 are presented. Diverse groups create detailed scenarios of their preferred future as if it has already been accomplished (noting barriers overcome and opportunities seized), focusing on the specific role played by BFAC in addressing barrier free access issues in our community.

Identify Common Ground for Barrier Free Access in the Future: Diverse Groups will post themes they believe are common ground for everyone. All together, the group determines their common future agenda and examples of ways to work towards it, while also acknowledging areas of unresolved differences.

Day 2, afternoon (1:00 – 3:30)

Recommendations for Change, The Future Role of BFAC: Main common ground themes will be presented to group. Individuals will choose themes of most interest and join that "voluntary group" to develop concrete recommendations for future action.

Action Planning: What actions will the group take in their future approach to barrier free access? Groups share their recommendations. The whole group agrees on plan. Volunteers sign up to implement action plans.

Tips for Using Future Search

There are some key principles used in Future Search that I have followed in all aspects of my work. It is this kind of wisdom that really sets Future Search apart.

- Get the whole system in the room. Invite a significant cross-section of all parties that have a stake in the outcome. I often include those with the authority to effect the change required.
- Explore the "whole elephant" before focusing on a single component. Get everyone talking about the same world. Think globally, act locally.
- Put common ground and a focus on the future at the centre of your conversation. Treat problems and conflicts as information, not action items.
- Encourage self-management and responsibility for action by participants before, during, and after the Future Search.
- Urge full attendance. Keep part-time participants to a minimum.
- Meet under healthy conditions. Convene in spacious rooms, and provide healthy snacks and meals, and adequate breaks.
- Work across three days (sleep twice). People need time to digest everything that happens. This is not always practical, but it is very good advice.
- Ask for voluntary public commitments to specific next steps before people leave.

More Tips from My Experience

- The question being asked is very important. Make sure that people have input into the question. Take the time to get it right and clear.
- Getting the "whole system" in the room means engaging everyone. Consider all of the sectors that need to be involved and active. See the Top 100 Exercise for more information about how to achieve this.
- Attend a Future Search conversation before you try to facilitate one. While this is not a hard technique to facilitate, understanding and achieving its rhythm is very important.
- This is a great process to use when building a community plan for your collaboration. In addition to building a plan, it also builds commitment.

Future Search is a remarkable method. This technique requires a lot of work but it is worth the effort because there is magic in both the process and the outcome. If the right people are in the room, the people with the power to act on the ideas generated can help to effect significant changes in your community almost effortlessly through their every day work.

Learn More

There is so much more to Future Search beyond what has been stated above. Here are some resources that will help you to learn more:

- [Future Search website](#)
- *Weisbord, Marvin, and Sandra Janoff. Future Search – An Action Guide to Finding Common Ground in Organizations and Communities. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2000.*
- Weisbord, Marvin et al. *Discovering Common Ground – How Future Search Conferences Bring People Together to Achieve Breakthrough Innovation, Empowerment, Shared Vision, and Collaborative Action.* San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1992.
- "Searching for Responses to Poverty." *Making Waves* Vol. 10, No. 3., pp. 5-8.

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