

Future Search | A Whole System Strategic Planning Model

Purpose

Engage a whole system in strategic, cooperative planning to design a collective vision, common ground, and action plans for a shared future around a topic of importance.

FUTURE SEARCH OVERVIEW

Future Search is a principle-based, 2 ½ day strategic planning meeting that creates the conditions for people to learn together and build community around a future they design together. This method is highly designed and structured, with the intention of bringing together the “whole system” in order to enable a space for change and find a shared way forward.

In a Future Search the “whole system” is represented by the diversity of stakeholders, demographics, and perspectives of those who *have to be in the room for something to change*: attendees pool their experiences to create a new shared reality. When the whole system comes together it is possible to understand the complexity of the system and learn how to impact the issue of focus on all levels, giving people responsibility they have the capacity for.

Planning the Future Search workshop is as important as the event itself, which is why such a high degree of care is taken in attending to every detail, every step of the way. The structure of both the planning meetings, and the event, is a building process intended to focus and empower the planning group (Steering Committee) and the Future Search event participants to gain knowledge of the whole system and find common ground to take action.

FOUR PRINCIPLES

The four principles of Future Search serve to guide the planning work and the facilitation style during the event:

1. The “whole system” is in the room.
2. The “whole elephant” serves as the global context for local action.
3. The focus is on the future and building common ground.
4. Participants are empowered toward self-management and taking responsibility for action.

METHODOLOGY

Future Search is a strategic planning design that allows a whole system to create common ground and build action plans around a topic of concern.

Future Search is designed to implement four principles not typical of traditional strategic planning:

1. The **WHOLE SYSTEM** participates--a cross-section of those with authority, resources, expertise, information and need. That means more diversity and less hierarchy than usual in a planning meeting, and a chance for each person to be heard and to learn other ways of looking at the task.
2. We put the focal issue in a **HISTORICAL AND GLOBAL** perspective. That means thinking globally before acting locally--learning about the "whole elephant" before acting on any part. This feature enables every person to talk about the same world—one that includes all perceptions.
3. **FOCUS ON THE FUTURE AND COMMON GROUND**. Common Ground is the frame of reference. We treat problems and conflicts as essential information, not action items. That means identifying shared values and joint action steps while honoring differences rather than reconciling them.
4. People **SELF-MANAGE** their work, and use **DIALOGUE**--not "problem solving" as the main tool. This means helping each other do the tasks and taking responsibility for our perceptions and actions.

Stakeholders have been specifically selected and invited based on their role within the purpose of the Future Search workshop, and the following guidelines - those who have the:

- Authority** to act on their own
- Resources** of time, money, access, or influence
- Expertise** in the topic - social, economic, technical, etc.
- Information** that others need
- Need** - they will be affected by the outcome

CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS

- All ideas valid
- All information written on flip charts
- Listen to each other--all points of view matter
- Strict time frames
- Seek common ground and action
- Differences/problems noted, explored, understood -- not "worked."
- Be creative

RESOURCES

- ✓ Future Search Network - <https://futuresearch.net/>
- ✓ Books and testimonial videos: <https://futuresearch.net/resources/booksandvideos/>