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Title: **A Tale of Two Future Searches:**
             A Methodology for Large Group
             Change Planning

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A Tale of Two Future Searches: A Methodology for Large Group Change Planning

"Large group interventions for organizational and community change are methods for involving the whole system, internal and external, in the change process. These methods may go by different names…but the key similarity is that (they) deliberately involve a critical mass of people affected by change, both inside and outside the organization."
— Barbara Bunker & Billie Alban, *Large group interventions* (1997)

Change management is a hot topic in today's fast-moving economy, and one of the most frequently asked questions is "How can we build genuine and inclusive support for change within our organization - and do it quickly?" The top-down cascade approach takes ages. The shotgun approach creates instant opposition. The bottom-up approach lacks focus. Participative approaches are supposed to work better, but focus groups are a logistical nightmare.

One answer to this dilemma of time versus wide participation is to use a large group whole systems change process, such as Future Search, Open Space, or Real Time Strategic Change (to name just a few). In all cases, the goal is to bring together a critical mass of people, representing all the key stakeholders. With the 'whole system in the room' many different viewpoints can be brought to bear on analyzing the change problem and generating ideas for action.

Bunker and Alban (1997) identify three main advantages of large group processes:
- Even if large group events take more time to plan, the result is faster and more efficient, because everyone has ownership of the change.
- Everyone has access to information from all levels and perspectives.
- The diversity of the whole system process creates synergy that can lead to a more innovative change.

In this article, I want to examine one of the whole systems processes, Future Search, and present two case studies of its application in two very different change management scenarios: a regional economic development story from Canada and the creation of a national suicide prevention policy in Ireland. In presenting these two real-life examples, I hope to show change managers how a large group intervention can help build the energy and support to move a change project forward. In addition, I want to highlight some of the advance planning issues, and ways in which the Future Search model can be 'tweaked.'

What is Future Search?

Future Search is a methodology developed by Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff (1999) to help large groups find common ground for action. *"A future search is a large group planning meeting that brings a 'whole system' into the room to work on a task-focused agenda. The meeting is based on a simple notion: if we want dramatic new action plans, we need to use structures and processes congruent with our aspirations."* (Weisbord, 1999)

The Future Search process is based on the following criteria:
- 16 hours spread over three days (participants have two nights' sleep during the event)
- "Whole system" in the room (i.e. representatives from all relevant stakeholders, both internal and external)
- Global context for the discussion, but leading to local action
- Emphasis on common ground and future focus, *not* problems or conflicts
- Self-managed small groups
- Public responsibility for follow-up is taken before people leave the conference
- Full attendance throughout the conference
- Healthy meeting conditions (airy meeting rooms, healthy food, etc.)

A Future Search conference works best with about 60 to 80 participants (or hundreds meeting in parallel rooms) who work together in small groups through five structured discussion tasks over three days:

- *Review the past*

    People make time lines of key events in the world, in their own lives, and in the history of their future search topic, then discuss the implications of this history for the work they want to do.

- *Explore the present*

    Group creates a mind map of external trends affecting their topic, and discusses what they are doing now/hope to do in the future about key trends, and what they are proud of/sorry about in the way they are dealing with the future search topic.

- *Create ideal future scenarios*

    Describe preferred future as if it had already happened.

- *Identify common ground*

    Identify themes in the ideal future scenarios that seem to be common ground for everyone.

- *Make action plans*

    Volunteers sign up to implement the plans after the conference is over.

Some of the tasks are done in mixed groups representing a cross-section of the whole, and some are done in stakeholder groups whose members share the same perspective. All groups manage their own discussions, flip charting, and presentations.

The conference itself is, of course, the end result of careful advance planning by a steering group, whose membership should include a cross-section of major stakeholders. The steering group decides the theme of the conference, the invitation list, and the follow-up strategy for communicating the action plans.

What makes Future Search different?

Participants in a Future Search are expected to work as colleagues (i.e. non-hierarchically), and to listen to and respect diverse points of view. The conference groundrules state that "All ideas are valid" and that "Everything gets written on the flipchart." The purpose of the conference is to seek the values and ideas that people have in common, rather than try to identify and resolve differences. Problems or conflict issues are acknowledged, but simply treated as information.

Participants are expected to take responsibility for themselves, and the action plans they propose. Within the framework of each task, the groups have total freedom. Facilitators manage the overall process, but otherwise remain on the sidelines.

Future Search conferences unleash energy. By working in this way, and being exposed to different perspectives and points of view, people can create change projects that would have been impossible to plan alone. As Marvin Weisbord (1995) writes:
"There are many advantages to having a diverse group plan and act together on a common future. Not the least is a shared picture of reality that no participants had when they came through the door. Freed from problem-solving and conflict managing, people discover a new freedom to make things happen."

Future Search in action: two case studies

While the Future Search process is a particularly powerful tool within the voluntary/community/NGO sectors, where citizen involvement is sought, it is equally useful within both government and business sectors. This article presents two such examples: A Canadian Future Search to develop a regional economic development strategy and action plan, and an Irish Future Search to develop a national suicide prevention policy and action plan.

The article compares the two examples from both sponsor and facilitator perspectives, and summarizes the benefits of the process, and also lessons learned.

Case Study 1: Kitimat District Council: "How can we maintain and create jobs in the Kitimat Valley between now and 2011?"

The first case study describes a Future Search carried out in Kitimat, British Columbia in 2005. Kitimat is western Canada's largest private port, located on the British Columbia coast 400 miles north of Vancouver. Although the town was originally designed to service a new Alcan smelter in the 1950s, the municipal government is working to widen the economic and international trade base to realize the natural comparative advantages of a tidewater valley and the proximity to Asian markets.

Kitimat District Council held its first Future Search conference in 1996, after hearing about the process from Alcan. The conference was a major success in that, a decade later, nearly all of the ideas for community and economic development that were proposed in 1996 had been carried out or at least initiated.

Client perspective

Who was the sponsor?
Municipal government and Council of the District of Kitimat, British Columbia

Purpose of the conference
To involve local communities and regional stakeholders in a process to identify common 'visions' for the future, i.e. "activities that seem to make sense for long-term development with outcomes that could benefit many citizens living in the Kitmat Valley." The ideas from the conference were to form the prelude to the official Kitimat Community Plan and economic vision, and help the District of Kitimat attract inward investment for ideas shown to have cross-community support.

Why we chose Future Search
Alcan had used Future Search within a labour relations context, and recommended the process to the District officials in 1996 when they were seeking a broad-based consultative process to generate job creation ideas. The Future Search process was attractive because it provided "both a blueprint for harmonious relations, and [also] 'visions' of things that make sense with broad economic, social and environmental benefits." The 'common ground' focus of Future Search was particularly important, given the wide diversity of stakeholders to be included.

The 1996 Future Search brought together a large group of stakeholders, known for their commitment to positive growth and development of the Kitimat region. The conference theme

was "How do we maintain and create jobs in the Kitimat Valley between now and 2005?" and the result was a long list of practical ideas in the areas of education, community wellness, infrastructure/transportation, labour relations, business and industry. In addition, the 1996 conference participants identified five common principles to guide economic development decisions:

- There will be a regional focus and approach to economic development
- All development in the Kitmat Valley will occur in an environmentally sensitive manner
- We will strive to have positive working relationships with First Nations
- We will strive for commitment to lifelong learning and access to education for residents of the Kitimat Valley
- Kitimat Valley will be known for positive labour-management relations.

The success of the 1996 conference led the District of Kitimat to plan a further Future Search in 2005 to take the economic vision forward to 2011.

How we planned it

Planning for the 2005 conference was initiated by the Mayor and Municipal Council, and carried out by staff within the Kitimat municipal government, spearheaded by the Manager of Economic Development. The conference facilitators were selected after the main conference planning had taken place. The lead facilitator was an experienced Future Search practitioner, and the co-facilitator was skilled in dealing with First Nations issues.

Who were the stakeholder groups?

The participants were drawn from local communities throughout the Kitimat Valley, including Kitimat (pop. 10,000), Kitamaat First Nation Historical community (pop 800), Lakelse, and Terrace (pop 12,000) Six stakeholder groups were invited to participate:
- Business (local business owners)
- Industry/Infrastructure (major employers such as Alcan, port industries)

- Education (schools, students, and education projects)
- Labour/Employment (trade unions, employment agencies)
- Community Wellness (health agencies, seniors club, youth centre)
- Neighbours (representatives from business, government, and other residents throughout the Kitimat Valley, including Haisla Kitamaat Village)

Conference outcomes

Visions that make sense for the Kitimat Valley

The 'future visions' drawn up by the group contained a wealth of possibilities, both short and long term. The final common ground list highlighted several clusters of potential ideas in a variety of stakeholder areas:

- Community health and wellness
- Education
- Labour and employment
- Arts and culture
- Business
- Industrial and port development

'Working together' as the overarching principle

As in 1996, the 2005 participants highlighted common values that should underpin all development decisions. There was near-unanimous agreement to the benefits of working together with mutual respect, honesty and open communication, thus building an integrated approach and strong relationships at every level (recognizing that 'we're all in the same boat'). Respect for one another, above all else, was highlighted as being essential.

How we communicated the outcomes within our organizations

The results of the 2005 conference and an update on the progress from the 1996 conference were immediately posted on the District of Kitimat website. (www.city.kitimat.bc.ca) Volunteers from among the conference participants helped make presentations to groups, clubs, organizations, agencies, businesses, and schools, to encourage them to build on the conference thinking and to integrate appropriate 'vision' ideas in their own strategies and action plans. Kitimat District Council offered to help this strategic planning process, and to find partners to support particular ideas. A brochure from the

conference was included in the Kitimat information package given to prospective investors, so they can see how these ideas might fit with their business proposals. Finally, Kitimat District Council will post progress reports on its website of all the 'vision' ideas from the 2005 conference.

What happened as a result

By 2005, nearly all the ideas from the 1996 conference had been implemented or initiated. The process of 'selling' the ideas from the 2005 conference has begun.

Facilitator perspective

Role in the planning process

Both facilitators were selected after the major conference planning had taken place, and invitations sent to stakeholders. Thus, the facilitators' planning role was limited to preparing the timetable for the conference itself, and designing the workbook. Ideally, the facilitators should be an integral part of the steering group, not only to learn the organization background, but also to guide the thinking about the conference principles and ensure a wide stakeholder representation. However, in this case, because the District of Kitimat had run a successful Future Search before, the steering group knew what to do. And because of Kitimat's remote location, advance meetings would have been very difficult in any case, so the facilitators relied on conference calls and emails.

The conference itself: What worked well?

The 'right people in the room'
The most important condition for a successful Future Search is that participants are positively committed to the future quest being sought. The District of Kitimat Council was able to assemble an excellent group drawn from throughout the region and representative of a wide spectrum of stakeholder groups.

High energy and commitment to positive outcome
Participants were asked to attend for the entire conference, which meant giving up their weekend.

Nonetheless, they stayed connected and engaged for the entire time, and worked tirelessly to complete the group work.

First Nations voice
The Haisla delegates made an invaluable positive contribution, both by raising awareness and also by providing a holistic framework for many of the discussions.

What didn't work well?

Energy management
One of the most important aspects of a Future Search is energy management. For participants to stay focused throughout the entire event requires considerable stamina. In this case, because Day One was very short (6:30- 9:00 p.m.), Day Two was very long and included an after-dinner session, when people were simply too tired.

What we learned

'Common ground' includes common principles and values
In both the 1996 and 2005 Future Searches, the participants started by articulating shared values before moving on to discussing practical action plan ideas. These lists became the criteria for assessing potential job creation/business ideas.

Don't just do something, stand there!
It can seem uncomfortable to stay on the sidelines throughout the conference, and the facilitators often felt as though they were doing nothing. However, any time they gave in to the need to intervene, it weakened the groups' self management process, and focused the attention on the facilitator instead. The facilitators discovered that their real value was simply 'being there,' setting up the tasks, and chairing the take-back discussions that followed. Future Search requires a very 'hands-off' style of facilitation which doesn't come easily to those from the education side of organization development.

Case Study 2: Ireland: the Health Boards Executive: "National strategy for action on suicide prevention"

Irish suicide rates, particularly among young people, are among the highest in Europe. In response to this, the Irish Health Boards Executive, (the body which managed the Irish health services), together with the National Suicide Review Group and the government Department of Health and Children launched a consultation process in order to develop a national strategy for suicide prevention. Because it was felt that no single approach would adequately address the problem, the Health Boards Executive sought to build a co-ordinated strategy, by involving statutory, voluntary and community groups and individuals, supported by Government.

A series of five regional consultation sessions were held, involving a wide range of people involved in suicide prevention at the grassroots. Interestingly, these one-day sessions used another large-group intervention model, Open Space, in which participants create their own agenda by identifying the topics they wish to discuss within an overall broad theme. (Harrison Owen, 1997)

After the ideas had been gathered from the regional consultation process, the National Suicide Review Group drew up a preliminary draft strategy. The final stage was to bring together representatives of national-level stakeholders, to include practitioners, community groups, and high-level decision makers who could influence policy and drive the final change strategy.

Client perspective

Who was the sponsor?	The Health Boards Executive; The Department of Health and Children; the National Suicide Review Group
Purpose of the conference	Following on the regional consultation process, the steering group wanted to hold an event that would include senior-level decision makers in the health system, plus representatives of national stakeholder groups. The purpose of this event was to give relevant stakeholder groups an opportunity to contribute to the ongoing development of the national strategy by building on the information gathered during the regional consultation meetings; and to create shared ownership of that strategy at the highest level.
Why we chose Future Search	Although the Open Space methodology had been used for the regional consultation process, it was felt that Future Search would be a better model to use for the higher-level participants,

in that it provides more structure and takes place over a longer time period. One of the members of the conference planning group had experience of Future Search elsewhere within the health system, and proposed that it be used for this event. As a result, two external facilitators with Future Search expertise were added to the planning group.

How we planned it

The planning group consisted of representatives from the three sponsor organizations plus the conference facilitators. The purpose of this group was to plan the overall conference and to select participants on the basis of their knowledge of and interest in the issues, along with their potential to influence the implementation of the strategy.

Although this sounds straightforward, the planning process became a miniature Future Search itself in its search for common ground agreement amongst many strongly held viewpoints. Some of the issues that had to be resolved included:

Is Future Search the right model?
The facilitators argued that if the draft strategy had already been written after the regional consultation process, why not simply gather a small group of senior people to 'grind it down into a policy document.' But the sponsors wanted more than this, and Future Search seemed a better model to attract the right mix of participants and to create a forum for broad policy-level discussion and input.

How much of the output from the OpenSpace sessions should be given to the Future Search participants?
At first the planning group wanted to circulate all the discussion notes from the regional consultation meetings, plus the preliminary draft strategy, but there was a concern that this would unnecessarily constrain the Future Search participants. In the end, a distilled version of the output from the regional meetings was circulated, but Future Search participants were free to think beyond this document.

Who should we invite?
The agreement on the stakeholder invitation list took a lot of time, but eventually came down to nine groups, and some of the

individuals on the list would also have been involved in the regional consultation process. In retrospect, the planning group felt that they should have made more effort to ensure that young people attended, especially given the need for a strategy on youth suicide prevention. Although there were a few young people at the conference representing youth advocacy organizations, the Union of Students in Ireland were unable to send any delegates.

Who were the stakeholder groups?

- Health and social policy (e.g. Dept of Health & Children, CEOs of regional health boards, National Suicide Review Group)

- Health promotion across the lifespan (e.g. Suicide awareness groups, Suicide prevention and health promotion officers)

- Alcohol and suicidal behaviour (e.g. Irish National Alliance for Action on Alcohol, Irish Association of Alcohol and Addiction)

- Representative bodies (e.g. Irish College of Psychiatrists, Psychiatric Nurses' Association, Irish Association of Social Workers)

- Education sector (e.g. Department of Education and Science, teachers' unions, National Educational Psychology Service)

- Justice sector (e.g. police, prison officers)

- Voluntary and interest groups (e.g. support groups for travellers, refugees, mental health)

- Research and information (e.g. government, universities, Central Statistics Office, journalists)

Conference outcomes

Ten "common ground" issues were identified. Participants then chose the issue they felt most committed to, and these groups developed draft action plans which were written up and

submitted to the planning group after the conference. The issues chosen were:

- Service provision and access
- Alcohol strategy
- Suicide and severe mental illness
- Education sector
- Feedback from high risk groups
- Community issues

How we communicated the outcomes within our organizations

A working group had already been set up prior to the Future Search conference in order to turn the output into a final report. This report was the main communication vehicle for all the contributing organizations.

What happened as a result

The report, *Reach Out: A national action strategy for suicide prevention,* was launched in 2005, very soon after the Future Search event. (www.doh.ie)

A National Office of Suicide Prevention was established to plan and co-ordinate the implementation of the *Reach Out* action plans.

Subsequent to the publication of the strategy, the President of Ireland, Mary McAleese, sponsored a forum to bring together all those involved in suicide prevention (many of whom had also attended the Future Search). This is now to become an annual national event, which will help to implement the action strategy, and keep the cross-community group of stakeholders connected.

Facilitator perspective

Role in the planning process

Both facilitators were experienced Future Search practitioners, and were involved with the conference planning group right from outset. Their first task was to help the group clarify the purpose of the conference, and whether Future Search was the right model to use.

The facilitators also argued for a more diverse stakeholder list (for example, to include trade unions that would be affected by the roll-out of the suicide prevention action plan).

They were unsuccessful in arguing for the full three

day conference format (rejected because of cost implications).

The conference itself: What worked well?

High energy, passion and commitment
Although the participants included very senior experts with strong opinions, they were willing to listen to other ideas, and worked hard to seek common ground.

Egalitarian way of working
Because the Future Search model is based on the principle that 'all ideas are valid,' it creates a discussion forum in which people are not required to represent their titles.

The right people in the room
The delegates were all people who could make a difference to the development and implementation of a suicide prevention strategy. Despite the two-day time commitment, all the delegates, including some very senior people, stayed connected to the process for the entire time. The conference was held in a country hotel, far from the city, so there were also social and informal opportunities for dialogue.

Practical focus throughout
Although they were aiming to contribute to a policy-level strategy, the discussion groups considered implementation aspects at every stage. This was extremely helpful for the working group whose task it was to craft the final draft strategy document after the conference. Many members of the working group attended the Future Search, so were participants in the discussions and the resulting action plans.

What didn't work well?

Energy management: The implications of reducing the length to two days
The recommended Future Search schedule spreads the discussion tasks over three days: Day 1 (afternoon); Day 2 (all day); Day 3 (morning). The schedule allows participants two nights' rest in the midst of what is a

very concentrated and demanding mental process. And it means that the final action planning task that pulls the whole conference together happens on the morning of Day 3, when everybody is fresh. By compressing the conference to two days, the action planning piece falls at the end of a very long Day 2, when participants are often too tired to do their best work.

Facilitators at the Suicide Prevention Future Search found that they had to push a lot of energy into the group at the end of Day 2 to get the final result. Given that the action planning task was the most important outcome from the sponsors' point of view, the stakes were high.

What we learned

Wider stakeholder diversity for planning and participation
To get the best result, a Future Search needs to include input from a vertical slice of stakeholders, not just the senior level.
Because of the way the regional consultation process had been carried out, the planning group wanted the Future Search to include significant input from senior level. Perhaps because of this, they overlooked participation from students/young people until very late in the preparation.

Fight for the three day format!
The benefits in terms of quality of mental output need to be stressed. Facilitators need to be willing to make a stronger case for this.

The importance of a fast follow-up
Mechanisms were set up in advance to take the output from the Future Search conference to the next step. A working group wrote up the final strategy document immediately after the conference was over, and the document was officially launched within a few months.

Comparing the two case studies: 'tweaking' the Future Search design

At the 2005 Future Search Facilitators Learning Exchange, one of the discussion topics was "When is a Future Search not a Future Search?" given that every conference is unique, and facilitators must be able to adapt the design appropriately. The Future Search model developed by Weisbord and Janoff is not rigid, and facilitators are free to make minor modifications to suit the needs of the sponsors, so long as they maintain the four core principles:

- Get the 'whole system' in the room
- Global exploration before local action
- Put common ground and future focus front and centre
- Encourage self-management and responsibility for action by participants

The Learning Exchange group[i] came up with an image of the 'DNA of Future Search' to express this notion of inner and outer boundaries of the process within which the facilitator can 'tweak' the design.

THE DNA OF FUTURE SEARCH
Can Tweaking Within the Current Boundaries
Lead to Positive Change for the Discipline?
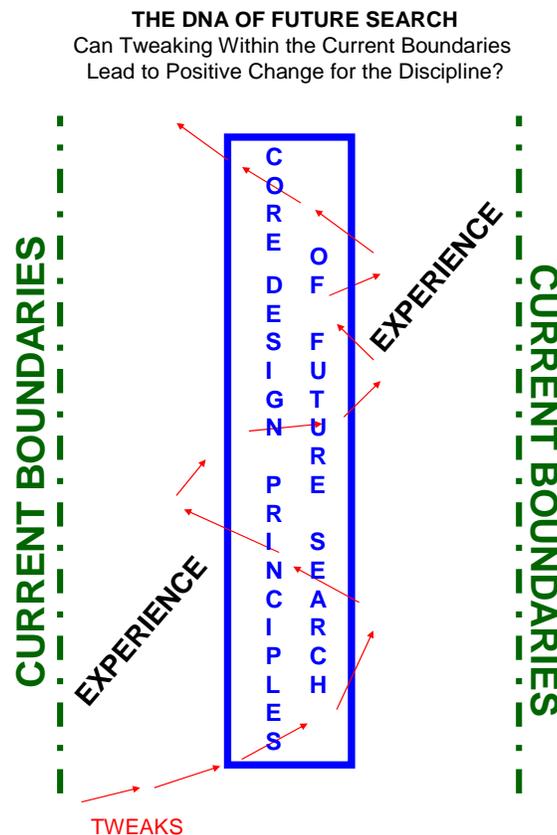
Looking back at the two case studies, we can see that similar 'tweaks' were done in both the Kitimat and Suicide Prevention Future Searches:

- ***Two-day instead of three-day format***
  Nearly all clients want this. But while a two day format is less expensive in terms of time and accommodation, it means less mental energy available for the common ground action plans, which are the most important end product of the Future Search.

- ***In-house conference planning group versus stakeholder cross-section***
  In both cases, the conference planning was done mainly by the sponsors, and with limited input from the facilitators in the Kitimat case. While this is more efficient in terms of time, logistics, and overall strategic focus, it risks the "whole systems" aspect that is a core principle of Future Search, and can mean that the planning group overlooks some important stakeholder voices (as was the case with the Suicide Prevention conference). Kitimat used a 'whole systems' planning process for its first Future Search in 1996, and spent six months. In 2005, with very tight deadlines (1.5 months) they used a more streamlined in-house approach relying on their previous experience.

- ***Building on previous work versus the 'blank page'***
  In both cases, the Future Search built on a previous consultation process. In the Kitimat case, it had been ten years since the previous Future Search, but the results of that search were known to the participants, who were asked to revisit the same topic a decade later. In the Suicide Prevention case, the Future Search followed a series of five Open Space regional consultation meetings with grassroots stakeholders, and the results of those meetings had already been turned into a preliminary draft strategy before the Future Search took place.

  In both cases, this prior work could have been a serious constraint to the quality of discussion at the Future Search, but the fact that this did not happen is interesting. The (logical) temptation in both cases would have been to use the prior data as an opening PowerPoint presentation to the Future Search, in order to help jump-start the thinking. But this would have prejudged the outcome, and sent the message that "we want you to start here," whereas the unique synergy that Future Search creates can only happen if the 'whole system' starts wherever they need to, and lets the diversity of their viewpoints create something entirely new.

  So, although both the Kitmat and Suicide Prevention Future Searches incorporated previous thinking in their conferences, they did so in a way that didn't prevent group synergy. Kitimat sent out the progress report on the ideas

that came out of the 1996 conference, but simply left it at that. The Suicide Prevention planning group discussed at length how much information from the regional consultation process should be given to the Future Search participants, and ended up by circulating a very distilled version. Again, it was treated as background, but wasn't forced onto the Future Search process as an agenda item.

Finally, the two cases share some interesting 'before' and 'after' issues:

- *Before: 'Word of mouth' advertising*
  Future Search can be difficult to describe to clients who have never experienced it, and are worried about the cost and logistics of bringing large groups together. In both the Kitimat and Suicide Prevention cases, Future Search was chosen because somebody on the planning group had heard of it. Personal success stories are powerful marketing tools, and the Future Search website (www.futuresearch.net) lists organizations that have sponsored Future Searches, and provides brief case studies.

- *After: Communicating the outcome quickly*
  The steering groups in both cases had planned how to leverage the energy of the Future Search by rapid follow-up activities. The District of Kitimat posted the list of 'ideas that make sense' on its website within days of the conference, and set up a panel of volunteers to present the ideas to local business and community groups. In the case of the Suicide Prevention conference, the working group who were to write the final strategy document were waiting to be handed the discussion notes the moment the conference ended. In both cases, the follow-up mechanisms capitalized on personal networking to "seed" the ideas, and create linkages.

Future Search versus Open Space

The Suicide Prevention case is interesting, in that the planning group used two different large group intervention techniques. The day-long regional consultation meetings involved groups of 100 or more, using the Open Space format This very open-ended approach allows participants to create their own agenda on the day, by nominating a list of discussion topics, and being free to attend the topics that appeal to them.[ii] Open Space works well with large numbers of participants, and an overall conference topic that everybody feels passionate about. Although it sounds a bit like organised anarchy (which it is!), it works very well, and produces a huge amount of rich opinion data in a short time. (www.openspaceworld.org)

Future Search, by comparison, is longer and more structured, and better suited for building 'hearts and minds' commitment to the conference outcomes. Future Search participants take responsibility for creating an action plan, and, more important, for driving its implementation after the conference is over.

Both methodologies rely on self-management, and having the 'whole system in the room,' but there is more opportunity for true dialogue within Future Search because small discussion groups remain together for much of the time. In Open Space events, participants drop in and out of the discussions, thus creating more cross-pollinization of ideas than may happen in Future Search. Both methodologies create huge energy, and creative thinking, but summarizing the Open Space discussions afterwards can be a challenge, whereas Future Search does this within the frame of the conference itself.

For both techniques, advance planning is critical, and the conference itself is simply the last link in a long chain of activity. But Future Search requires more focused planning, especially to make sure that the 'right' stakeholders are invited and allocated to small groups in the 'right' combinations. In Open Space, the participants allocate themselves to a series of discussion groups based on shared interest in a particular topic. As the project manager of the Suicide Prevention planning group told me, preparing for the Open Space events was like planning a free-for-all 21st birthday party, but for the Future Search, it was like planning a wedding.

The unexpected by-products of large-group interventions

Even though every Future Search is the end result of a long and careful process of advance planning, the outcomes can never be entirely predicted, and always have an element of surprise. Partly this is the result of the dynamic of bringing diverse groups of people together. As Bunker and Alban (1997) point out, *"A final advantage is that the diversity that comprises the whole system often creates a synergy that leads to … a more creative solution than the small group can possibly produce."*

This creative chemistry goes deeper than the action plans themselves. In the Kitimat Future Searches of 1996 and again in 2005, the participants not only articulated common ground *projects*, but also (and more significantly) common ground *principles* and *values* that they shared, and which they felt should underpin the economic action plans.

In so doing, the participants also created working relationships that might never have existed before. Although many of the participants in the Suicide Prevention Future Search were very high-profile in their fields of expertise, they nonetheless worked as colleagues with the other conference participants, and in doing so, created multi-disciplinary partnerships that will outlive the conference.

The last word goes to Marvin Weisbord:

"Future search conferences enable organizations and communities to learn more about themselves from every angle. Bringing the 'whole system' into the room makes feasible a shared encounter with aspects of reality we normally avoid – chaos, complexity, uncertainty. The key word is 'shared'. When we explore common ground with others, we release creative energy leading to projects none of us can do alone. People simultaneously discover mutual values, innovative ideas, commitment and support. Rarely in daily life do people encounter these key conditions for action all at once." (1999)

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Acknowlegements:

Endnotes:

[i] DNA of Futures Search model developed by John McAdam, Orrin Judd, Barbara Dickinson, Lucinda Bray, and Blazena Huskova at the Future Search Learning Exchange (Derry, Northern Ireland, 2005)

[ii] Reflecting on the fact that the most valuable parts of any conference are often the coffee breaks, Harrison Owen designed Open Space as a way of creating a conference that is "all coffee breaks".

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