

Improving Whole Systems Worldwide

How Future Search Went Global



M a r v i n W e i s b o r d

Future search has been used equally well in corporations and communities on five continents. In nearly 40 years as a manager, consultant and non-profit executive, I have not found a more cost-effective or time-efficient planning method. Nor one more responsive to values of dignity, meaning, and community. I want to describe its dissemination and speculate on how and why so many diverse cultures have taken it up.

When we met in 1987, Sandra Janoff, co-director of Future Search Network, had spent a decade teaching in an experimental school where city and suburban children formed a self-managed learning community. Her experiences paralleled mine in business firms. We had both come separately to the conclusion that structure was a shaper of behavior that people could actually control. Together we now began to fine tune future search principles and practices. In particular, we sought to understand and apply structures that best enabled the dynamic journey people went on as they explored their systems and themselves.

I had been experimenting since the early 1970s with meeting designs aimed at involving the whole person and not just the “left brain.” This meant offering ways for everyone to participate regardless of learning styles. Now Sandra and I began an elaboration of this idea. We set up tasks that would require people to move around, on the theory that if you want to move you ought to start by moving. We gave everyone access to the walls and the magic markers to write or draw pictures from the very start. This showed that every person’s experience counted and that the walls, charts, and markers belonged to all.

Adopting an insight from the late Ronald Lippitt, an inventor/discoverer of group dynamics, we had people act from the future, describing their desired experiences as if they had already happened. This, we believed, engaged people physically and emotionally, making action more probable as they got the feeling of success in their very bones. Sandra also integrated into the facilitating work insights from her training in system-centered group dynamics. In particular she showed that so long as each person had at least one other who shared their thoughts and/or feelings, a group would stay whole and “on task.”

We refined these ideas with many organizations. One early effort was with Resources for Human Development, a nonprofit umbrella agency with 100+ human service programs, that is now Future Search Network’s home. RHD was managing 25%-a-year growth in diverse and

unrelated programs in housing, employment, mental health, child care, the arts, drug and alcohol abuse, etc. supported largely by (uncertain) government contracts. RHD sought to implement values of inclusion, diversity, dignity, responsibility, accountability and cooperation while operating on 15 percent overhead or less. Many programs benefited, and five years later we ran a second conference to decentralize what was becoming a mini-bureaucracy with 3000 employees.

A notable business example was a future search with a Quaker Oats pet food plant in Topeka, Kansas in 1991, the 20th anniversary of the longest-running employee-designed team-based factory in the United States. It had won wide notoriety for "the Topeka system," a high productivity process driven from the bottom by the people who did the work. The future search was intended to set a direction for the Topeka system over the next 20 years. Built by General Foods and sold to Quaker Oats, Topeka's subtext was the survival of its system in a corporation that neither invented nor understood it and was imposing policies that speeded its erosion.

"I had been experimenting since the early 1970s with meeting designs aimed at involving the whole person and not just the "left brain."

The meeting ended with a resolve to restore autonomy and responsibility at all levels. The high point for me came when a senior Quaker Oats executive said in a voice quivering with conviction, "What I realize today is that when we acquired your company, we tried to 'Quakerize' you." A bolt of electricity shot through the room. "For that I apologize," he went on. "We did not appreciate what you were doing here." He then publicly charged his staff to collaborate with the plant in modifying corporate practices to support the local system.

Training Practitioners

Sandra Janoff and I did our first training workshop in 1991 at Cape Cod Institute as an experiment to see if we could teach future search principles and methods to others. We have continually refined the training. The summer 2004 workshop at Shambhala Institute will be our 53rd such seminar. With our Future Search Network colleagues we have trained more than 3000 people in North America, Europe, Asia, Africa and Australia.

There exists in such training a paradox. The success of a future search hinges on interdependent stakeholders. The dynamic tension comes as people find common ground across lines of class, culture, and status, leading to action plans none dreamed possible. We can describe this, show it on videotapes, even role-play it in simulation. What we can't do is provide the real thing. Workshop participants' only common concern is learning future search. Diverse and motivated they may be, but they cannot recreate fully the interactive dynamics.

So it was with skepticism we approached Cape Cod. To make things worse, we selected the future of organization development as a simulation topic, thinking this would provide a common denominator. That turned out to be a little like choosing the future of metaphysical speculation, since OD encompassed a wide range of diverse practices, individual, group, and system-wide. More, OD consultants, like many professionals, usually work solo or with a partner. Even were Cape Cod not a simulation, an actual future search to help solo professionals do collaborative action planning is largely a dead end.

Future search is geared toward tangible actions with a visible impact, requiring groups that perceive their interdependence. Despite this paradox, many Cape Cod participants learned enough to run successful future searches. Most also got a pleasant surprise. Faced with people who *needed* to cooperate, they had a better experience than during the training. We hope this happens for some Shambhala Institute participants too.

Launching Future Search Network

In 1991, working with the Philadelphia Region OD Network, we also ran an action research project to see whether consultant teams could run successful future searches after three days of training. That project resulted in a dozen future searches for organizations as diverse as an inner-city career agency, a statewide reading program, and a hospital for emotionally disturbed children. As clients reported planning breakthroughs, people in other cities requested training.

Thus began Future Search Network, founded in 1993, a non-profit coalition of practitioners who began doing future searches across the United States and Canada as a public service. By 2003 the Network had hundreds of members in 25 countries on five continents who offered to put on future searches for public benefit in any culture and any language, for whatever people could afford.

We also decided that this method, a product of so many hands and brains, ought to be freely available, unencumbered by certification and market concerns. As the Network grew, its members experimented with time frames, overall length, group size, task sequence, instructions, how to display data on walls, how to involve everybody in large groups, and with the degree to which people could and should do work formerly done for them by staff. Learning was shared by all. The method became simpler, instructions fewer, groups ever more diverse and participants' involvement deeper and more passionate as we left more of the work up to them.

Ripples in the Stream of Social Change

I cannot leave my brief review without commenting on two phenomena related to the rapid spread of this work. First was the discovery that so many diverse people could participate in future searches without needing to be trained in new skills. Second, the method bridged cultural boundaries none of us had set out to cross. In the '70s I had learned how problematic it was to adapt business-based methods to colleges, universities and medical schools, not to mention cultures not my own. Future Search Network members had involved participants from an encyclopedic list of the world's cultures in taking charge of their futures.

People were using future search to validate their own traditions. Unity Church clergy, for example, adapted future search to congregational renewal, saying that the underlying principles embodied the core tenets of their faith. Many Episcopal and Methodist clergy came to the same conclusion. The Jewish Reconstructionist Federation undertook a future search, saying it represented "Reconstructionism in action." A director of the U.S. Army leadership center incorporated future search into officer training because the balance between structure and open-ended possibility seemed peculiarly suited to military officers. In Hawaii the planning committee for Ko'olau Loa, a community on the North Shore of Oahu, concluded that future search enabled a return to traditional Hawaiian values of the oneness of mind, body and spirit. In Singapore, participants of Chinese descent said they experienced in future search a recreation of traditional community values of mutual support and cooperation. It was as if people used future search as a giant projection screen to evoke core aspects of their own traditions.

Why Was This Happening?

Years ago, before future search went global, my friend Bapu Deolalikar, an international development consultant, had pointed out that future search was "largely culture free" and could be transported to India and other countries in Asia and Africa. At the time I recall mumbling my

"Future searches were tapping into something lodged deep in the human psyche. There was a part of us yearning to transcend the tyranny of technology, the pressure for growth and achievement at any cost, and the relentless compression of time"

skepticism that such a thing could be possible. By the mid-90's, however, it became clear that Bapu was right. Future searches were tapping into something lodged deep in the human psyche. There was a part of us yearning to transcend the tyranny of technology, the pressure for growth and achievement at any cost, and the relentless compression of time. A big part of us wanted to recapture a time when people everywhere lived by the rhythms of nature.

Future search, to be so widely embraced, had to be tapping into universal needs. That realization pointed me towards its mythic aspects. Looked at one way future search was just another planning meeting. From another angle it could be seen as a secular rite of passage, enabling people to make a perilous journey from one place to another, to do things this week that were unthinkable a week earlier. Its rituals were the time lines, mind maps, "prouds and sorries," and "common ground wall." Its myths were fanciful stories dressed up as "preferred future scenarios." Looked at this way, I could understand my friend Bapu's comment about crossing cultures. The human species has practiced living in community from the dawn of time.

For people from homogeneous cultures the secular myths and rituals evoked familiar cultural processes that celebrated community milestones. In cross-cultural future searches the processes provided a neutral bridge that diverse people could walk to find each other. Because the rituals belonged to no one culture, they could be owned by all. It was as if people used the future search to recreate their own cultural contexts, projecting onto an empty screen labeled "past, present, and future" what they valued most. Far from being a "new paradigm," perhaps we had inadvertently tapped into our common heritage on earth, dating to when every tribe lived by myth, ritual, and the changing seasons.

Redefining Future Search

Then, attending a 1995 seminar on "Redefining Health" at The Traditional Acupuncture Institute (Now TAI-SOPHIA) in Columbia, MD, I was startled to discover parallels between future search and the ancient Taoist philosophy underlying traditional Chinese medicine. This philosophy informs the seasons of five element acupuncture, each season matching an element in nature—fall (metal); winter (water); spring (wood); summer (fire); late summer (earth). We were asked to apply this metaphorical system to situations in our lives. The model had us moving—in relation to an issue we had selected—around the seasons, from "honoring all concerned" in fall, to a place of inquiry and unknowing in winter, to a clear vision in spring, to partnership in summer, and to mutual agreement about what to do in late summer. (Acupuncturists who practice this way intend that people to be whole and energized experience all five conditions during treatment.)

"Observing this process, I felt a tingle of excitement. The movement around the seasons exactly paralleled the five phases of future search!"

Observing this process, I felt a tingle of excitement. The movement around the seasons exactly paralleled the five phases of future search! We start with timelines honoring the experience of every person in the room. We make a mind map of global trends that is the basis for further inquiry into the complexity of our world. We move to common ground and dramatic visions of a future people are willing to work for. Finally we seek voluntary partnerships, agreement, and action commitments. This cycle of experience had been known for thousands of years. Over a few decades we had replicated it experimentally with no awareness of its origins, perhaps, in the collective unconscious.

I cannot prove that future search does all this. However, I have little doubt researchers will follow up my hypothesis. Someday we may see formal evidence that future search and similar methods succeeded not because they changed the paradigm so much as they helped people refocus on what

“In a tidal wave of change, most of it self-made and much of it self-defeating, many people were eager by 20th Century’s end to recover those parts of our shared experience that made working together one of life’s joys.”

had always been fundamental to our species—dignity, meaning, community, and productive work. In a tidal wave of change, most of it self-made and much of it self-defeating, many people were eager by 20th Century’s end to recover those parts of our shared experience that made working together one of life’s joys.

Ancient Wisdom		Future Search	
Season	Ongoing Conditions	Phase	Purpose
Fall	Honoring all concerned; insight into who each of us is in this situation	Past	Validating every person’s experience; developing a shared context.
Winter	Knowledge; willingness to be in inquiry/ unknowing.	Present	Pooling all perceptions; inquiry; discovery.
Spring	Seeing what your vision is with clarity about your intent.	Future	Living our dreams; internalizing what we really want.
Summer	Opening the heart to create partnership.	Common Ground	Confirming shared aspirations & values.
Late Summer	Mutual agreement about what would be of service.	Action	Cooperating on next steps toward a future serving all.

And, from the Epilogue to the book—

Eric Trist, my late friend and mentor, observed decades ago that workplace innovations had lives of their own. They rarely spread within the companies that pioneered them. As word got around, though, the underlying ideas became public, and many distant workplaces benefited. There is a term for this phenomenon—“morphic resonance”—that, despite my distaste for jargon, I like very much. It was coined by Rupert Sheldrake, the molecular biologist and maverick scientist, to describe how (perhaps) things change in nature without anyone’s deliberately seeking to change them.

Take flying, for example. For thousands of years people aspired to soar like birds. Nobody could do it until the Wright brothers built the right machine and learned to use it. After that nearly anyone could fly. Until Roger Bannister ran an under-four-minute mile in 1954, that feat was thought beyond human limits. Now countless others have done it.

So it is with workplace innovations. Meg Wheatley (a Future Search Network member, incidentally) was among the first to show the inherent potential and the beautiful order that exists amid apparent confusion. Before “chaos theory” became management lingo, most people were understandably skeptical of large crowds interacting, sharing information, planning, and committing to action—all without being exhorted by charismatic orators. As more people learn to do something, however, it becomes easier for others even without prior exposure. The capability travels through space and time by processes not well understood, though the effects are observable. When we say a trend is “in the air” we are talking about morphic resonance. By the end of the

“Paradoxically, in an age of shorter, faster, cheaper, the shortest, fastest, cheapest way to get everybody improving whole systems was to get the whole system in the room.”

"In a tidal wave of change, most of it self-made and much of it self-defeating, many people were eager by 20th Century's end to recover those parts of our shared experience that made working together one of life's joys."

20th Century, many people came to understand the transformative power of "the whole system in the room."

We recognized that a simple act—inviting the right people to an interactive meeting, something the average person could do without years of training—opened the door to constructive, time-efficient actions that no one could plan, program, or specify as "deliverables." The more we did it the easier it got for others. As a result, tens of thousands of people who once had the word "meeting" equate with "frustration" had attended highly productive forums. They had learned first hand the action potential of what Wheatley called a "self-organizing system." Paradoxically, in an age of shorter, faster, cheaper, the shortest, fastest, cheapest way to get everybody improving whole systems was to get the whole system in the room.

References

Sheldrake, Rupert. *The Presence of the Past: Morphic Resonance and the Habits of Nature*. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.

Weisbord, Marvin. "Future Search: A 'New Paradigm?' Maybe Not." *SearchNEWS*, No. 6. Winter 1996.

Weisbord, Marvin. "Resolving a New Paradox with Old Wisdom," in *The Flawless Consulting Fieldbook and Companion*, by Peter Block and 30 Flawless Consultants, assisted by Andrea M. Markowitz, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer, 2001.

Wheatley, Margaret J. *Leadership and the New Science Revised: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1992.

Weisbord, Marvin and Sandra Janoff. *Future Search: An Action Guide to Finding Common Ground in Organizations and Communities*, 2nd edition, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2000.

This article is excerpted from *Productive Workplaces Revisited: Dignity, Meaning and Community in the 21st Century*, to be published by Jossey-Bass/Wylie in February 2004. A longer version appears in the latest issue of *FutureSearching*, the newsletter of the Future Search Network. ©2003 by Marvin Weisbord.

Marvin Weisbord is co-director, with Sandra Janoff, of Future Search Network, an international, voluntary network of practitioners dedicated to public service, collaboration, and learning. Marvin is author of *Organizational Diagnosis* (Addison-Wesley, 1978), *Productive Workplaces* (Jossey-Bass, 1987), *Productive Workplaces Revisited* (Jossey-Bass 2004), and co-author of *Discovering Common Ground* (Berrett-Koehler, 1992), which are used as texts in dozens of colleges and universities.

"Paradoxically, in an age of shorter, faster, cheaper, the shortest, fastest, cheapest way to get everybody improving whole systems was to get the whole system in the room."

Marvin and Sandra will co-lead a module on Future Search at the 2004 Summer Program.

See http://www.shambhalainstitute.org/2004/module_janoffweisbord.htm