

Chapter 13

Search Conferences and Future Search Conferences: Potential Tools for Urban Planning in an On-Line Environment

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the potential of the Search Conference (SC) and a later version, the Future Search Conference (FS), as useful participatory methods that contribute to urban and other types of planning. An unusual feature of these approaches is that participants are expected to contribute to the implementation of any action recommended. The chapter begins with a definition and history of these conferences before outlining how traditional, face-to-face conferences are implemented. As an illustration, the Future Search Conference 'Bendigo +25' (carried out in a regional Australian city to determine ways forward for the next 25 years) is discussed. The same case study is then re-examined in the context of attempting to run such an exercise in a Web-based environment. Both advantages and challenges of this mode of delivery are considered.

INTRODUCTION

A Search Conference (SC), and its later offshoot the Future Search Conference, (FS) can be excellent qualitative research tools for urban or other types of planning, as they use participatory

techniques involving interested groups (such as experts, clients and residents) in order to find solutions and set priorities for future action.

Both techniques constitute a form of strategic planning run by a facilitator. However, after the event, desired outcomes are achieved not by those in power, but rather by the delegates working together to implement agreed-upon solutions

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-0074-4.ch013

or recommendations that have been determined during the conference.

In order to understand the approach further, this chapter sets out to define the terms ‘Search Conference’, and ‘Future Search Conference’, their derivation and how they have been applied in a variety of settings. This is followed by details of how to set up and run such an event, illustrated by a case study of a FS that was organized to assist town planning for the next 25 years. Having presented the case, it is then reassessed in the context of running such an activity on-line.

BACKGROUND

What Are Search Conferences and What Are Their Origins?

A Search Conference has been defined as a: “... social event convened to create a collaborative picture of probable and desirable futures and to develop plans to move towards that desirable future” (Williams, 1984, p. 29), or a “...carefully planned, custom-designed, participative event embedded in a longer process of planning and improvement. Its main focus is to create ideas for future action that are to be implemented by the participants” (Hurworth, 2006, 2007). As Large adds: “This approach can lead to learning, purposeful action, commitment, creative involvement and ownership because people are working together on what matters to them” (Large, 1998a, p. 63).

Origins and History of the Search Conference

The Search Conference was originally conceived in the late 1950s by Fred Emery and his wife Merrelyn (both from Australia) working in conjunction with Eric Trist (from the Tavistock Institute in London). This trio’s work in socio-technical systems, open systems theory and participative planning made an important contribution to management

thinking. Their ideas came at a time when organisations were finding it difficult to drive changes from the top and were seeking to engage larger stakeholder groups in future planning.

Fred and Eric first implemented a Search Conference to assist with the merger of the Bristol and Siddely Aircraft Companies. The SC process allowed the two companies to merge successfully, as well as the creation of new engine ideas and the concept of an airbus (Emery, 1995; Weisbord, 1992). Next, Fred experimented and worked further on the rationalization of conflict, which involved working to find common ground, rather than tackling conflict head on.

The SC approach then ‘took off’ in places such as Scandinavia, Australia and North America where it was used by companies such as Microsoft and Hewlett Packard. Back in Australia, Fred and Merrelyn continued to develop the SC further, and applied the method within a variety of planning contexts, such as local communities, the public service and companies.

Meanwhile, Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff developed their own version of the technique called the Future Search Conference (FS) (Weisbord & Janoff, 1995) which tends to involve larger numbers and leaves less time for action planning. For instance, during the 1970s the latter authors assembled as many as 300 people in order to work with a vertical slice of an entire community.

Since then, various other types of Search Conferences have evolved (see Crombie, 1984, who describes four versions). Also, in Australia and elsewhere, the terms ‘Search Conference’ and ‘Future Search Conference’ have become blended, or at least blurred, so that conferences often contain elements of both approaches.

Main Features of Search Conferences Held Face-to-Face

Some particular features of traditional search conferences held face-to face are that they:

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