Yikes!! Valuable and Humbling Lessons about Future Search

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I have facilitated six Future Searches since I learned the method in the fall of 1995. All but one have been public sector organizations or community consortiums. Along the way I have learned some useful lessons about the process and my role as facilitator.

1.   The Process Works

The very first future search I facilitated was a highly complex school & community health care effort. It was fraught with politics and industry chaos. Since I did not have a background in health care, I found a partner who both worked in public health and had experience conducting future searches, to assist in the effort. Things were clicking along well in preparation for the Future Search, and I was excited but nervous as I anticipated the event.

Then came the call. Less than twenty-four hours before the conference, I learned that my partner was in the hospital! I was panicked. I had never even seen a real Future Search in its entirety before, just in training. How would I pull this off alone? I decided to ask a local consulting friend to assist me. She had been through Bunker & Albanøs *Large Group Interventions* workshop, but not the more intensive Future Search training. Gambling that the design was solid, my friend and I took the plunge.

Long story short -- THE PROCESS WORKED! It worked in spite of us. I remember consulting my training notes often (if surreptitiously) during that conference, trying to understand if the reaction we were getting was õnormal.ö What I learned was that the process was solid, and that if we stuck to it, it would yield results.

2. The Dependency Trap: Theirs

At that same first conference I fell headlong into another powerful lesson. I was closing the conference at the end of day two after an energizing, vision-filled afternoon.   We came to a dead stop when one of the participants said, õWho will *do* all this?ö There was a chorus of concern -- over 80% of the people there had that same question. Clarification revealed that they did not believe that they had enough power to make their vision a reality, and suspected that the people who *did* were not in the room.

My heart was racing. I remembered the endless hours that the design team spent on the people to be invited. I could not imagine that they had left many stones unturned. I also knew that 90% of those invited were participating at that moment. I asked the group to take a good look at each other, at the community that they represented, at themselves as individuals, and then asked them to name who else should have been in the room. After some discussion, I told the group that the future was up to them, that *they* were the people who could choose to make it happen.   And if they loved that vision enough, by golly, to come the next day and commit to *start doing something* about it.

That evening, the design team and I were depressed. We wondered if anyone would show up the next day, a Saturday no less. I questioned my own words, wondering if I had been too harsh, if I had perhaps driven people away. Much to our surprise, nearly 75% of the people came back the final day and stayed to the end of the conference. Many commitments were made and the Future Search finished on a note of hope.

What I learned was that the dependency and powerlessness I experienced from this group were endemic to their culture, and that by being direct and clear about boundaries and responsibilities, it helped to shift the group into a different place. I also learned the importance of having another night to õsleep on thingsö that is inherent in the three-day design of a Future Search.

3. The Dependency Trap: Mine

Two years later, I found myself doing another Future Search with the same client, but on a totally different subject. The success of the first conference had prompted their desire to use the same process for

another topic.   This time I felt different -- much more confident and definitely more experienced. I also believed I had a õleg upö because I knew this clientøs culture so well.

The conference began well enough, but I started to get bothered midway through the analysis of the present. People seemed blasé. There did not seem to be a lot of self-reflection or honesty. My concern grew as I watched the futuring process. Usually groups would beg for more time to finish their scenarios, but this group was done early. Presentations took less than the time allotted, and did not seem very energetic. What was going on?

As I tossed and turned in bed that night, I dreamed about being lost while driving to an important rendezvous. Obstacle upon obstacle was thrown in the path of my car, and I did my best to be creative and clever about overcoming each one. I was running late for the rendezvous, though, and worried that the others would leave without me.

I realized that I had allowed myself to be co-opted by this clientøs dependency, and was feeling personally responsible for the success of this conference. *They* didnøt feel responsible, I *did!* Why? It had much to do with my relationship (or lack thereof) with the new leader, who had been named midway through the planning of the conference. This person had not been initially supportive of holding the Future Search, and seemed to hold a dim view of consultants.

I should have listened, *really* listened! However, the conference had already been delayed for months due to other factors. The sponsoring staff (with my support) persuaded the leader to support this effort, and told him they believed he would be pleased with the results. So now, I was trying to deliver the results. The only problem was, that since the leader had not fully committed to the Future Search, neither had the participants, and only *they* could deliver results!

In the morning I met with my co-facilitator to discuss what we had to do next. Based on my dream, I knew that we had to shift the responsibility for the success of the conference from our shoulders to that of the participants. That final morning, as participants straggled in and food was late, no one really wanted to get started. Amid protests, I decided to stick to the agenda and just start. I reviewed the focus of the conference and the participantsø and my role in it. I reminded them that this was their

product, and that success hinged on what they did that morning. The leader and sponsoring staff also spoke, reaffirming their commitment. The next few hours proved to be important, and eventually the group created a common ground wall and five action groups took up the business of next steps.

The final results pleased the sponsoring staff (I am still not sure about the leader!) and indeed the future direction that was created has started to emerge. However, I still wonder if the results might not have been stronger had I been clear about who was really in charge of this Future Search.

4.   Holding the Tension: "Minnesota Nice" is not very nice!

I do not know if people from other parts of the country have this problem, but here in Minnesota people pride themselves on being õnice.ö From my experience, that includes never acknowledging (much less addressing) conflicts or differences of opinion. Even the mention of disagreement causes people to wince.

So when I tell people here that a Future Search focuses on the future and common ground, rather than current conflicts, there is a collective sigh of relief. When I review ground rules and ask people to acknowledge, but not work, a conflict, they eagerly nod in agreement.

It is hard to õhold the tensionö when no one is willing to acknowledge any! I find that resulting discussions about trends and issues, proudsø and sorriesø can lack honesty and candor, as people are afraid to offend anyone with their comments. My experience is that the longer this kind of surface-level politeness and agreement exists in a conference, the less powerful the results.

I have found it hard to crack that polite exterior. It is a slow process, but I *am* learning to be quicker at recognizing threads of discontent, and not damping them prematurely due to the groupøs (or my own) discomfort. I have also found that participant diversity helps to reduce the õpolitenessö dynamic, especially if the topic is highly charged. (P.S. The occasional New York transplant in Minnesota helps, too!)

5. *Preparing the Way: Managing Expectations*

In one Future Search, the effort was supported by one of the big eight consulting firms as a community business partner of the organization. I thought it not only generous of the firm, but evidence that it understood and supported the Future Search process.

On the last day of the conference, one of the firmøs partners came up as we took a break after confirming common ground. She asked how we were going to complete the rest of the strategic plan in the time allotted. Turns out she was expecting a full-blown, five year plan to come out of the conference, replete with goals, strategies, objectives, resource plans and action items!

No amount of explaining about the concept of creative tension helped at this point. The partner was mad and extremely disappointed, both in me and in the process. I told her that I was sorry that she was disappointed, and that this process was never designed to create a full-fledged strategic plan in three days. However, since there was now a shared vision, the organization had the opportunity to create the kind of long-term plan she desired, with much better odds of success.

What I learned from this experience is to not take other consultantsø knowledge about the Future Search process for granted.   Had this partner attended the design team meetings (to which she was invited, but chose not to participate) it also might have helped. We could have pre-planned follow-up activities to create the cohesive plan she wanted.

I now make a point of telling clients and participants up front that this is like no other planning effort they may have engaged. It can be the *beginning point* in a strategic planning effort, but will not create a strategic plan (as it is typically defined) in three days.

6. *Following Your Gut*

Well, by now I had learned to do a good job of level-setting expectations about the results of a Future Search conference. Maybe too good. When I facilitated a design team discussion about follow-up activities with another client, the leaders informed us that the conference results would be used as input to

an eight member task force that would kick off seven months later. The task force would determine the future direction, develop the strategic plan, and restructure the organization. There was no discussion of any other follow-up activities or community participation, beyond publishing a conference report.

What?? Bells sounded in my brain. Future Search as *input only*? Was I hearing this right? At the next break I pulled the leaders over and asked about it. Yes, they confirmed there was no need for other follow-up planning, because the results of this conference would be input to the leadership and task force.

With growing concern I explained that much energy and enthusiasm might be generated at their upcoming Future Search. I asked them to remain open to the possibilities that Future Search would bring, which could mean engaging the entire community in realizing its future. I was worried about the impact of reverting back to traditional planning methods after a whole-system approach, let alone using a method that would not yield results for at least eight to ten months. They agreed to see what happened.

In truth, there is one *very* big advantage of traditional planning methods -- control. As the conference progressed, it became apparent that the leadership was exercising it. As participants realized this, their energy level and commitment decreased. Even though discussion about trends and issues was engaging, no one took ownership. Future scenarios seemed flat and uninspired. At the end of the conference, the õcommon groundö wall had only four or five items, but over twenty items in the õunresolved differencesö list. There was no action planning. Instead, participants regrouped as stakeholdersø and gave õwords of adviceö to the leadership. It was a conference that was as unfulfilling to us as facilitators as it was to the participants, although the leadership seemed to be pleased.

I did not realize fully until the end of the conference that this was almost purely an academic exercise. It was borne more of a desire to experience a hot new trend than to create fundamental and lasting change. What went wrong? The leaders had researched this method and sought us out. They used all the right lingo. So I thought when I started this effort that they were prepared to share power. It was only in the design meeting that fragments of a different agenda started to emerge.

I should have stopped the process at that defining moment and just kept asking questions. I learned that I need to trust my instincts, but that it takes real courage to say õtime outö and risk looking foolish or stubborn in front of a client.

In Summary...

I have learned that the process works, but it is just one ingredient. As a facilitator, I must be clear about my boundaries and role, and have the courage to manage expectations, surface conflict, and stop the process. Even then, I am the smaller part of the equation. The larger part is the client -- its leadership, membership, and community. They have to be willing to share power, engage the process, and live with the uncertainty of the outcomes. Most important though, the issue that brings people together must be able to provoke passion and desire, in order to transcend system inertia. Or as someone once said, õYou really gotta wanna!ö