

THE SEARCH CONFERENCE METHOD FOR PARTICIPATIVE PLANNING

Robert Rehm and Nancy Cebula

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The search conference is a participative planning method that enables people to create a plan for the most desirable future of their community or organization, a plan they take responsibility for carrying out themselves.

In a search conference, people--citizens, community leaders, managers, workers--become a planning community. Together they create a plan for the future, based on shared human ideals, that they can live for and work to implement. The search conference makes it possible for any kind of system, whether community or workplace, to thrive in the face of uncertain, turbulent conditions.

The search conference has been used around the world for more than 30 years. Fred Emery and Eric Trist introduced the search conference in 1959. The method has been researched and developed ever since by Fred and Merrelyn Emery and a core group around Australia. Merrelyn Emery brought the search conference into the U. S. and the Americas several years ago. She continues to train and develop conference managers through her workshops at the International Institute for Resource Management at New Mexico State University.

PURPOSES AND TYPES OF SEARCH CONFERENCES

The search conference is useful for setting new policy, directions, and strategies in any sector, public or private; for finding common ground on difficult social conflicts, while acknowledging that disagreements are rational and real; for developing or reforming communities, organizations, or industries. It is effective for any system coming together around a common purpose and looking to a desirable future.

The search conference brings to life the concept called open systems, suggesting that any system has an open and direct relationship with its larger environment. We use the term "system" to mean any organization, community, or network that draws a boundary around itself to establish itself in relationship to its environment. "Environment" means everything outside the system, including all the aspects of global society that are changing so fast, as well as those things which are unchanging or changing slowly, such as: increasing global economic development, population growth, and communications superhighway, to name a few.

The method is ideal for the following systems:

- Communities and regions wanting to bring together people with diverse, often conflicting, perspectives concerning complex social issues, such as environment, education, or social services to build a new future together;
- Organizations, private companies or public agencies, needing to develop a new strategy, direction, and actions people are committed to carrying out together;
- Multiple organizations wanting to develop a plan for merging their business strategies or integrating their service delivery.
- Networks, organizations, or institutes that need to emerge and be built from scratch to deal with issues in the changing environment.

The following are only a few examples of the power of the search conference method. They illustrate the scope of the search conference from regional planning, to planning on important social and environmental issues, and to strategic planning for organizations in both the private and public sectors.

In Nebraska, mental health professionals, consumers, and political leaders developed an integrated plan for their state's mental health delivery system that they are implementing themselves. The new system is consumer based, locally driven, and supported by a new state mental health institute. These results and others came from a series of three search conferences on the future of mental health in the state.

At Hewlett-Packard, one manufacturing plant used the search conference method to renew its business by bringing together leaders from the organization to collaborate on a thorough strategic plan, including decisions about key business strategies. Another HP plant used the search conference to develop a plan for empowering its workforce. This search conference led to several new strategies including implementation of self managing groups.

In the Macatawa region of Michigan, citizens and community leaders used a search conference to develop a comprehensive plan for the future of their region, including specific, concrete action plans on transportation, education, and economic development. After the search conference, the participants are continuing to work on implementation of the plan. Now the plan has been adopted as both the regional strategic plan and the organizational form of the new regional council.

In Colorado, the governor called together water engineers from the front range communities of the Rocky Mountains to cooperate on the use of scarce water resources in this semi-arid region. The history of deep conflict and litigation over water resources goes back more than one hundred years in the state. The engineers came up with a plan that would for the first time ever make it possible for their communities to share water

resources. At the conference they organized themselves into a temporary network organization to implement the plan.

WHAT HAPPENS IN A SEARCH CONFERENCE?

"Search Conferences are increasingly popular because they hold out the promise of commitment to and collective action towards agreed goals, directions, and change."

Merrelyn Emery

20-40 people from the system (leaders of the organization or people from the community) participate based on their knowledge of the system, diverse perspectives, and potential for implementing the plan they develop. Participants attend not as representatives of stakeholder groups, but because of their importance to the conference task. The idea is to get the right people in the room -- those whose presence is critical for doing the job right. Once in the room, people become a community of planners.

When we use the word "participative" in the search conference, we are going beyond the way people often use the word. The search conference is not about a group giving input to higher up authorities or others who are responsible for planning. Participation, here, means the group actually develops and carries out the plan. That's why it is important to keep the number of participants at a level where real community can emerge.

The search conference is not the usual visioning process that has been so trendy over the years. We constantly encounter organizations and communities that have produced creative, abstract vision statements that are framed on the wall and go nowhere. The search conference rivets people's attention on real action based on a future the group wants to make happen.

The conference is normally two days and two nights, preferably off-site. People immerse themselves in a "social island" setting in which they form new relationships and commitments. At the conference people work together mostly as a large conference community, with some small groups for specific tasks. We call it "searching" because the conference community searches through their external environment and system, collecting, analyzing, and synthesizing data. In this process, people simultaneously learn and plan together.

The search conference is designed to provide a learning environment in which participation is equal and open, regardless of hierarchy or position. People's words are spoken out loud and recorded on chart paper for all to see. There are no individual workbooks or private note taking, as the emphasis is on restoring oral culture and discussion.

The search conference has no presenters, lectures, speeches, keynote addresses, games, or training sessions. There is nothing to make it look as if people are in a training workshop

or traditional conference. People do not have to perform skits or do fantasy visions. And there is no need for people to feel confused or experience chaos in order for learning or change to occur. There is nothing magical about a search conference, just people doing real work on important tasks.

People are collectively responsible for tasks and outcomes. Conference managers make sure participants have the best structure and process for their task, providing the best possible learning environment.

The search conference is about jigsaw puzzle solving. The focus is on putting the right pieces of strategy together that will produce the desirable future. Puzzle learning is unlike problem solving in that until each piece is individually located and placed, it is not possible to determine which piece must be found next. In a search conference, each person contributes knowledge and expertise about some piece of the overall puzzle.

SEARCH CONFERENCE DESIGN: THE OPEN SYSTEMS “FUNNEL”

“People are purposeful and can, in the appropriate conditions, be ideal seeking.”
Merrelyn Emery

The search conference resembles a funnel in its design. It begins with the widest possible perspective, outside ourselves and our task, to explore possibilities. Then it narrows to specific key strategies and actions, widening again as the group diffuses and implements its plan back home. The design is essentially the translation of the concept of open systems into a conference learning environment--to make open systems come alive.

In a nutshell, the search conference begins with activities in which people learn about their turbulent global environment. They are a system that is open to their external environment. Next people search through their system's past and present in order to develop the most desirable system. Then they develop strategies and action plans that they will implement in ways that are adaptive to and change their environment.

Roughly one third of the conference time focuses on learning about the turbulent environment, one third on learning about the system, and the last third concentrates on action planning.

Every search conference is unique, requiring special planning and design. There are no set activities to take off the shelf and dust off for simple use. This is the generic process:

**Changes in the World Important Into the Future
Desirable and Probable Future of the World**

**Our System's History: Where We
Came From**

**Our Current System: What
to Keep, Drop, and Create**

**Our Most Desirable
System**

**Strategies and
Actions Plans**

**Community Grows and
Diffuses Through Implementation**

THE PROCESS IN DETAIL

Learning about Our Turbulent Environment

After a brief opening session to clarify the conference task and agenda, and a session to negotiate expectations for the conference, the search is underway. There are no "ice breakers," speeches, lectures or any activities that might suggest that people are about to experience a traditional conference in which someone else is responsible for doing the work.

Changes in the world...Desirable and Probable Futures. The first session has people working as a large community. People voice their perceptions of what has been happening in the world in the past 5-7 years that has struck them as significant. The ground rule is that all perceptions of the environment are valid and are written on chart paper for all to see. The changing world appears before everyone's eyes as the list grows: "movement toward a global economy, intensifying environmental problems, expanding global communication and technology, increasing government regulation, increasing empowerment in the workplace." The list goes on and on.

This is an important and exciting session because all the conceptual frameworks of the search conference immediately come into play. People see that their organization or community exists within a much larger context. People are immediately using their direct perception of the turbulent world environment. They are taking responsibility for their own data, behaving in an open and public manner, beginning to build a planning community of trust. Doing this session as a total community sends the message that the search conference is a community building event. The search conference is designed to

keep people working together as a big group, with as few small group activities as possible.

Next, small task groups form to analyze the data. They come to grips with the significance of the changes they have perceived by identifying both the probable and desirable future of the world several years out. The groups report their findings and integrate the results into a final community list.

In identifying their desirable future of the world, the conference community is expressing and coming to agreement on their shared human ideals. These ideals will serve as a benchmark for later work on determining the system's most desirable future. Common ideals that tend to emerge in a search conference include such desirable futures as: peaceful resolution of differences, increased community participation, respect for human rights, balance between development and environment, community and regional cooperation. Agreement on basic human ideals makes it easier, later in the conference, to agree on specific, concrete strategies that are embedded in these ideals.

The point of starting with the environment is that there is a direct correlation between the future direction of any organization or community and the direction of the larger global environment. This is called "directive correlation." The theory suggests that any new state of affairs will be jointly determined by both the system and the environment. Many organizations mistakenly believe they need only be aware of their immediate business environment in the planning process. They thereby risk failure to be adaptive in a fast changing world. When system and environment are moving in sync, they have an adaptive relationship.

In corporate, industry, and issue oriented searches, another level of environment may need to be included. This is the task environment--those changes just outside the boundary of the system that are having the most immediate and proximate effect on the future of the system. Examples from corporate searches include marketing, industry trends, technical innovations, or changes in the larger corporate environment.

Learning about Our System

The next phase has people appreciating their history as a system, analyzing the current functioning of the system, and then agreeing on their systems most desirable future.

Our System's History: Where We Came From. Surveying the significant historical events and changes is a critical phase for any already existing system, whether organization, community, industry, or network. Gaining a shared appreciation of where they have come from, what has made the system what it is today, is an important part of the context. Without this perspective, the group is at risk of designing a future that fails to link past and future.

It is best to do the history session as a large open community discussion, with people telling their own perspective of events they believe shaped their organization or community. It is best for people to just talk in open large group without any artificial expectations, like identifying decades. Everyone learns about the continuities that have shaped the system. In a way, the history session restores the kind of oral culture that allows people to celebrate and take pleasure in their common organizational past. The history session becomes a fully participative community building event amplifying the common ground established during the previous phase.

Our Current System: What to Keep, Drop, and Create. With both future and past contexts in place, the group enters another analytical phase. Here it builds upon the learning from the history session and should by now have sufficient trust in itself to openly acknowledge the weaknesses as well as strengths of the current state of the system. Rather than narrow this session down to a typical strengths and weaknesses analysis, it is more useful to broaden the analysis. This allows people to continue their learning from the history session. The task is to identify, usually in large group, what about the current functioning of the system to “keep, drop, and create.” This is a brainstorm with the ground rule that all perceptions are valid. This reinforces confidence in people’s direct perceptions and values, and in their openness and democratic functioning.

This process, building on the history session, is just another preparatory step in the mutually supporting processes of building a planning community. At this stage we start using the word “community” to describe the search conference group.

Most Desirable System. People break into small groups that work in parallel on the same task: “the most desirable future of the system.” There are no imposed ways for the groups to work. There is no required fantasy visioning approach to this, or expectation that the groups perform skits. The creativity is in the ideas the groups come up with, not necessarily the process they use to get there. The groups manage themselves to come up with lists of concrete points describing the desirable system, as it would look at an agreed upon time in the future. The groups report and integrate their results. Then the entire conference community decides which points to develop into desirable strategic goals.

The process is purposely designed to avoid the lofty, abstract, overarching vision statements that have led to so much frustration and misunderstanding in organizations. Too often groups create lofty visions that they frame on the wall, but never convert into concrete strategy. The belief that somehow a powerful vision will magically happen has led to deeper levels of cynicism. Our experience is that making our desirable futures happen requires strategy and concrete action planning.

It is important that this session result in an array of desirable future strategies, so as not to put all the emphasis on one overarching theme. It is best not to put all the planning eggs in one basket. The number of strategies selected is up to the group to decide based on what they think they can handle.

Action Planning

The final third of the search conference involves the community in developing their desirable future into specific strategies and action plans. These plans contain a clear agreement on steps for implementing the plan and spreading their learning back home.

The time allotted for this phase should be roughly one third of the total working time of the search conference. People agree on a final reporting time. Within that period, groups can choose their own working and resting timetable. They are self managing.

Strategies and Actions. There are several variations on the process of this phase, but normally there is enough trust in the community for participants to become self managing. In practice this means that participants self select around strategic goals they want to work on, forming task forces that will develop action plans for that goal, on behalf of the whole community.

The components of this session are:

- Constraints and dealing with them;
- Our desirable and achievable future--does work on constraints indicate any change in strategy?
- What are we going to do to make it happen?
- Next steps, follow up.

There is a short informational briefing on the strategy of the indirect approach. This concept suggests that the most effective strategies are those that are indirect. By indirect we mean that they encircle, get around, or undercut key constraints that exist, as opposed to directly confronting barriers that may be difficult to overcome.

The intent here is to put constraints in a positive frame of reference, as items to work around. Because constraints are considered positive, task force groups often find that their work here provides major leads if not strategies for their chosen strategic goal. It is rare for a search community to adjust their desirable future after putting constraints under the creative gaze. Wherever possible, there is an interim plenary to ensure coordination of task force's plans in the interest of the total community.

The most successful strategies and action plans are those which are nested in time. If the ultimate time frame used for creating the most desirable system is 2001 for example, action plans may include subgoals for 1996 and 1998. Similarly, the plan will also include mechanisms for monitoring and coordinating progress, specifying who is responsible and when.

Final task force reports lead into a large group session where the community plans its continued life. This is the "follow up" session and it is here that the community decides what to do with its immediate product, usually some sort of report, setting out who should

do it by when. Usually the community selects some of their members to do this. Based on their action plans, the community will also decide when to meet again and in what structural configuration. This follow up work is the work of the community, not the designer/managers. Their job is done when the conference ends, or else the community has not really developed into a confident self managing group ready to implement its plan.

The Process of Implementation

The search conference is the middle part of an overall three part whole process of pre-planning, search conference, and implementation. No two processes of implementation are the same but how the community structures itself for implementation can make or break it. It is important that this new community of planners not fall back into a bureaucratic work structure. It should be careful not to organize itself into a traditional bureaucratic committee structure with subcommittees run by chair people, with membership and rules decided beforehand by those higher up in the organization. Responsibility for carrying out the plan rests with the entire group, not just higher ups, or sub-committees. A committee is only a mini-bureaucracy with the usual territorial bickering, leading to a rapid decline in attendance at meetings, enthusiasm and energy, and a waste of the gains made in the search conference. Some search conferences overcome this by making sure there is commitment to maintain the self managing structure experienced in the search conference into implementation. Other conferences add time at the end for a Participative Design workshop to organize the group into a democratic, self managing work organization.

PRINCIPLES AT WORK IN EVERY SEARCH CONFERENCE

"Every search conference is a participative event, but not all participative events are search conferences." Merrelyn Emery

The search conference is simple, straightforward, and conceptually deep. It is based on concepts that cross over many disciplines, including ecology, psychology, and all the social sciences. It has benefited from over 30 years of research on the principles and theories needed for direct democratic learning and planning to occur. These principles are the heart of the search conference. Understanding them and how they operate in the search conference is critical to successful use. These principles also help differentiate the search conference from other participative approaches.

Democratic Learning for Learning Democracy

“People want to learn, and want to create and exercise control over their futures.”
Merrelyn Emery

We use the word “democratic” when describing search conferences. In this context, we are not just talking about democratic philosophy or values. And we are not suggesting that organizations make decisions by voting or use representative means to run their business. Being democratic means that people who do the work, to the extent possible, have responsibility for control and coordination of that work, whether it be making a product or developing a plan. For people to behave democratically they need a learning and working structure that is designed to get it. The two basic components of democratic learning are the democratic design principle and the ecological learning paradigm. Both are alive in the search conference.

Democratic Design Principle. In his work with Eric Trist in the coal mines of Great Britain after World War II, Fred Emery noticed that there were two basic principles for designing any organization. The first principle he called bureaucratic, meaning that responsibility for control and coordination of work is located one level above where the work occurs. This is an organization that by its structure de-skills and devalues people. The second principle he called democratic. An organization designed according to the democratic design principle locates responsibility for control and coordination with the people doing the work, to the extent possible. These design principles are always a matter of choice. In work organizations, the democratic design principle leads to the structure of self managing groups. People in self managing groups have enough elbow room for decision making, ability to set their own goals and get feedback, experience work that has plenty of variety and visibility of a whole product. The democratic work environment is a place where people have control over their own work conditions and have a desirable future worth working for.

The search conference is a temporary work organization, and as such is designed along the lines of the democratic design principle and is self managing. In the context of the search, this means participants are responsible for learning about the system and environment, doing the planning work and carrying out their own plan. The democratic design principle results in an organization where responsibility is located with those doing the work of learning and planning. It also means that conference managers are responsible for designing the best learning environment possible and managing the conference consistent with the democratic design principle, as well as the other search principles.

Bureaucratic conferences are “talking head” designs where responsibility for content and outcomes rests with the organizers, speakers, facilitators, or chairs, not with the audience who are there to learn. Little learning results in a bureaucratic structure. Unlike bureaucratic organizations, democratic structures have no hierarchical dominance of one person over another, no master-servant relationships.

The democratic design principle produces a fully working learning conference that takes responsibility for its own control, coordination, and outcome. In practical terms, this means that the people who participate in the search conference should be members of the system, not outsiders, because they will implement the new plan themselves. It also means that participants do the work in the conference, including follow up, while conference managers are responsible for their own work of providing the best learning environment possible.

Ecological Learning. The search conference is based on research that shows that humans have evolved to naturally detect and extract information directly from their environment. The environment has an informational structure. It's loaded with real invariance, constancy, and patterns—in other words, meaning. Since the environment contains limitless information, any person with an intact perceptual system can access what they need. Humans have the natural, innate ability to directly perceive meaning from their environment. We sometimes call this common sense. Access to information is restricted only by habit, lack of confidence, and physical or psychological isolation from the informational field. Bureaucratic learning structures, like traditional conferences, have prevented people from exercising their innate abilities to the point that direct learning is like a muscle that has atrophied over time. The search conference is an environment in which people can flex their learning and planning muscles.

The implications of this paradigm are immense, not only for our educational systems but for our culture generally. Humanity, by its very structure and nature, is an intimate and indivisible part of its world. We were never "tabula rasa," bottles to be filled up, tablets to be written on.

The environment naturally provides this information to any seeking it. People, as perceiving systems, are purposeful and have the potential to act upon and define the environment. The combination of this capacity in the environment to offer opportunity for direct understanding, combined with the purposeful potential of every human expresses the process of living in a meaningful world.

People do not naturally learn through the process of abstraction, but by directly extracting meaning from the environment. Our formal educational systems are based on the theory that abstract knowledge, that which is divorced from its real concrete base, is superior to the knowledge we derive from first hand experience. The traditional approach demands that we be sent to school to get the right answers which are found in the warehouses of abstract knowledge accumulated from the past. The process of searching through the environment and system is a process in which people use their natural abilities of finding invariance, constancy, and patterns. In this paradigm the central problem for education is no longer which minds can achieve conceptual knowledge, but what kinds of environments best enable all minds to exercise their ability to perceive deeper orders of invariance.

The search conference is designed to acknowledge and enhance the human ability to make sense of their surroundings, having the effect of engendering confidence in it. As this confidence grows, individuals grow and become more perceptive, and able to think. And the environment itself will change as a result. Our capacity to learn and know through directly perceiving meaning in the environment, is in the most real sense learning by doing.

Group Dynamics: Creative Work and Group Assumptions. The search conference builds on the group dynamics theory developed by Wilfred Bion over 40 years ago. Bion discovered that when people come together they establish a group very quickly and that a group, like an individual, has a life of its own. A group is not just a collection of individuals, but a separate entity that has its own dynamics, behaviors, and operates on certain assumptions. He observed that, at any given time, a group is operating out of one of two possible modes. They are either in a creative work mode or basic assumption mode.

The creative work mode is characterized by conscious participation in and cooperation towards task achievement. When a group has a clear time-bounded task and a democratic structured learning environment, they do real work.

The basic assumption mode is just the opposite. It is a hidden, unconscious dynamic that occurs when people are given bureaucratic learning and work structures. It is called the basic assumption mode because the hidden, unspoken assumption or belief of the group is that:

1. The group exists in order to be sustained and taken care of by a leader--dependency;
2. The group has met for the purpose of fighting or running away--fight/flight; or
3. The group must allow two or more of its members to break away and assume leadership--pairing.

The way to predict which mode a group will be in--creative work or group assumption--is the choice of design principle. The group assumptions are the result of structure, not group development stages. Dependency and fight/flight are by-products of attempting to learn in a bureaucratic structure that inhibits cooperative use of all our capacities for coordination and control of our own destinies.

In a conference environment where responsibility rests with the experts, the group goes into the dependency mode and becomes an audience, depending on the expert, not themselves, to do the work. In the bureaucratic work and learning structure where responsibility is away from the participants, dependency is as good as it gets.

In fight/flight the leader is seen as the enemy, opposed to the preservation of the group. The subject matter is ignored while the concern is with winning or losing, either group

against group, or group against leader. The behavior of the group is anger and hostility towards the leader or other groups. It is either expressed (they get mad and fight) or covert (they withdraw in anger). Fight/flight differs from dependency in that there is an active, not passive, orientation. Even in extended periods of flight people will feel stirred up, with adrenaline flowing as in a prelude for battle.

Fight/flight occurs most frequently in learning environments where responsibility for content keeps shifting back and forth between leader and group. We call this dynamic the mixed mode and it is common in organizations caught in transition between a bureaucratic and democratic structure. The epitome of the mixed modes in organizations is the self managing group with a facilitator still really responsible for the work of the group.

A group operating out of the pairing mode often shows a high tolerance for a couple of its members to engage in side conversations, distracting or preventing the group from doing its work. When pairing breaks out in a bureaucratic learning environment, the response is usually to repress or stop it. When pairing happens in a search conference, which is rare, it can just as easily be seen as a prelude to real creative work for the whole group. Two or more participants may come together because they are excited about a new idea or perspective, and form one or more little buzz groups.. The idea can become the property of the community, sparking it into further creative work and taking on leadership of its own learning.

The learning environment provided by the search conference where participants are responsible for the content, goes immediately into the creative work mode and stays there.

Planning for Turbulent Times

“Instead of constantly adapting to change, why not change to be adaptive?”

Merrelyn Emery

Today’s global environment is turbulent, changing faster than our institutions. It was not always that way. Up until the advent of the industrial revolution in the late 18th century, the environment of most societies was relatively stable and predictable. In fact most of our human past was spent in this type environment. Hunting and gathering, and small village life were the norms, as well as agriculture. Within this environment, organizations and cultures were designed for non dominant relationships. This applied also to the relation between people and their physical world, a genuinely sustainable mode which fulfilled basic human needs. Above all, values were stable and predictable. Now we call it the “good old days.” Search conferences were not necessary then because continuous community talk was a way of life.

The industrial revolution brought a change in environmental texture. The environment basically remained stable and predictable but competition between systems over natural resources fueled technical innovations, large scale hierarchical organizations and

institutions, and less cooperation. While the environment was competitive and exploitive, it was nevertheless stable in terms of values. Simple linear projection, expert driven, mechanistic problem solving, and win-lose approaches were the dominant planning methods. It was during this period from about 1790 to post WWII that bureaucratic organizations were in full bloom, treating workers as replaceable parts, cogs in the machine of industry.

The term “turbulent” describes the texture of today’s environment. Turbulence refers to the way the current social environment is producing change by its own dynamism and consequently creating uncertainty for any system within it. The environment is no longer predictable or stable. When people see the list of inter-connected changes in the world go up on chart paper in the search conference, they appreciate the way all these changes effect one another and produce uncertainty for their own organization or community.

In a search conference people experience a learning environment in which they systematically explore their entire external environment. The purpose is to find ways to actively and creatively plan so that they are both responding to and changing their environment as they go. It’s called active adaptation and it is what searching is all about. Adapting does not just mean getting faster or being more flexible; it means becoming actively adaptive—developing a system’s capacity to be a community that continuously learns from and changes its environment. A system must reduce turbulence by changing the conditions that surrounds it and by influencing its future direction. The only way to do this in a turbulent environment, is through the sharing of human ideals. To become adaptive, a system needs to make sure there is alignment between its own desirable future and the desirable future it has for the world. This ensures that there is a direct correlation between the desirable future of the system and its environment.

The learning environment of the search conference allows people to seek human ideals together and use these to develop a future worth living for. It’s not just about value clarification where people get clear on what they think is important and what guides their behavior. It’s more than that. It’s all about creating the highest human capacity through community.

Search conference planning differs from the type of short term planning required for your next weekend cookout. For the cookout you need only to consider a handful of variables within a short time period--who to invite and what to cook? You would not expect major changes in the food preferences of your friends within a week, although today such shifts cannot be ruled out. Search conference planning is concerned with long time frames. In a turbulent, uncertain global environment, the simple cookout approach to planning will not work. There are too many variables outside the control of the system. Building plans for our future that are based on our shared human ideals is the only way to plan effectively in uncertain times. Being clear about the “ends” we want to arrive at five to ten years from now allows us to be adaptive in choosing the “means” to get us there.

The search conference is about strategy. It is all about making our desirable future happen, not just being visionary. Dreams do not come true without hard work. The search conference adopts the strategy of the indirect approach as developed in the "Art of War" by Sun Tzu and exemplified in the ancient Chinese game "GO," as it is called in the West. It means the art and science of maneuvering. The strategy of the indirect approach, in contrast to the direct approach that looks to win battles in the short term, takes a much longer time horizon. Its goal is to maximize territory while minimizing the use of resources. The message is: "Do not waste costly resources fighting battles, prevent war." Maneuvering through implementation, another puzzle approach, is the only approach for a world of uncertainty. In the search conference, people check the reality of their new strategies by identifying ways around key constraints. The indirect approach results in an array of practical strategies and actions that are most likely to stand the test of time and uncertainty.

Effective Communication for Building Community

"There is a real world, and it is knowable to the ordinary person." Fred Emery

The search conference is designed and managed to produce effective communications and the creative working mode. Successful communication depends on four basic properties that were discovered and researched by Solomon Asch. These properties are called the conditions for effective communication. They come to life in the conference. The basic idea here is that for face-to-face learning to occur people must enter into a relationship regarding some real task they are interested in and about which they desire to influence each other. If the following conditions are met, group learning and planning can occur.

Openness. In order for people to communicate effectively, they have to know they are in a situation that is totally open to their investigation and that things are "what they appear to be." The search conference is a learning environment where exploration and checking out are highly valued and where it is assumed that differences in perception and opinion exist. It is healthy and creative to acknowledge such differences. Mutual learning follows from the sharing of various direct experiences and perceptions.

A climate of openness in a search conference begins with the briefing of participants before the conference and a straightforward statement and display of conference agenda, purpose, and expectations. And perhaps the most striking innovation towards openness, which is now taken for granted, is the use of chart paper to compile an immediate, accessible and continuing record of work as it occurs. These publicly displayed papers provide the ultimate guarantee of openness and absence of manipulation.

We are all humans with the same human concerns. Most people naturally seek confirmation of their basic human similarities. Once people see the behaviors and motives of others as similar to their own, it becomes possible for people to admit they can learn

from each other. Any perception that a participant or conference manager is acting as “expert” or talking down will reduce the effectiveness of mutual learning.

Early on in the search conference, people discover their similarities through sharing of ideals about their desirable future of the world. Publicly sharing ideals and hopes makes them visible and real. It confirms that there is an underlying level of concern with humanity and the state of the world. Human ideals go beyond gender, race, status, or age. By discussing and deciding our desirable future in either global or nearer terms, we establish a climate of working together. Shared ideals become a benchmark for more creative and cooperative work toward the task of the conference.

We all live in the same world. The first task of the search conference is for people to state out loud data they know concerning changes in the world over the last 5-7 years. The rule is that all ideas are valid. This data is publicly listed on chart paper. The list becomes the fundamental data available for analysis and then synthesis into desirable and probable world futures. Accessible to all and manipulated by none, this snapshot of the changing world establishes the validity of the notion that we all live in the same world. This process establishes that the environment has real features, commonly perceived, and forms a shared context for planning and action. It is important that this data is recorded in “list” form, and not be manipulated through the use of mind maps or graphics controlled by the conference manager.

Trust. When people experience an open learning environment, appreciate that we are all humans with the same human concerns, and we all live in the same real world, then trust develops. As trust accumulates in the search conference, so do interpersonal relations strengthen and deepen, increasing the probability of mutual learning and network building.

Without this spiral of trust, learning, energy, and commitment, the process of implementation would be impossible. The presence of trust is tested towards the end of the search conference when participants self select into task forces to work on action plans. Each self selected subgroup is working on behalf of the whole community and must be trusted to do so.

The real key to direct democratic action is open communications and discussion among people. The search conference restores the human process of speaking and hearing, the oral culture known to older (or ancient) peoples. The world of literacy and bureaucracy is silent.

Rationalization of Conflict: The Common Ground Approach

The decision making process in the search conference is not consensus, but rationalization of conflict. Rationalization of conflict means making our differences clear and understandable. The search conference takes us beyond unanimity and consensus decision making to an environment in which people make their differences rational and base their future strategies on common ground on which they can agree. Conflict is an important

feature of the search conference. It is not avoided. In fact, rationalizing it means to take it seriously and truly understand and clarify the real differences people have. This is important because while these differences may not be part of the strategy the group adopts, they continue to exist within the community during implementation. Experience shows that when conflicts become clear and respected by the group, they diminish over time.

At various points in the search conference, the community must make important decisions. The crucial decision points are agreement on the desirable and probable future of the world, agreement on the most desirable system, and action plans. Rationalization of conflict works as follows. After small group work on the desirable future of the world, for instance, is reported and integrated with other group reports, two questions are raised. First, questions of clarification of the report and then a question as to whether anyone cannot live with or is not prepared to work towards any item on any of the reports.

If there is such a response, it is first debated fully in large group. If there is substantial disagreement, a couple of people from different sides may be sent out to negotiate the point, while the rest get on with the task of integration and agreement. If negotiation fails, the item goes on a disagreed list. It ceases to be part of the further work of the community.

In this process we are not assuming there will or should be consensus within the community. To do so is unrealistic, particularly on topics where there are legitimate and institutionalized adversarial positions. The aim of rationalization of conflict is to precisely establish common ground and to know exactly where the thin line between agreement and disagreement is located. Groups with a history of conflict tend to assume a greater area of conflict and less common ground than actually exists. Once the common ground and its boundaries are clarified, the community can continue work towards its goals on the basis of the common ground regardless of its size.

Using the disagreed list as a way of rationalizing a conflict is important at the beginning of a search conference. It shows people that a simple and controlled mechanism is available for dealing with disagreements. People realize they can use this process later in the conference for more intense conflicts that are closer to home.

In today's trendy world there is concern about verbal aggression. It should not be surprising that when people are planning around their most deeply held concerns and purposes, they may become excited, indeed angry over differences. If they were not, there should be concern that either the wrong people were in the room or that dissociation had reached a point that all such participative planning was useless.

SEARCH CONFERENCE MANAGEMENT AND DESIGN

"Good cooks don't follow recipes, they use principles." Julia Child

Search conference design and management require knowledge of search principles, ability to creatively match these principles to the search task, and the skill to "design on the run" once the conference is underway.

Preparation and Planning

Ideally, the designer/search conference manager is involved from the start. While it is preferable that conference managers are not experts and do not have a vested interest in the subject matter, they do need to immerse themselves in the circumstances of the system.

The system itself, in preparing the search conference, may realize they require more research data about a particular area before the conference. For example, a community may want to provide some demographic information to participants before the conference. Or an organization could survey their customers concerning their needs and expectations. The timing of a search conference should not be decided until sufficient preparation has been done to ensure confidence in the outcome.

The most important element in planning a search conference is the selection of participants. They are chosen because they carry a piece or pieces of the jigsaw puzzle in their heads. If a major piece is missing, the puzzle solution may be inadequate or the implementation difficult. People involved in a system or community know which people have which bits.

There is a difference in how to choose participants for a community search and an organization search. For community searches, it is best to use the community reference system as the basis of selection. The great advantage of this approach for geographical community, industry, and issue searches is that the "community" broadly defined determines the participants.

The community reference system process is as follows:

1. Draw a rough social map of the system whether it be community, issue, or industry, covering such aspects as interest groups and demographics;
2. Decide the criteria against which people are to be selected, such as areas of expertise and knowledge of the system, and potential for implementation;
3. Pick a starting point person in each sector of the map and ask them for two or three names that fit the criteria. This is for help only, no guarantees of invitation are given;
4. Ask each of the new names to give two or three names that fit the criteria;

5. After one or two go-arounds, some of the same names should appear. Select these from the total list and add others to make sure the map is covered;

6. It is not considered relevant that they be educated, literate, or articulate.

This community reference system clarifies that search conference participants are not there as representatives as they would be on a representative committee. They do not see themselves as stakeholders who are there to argue for and get the best deal for their constituents. Participants are briefed that they attend and participate just as themselves. In this, they are there as representatives of the human race and its basic ideals.

For organization searches such as corporations, the membership consists of those who hold responsibility for the health and direction of the organization. It is not appropriate for outsiders to attend, as they come from the environment not the system. Participation is determined by the boundary of the system; people with puzzle knowledge inside the boundary of the system.

All participants should be fully briefed about all aspects of the search conference beforehand. This works best in face to face conversation that can lead to design improvements as well as greater understanding of and commitment to the task.

Time, Place, and Numbers

Normally a search conference takes two nights and two days. Longer periods risk cognitive and emotional overload. Shorter conferences run the risk of not establishing the environment and system learning required to create a planning community prepared to implement its plan.

A search conference is not an everyday event and does not fit normal business hours. The best starting time is late afternoon. It is essential to create a relaxed social atmosphere in which people can become acquainted. Introductions, briefings, and expectations can occur before dinner, preferably served buffet style. Work proper starts after dinner and continues to about 10:00 p.m. It continues through the next day and evening, finishing late afternoon on the third day. Flexible arrangements help. Continuous access to refreshments is better than fixed times, because breaks are hard to predict.

People cannot be expected to work intensively and creatively in their normal office environments. They need to be free of distractions like phones and messages. The search conference is a social island. Facilities should be open to outside and fresh air, plenty of wall space and reasonable comfort. However, many search conferences have been held in suboptimal conditions and worked. The facility is far less important than design and management.

Search conferences work best with 20-40 people. Less than 15-20 takes on the character and dynamics of a small group. There is not enough diversity of data and perspectives to produce the energy, excitement and sparks for creative thinking that characterize a large working group. The upper limit has been successfully pushed up to 50 or more, but requires more time and management skill to pull off. Other participative approaches are able to accommodate more people because they limit the notion of participation to input, or do not establish a community that carries out its own plan.

For larger numbers, a multi-search is required. A multi-search consists of two or more search conferences running in parallel. Multi-searches are risky because of the difficulty of design and coordination. On the other hand, larger numbers may gain a large multiplier effect in terms of diffusion. The multi-search can be avoided by more careful selection of participants. It should be possible to select participants who “wear many hats.”

It may be preferable to design a series of search conferences that can be integrated later in various ways. There have been “rolling” search conferences where the cumulative data feeds into the next. There are many variations on the theme; all are questions of design.

Search Conference Designers/Managers

Designing and managing search conferences is exciting and challenging work. The design task requires knowledge of the underlying theories and the creativity to adapt the process to the situation. Managing the search conference is the ultimate in integrating practice and theory. The role of the designer/manager is to:

- Fully understand and have experience with the theoretical framework and concepts underlying the search conference;
- Stay within their role of designer/manager leaving responsibility for content and outcome to those who will live with the consequences. In practice, this means they:
- Explain the overall plan and set clear, precisely defined tasks for each phase;
- Decide which tasks and subtasks are to be small group or community work;
- Manage all large group sessions towards the integration of work into a community product using the rationalization of conflict model;
- Manage time, making sure there is plenty of slack in the agenda because it is not possible ahead of time to tell if some activities will take longer than expected;
- “Design on the run” when conditions in the conference require a change in structure;
- Monitor but not intervene in small group work;

- Deal with outbreaks of dependency and fight/flight group assumptions, if they occur, in such a way as to bring the community back to the creative work mode;
- Observe the conditions of effective communication and in particular practice openness;
- Maintain a task focus with a light, positive approach.

After the Search

The search conference is now a well established and highly reliable method of participative planning. It has the power to produce learning planning communities committed to making their own future happen. Not only do people walk away committed to their plan, they also have learned how to search so they can continue to adaptively change.

While the search conference produces adaptive relations between system and environment, it requires nurturing in the long run. The key to continued success is what happens after the search, and why? The most frequent answer for “why” is that the search group developed a democratic structure for implementation. Successful search groups stay away from the bureaucratic committee structure. They implement by making sure the group maintains responsibility for the control and coordination of the plan. People move to a new level of shared responsibility for their own affairs. The search conference provides an experience of and learning about direct participative democracy. The ultimate purpose is to restore to people their rights and responsibilities.

Communities and organizations that have searched and implemented their plan through a democratic structure become systems that continue to adapt and learn. The democratic design principle and ecological learning become as natural as walking and talking. Members of such an organization or community develop a keen awareness of their turbulent social environment in the same way a farmer keeps an eye on the changing weather conditions. Many groups set aside a day or so at regular intervals for formal long term planning. As time passes, searching becomes much less formal; it becomes a way of life. People naturally respect others’ perceptions. Management is everybody’s business. Rules give way to purposeful conversation.

The product of planning through a search conference is, therefore, not just the “plan” but the continuing learning planning community.

Robert Rehm and Nancy Cebula are leaders in the application of the Search Conference and Participative Design methods in the USA. They have done this work with communities, corporations, state and federal government agencies, educational institutions, and regional groups struggling with contentious issues such as environmental

or social problems. The common thread is movement towards democratic structures and values.

The article "Participative Design" by Robert Rehm is also available through the Consortium for Participative Democracy, Loyola University, Chicago. It describes the Participative Design Workshop, a method developed by Fred and Merrelyn Emery for involving people in restructuring their own workplace to be self managing.

For information about Merrelyn Emery's training for search conference managers, contact the International Institute for Resource Management, New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, New Mexico 88003; telephone (505) 646-2825; Internet: iirm@nmsu.edu.

Robert Rehm and Nancy Cebula, 1460 Judson Drive, Boulder, Colorado 80303, Telephone: (303) 499-1607, Fax: (303) 494-2337, Internet: rehmcbcla@csn.org.