

Search conference underpinnings: its theory, values and philosophy assume people have the ability to plan their future...

Traditional goal setting and planning methods assume that experts are essential to gather the appropriate data and to craft plans that can be implemented. Traditional planning methods also assume that it is possible to create 5, 10 and 20 year plans based on historical data.

The search conference acknowledges the value of data gathered by experts, but also places greater value and emphasis on the direct knowledge of participants in any system and on their ability to select goals and plan their future.

- Participation is equal and open (leave your hat at the door). All ideas are valid...
- It is democratic by design, people are responsible for the control and coordination of their own work...
- Explores how the surrounding world, with all its changes, forces and uncertainties, effects the community or region (reality checkpoint for future planning). Remembers the past, evaluates the present and creates a preferred future to end with a plan that is...
- Realistically balanced between the assets of the community and its (ever) changing environment...
- Focuses on future possibilities...
- Has no presenters, lectures, keynote addresses, games, or training sessions. Ordinary people can make perfect sense of the real world and are the experts doing the real work of learning, planning and implementation...
- Rationalization of conflict. As disagreement on certain topics is unavoidable and often legitimate, it is unrealistic to strive for consensus in a community. Rationalization of conflict is about finding the common ground between the arguments as the basis for the community to move forward...
- Builds on the notion that people are purposeful, want to learn and create their own future.

Search conference design...

The search conference resembles a funnel in its design. It begins with the widest possible perspective, then it narrows down to specific key actions, widening again as the group diffuses and implements its vision to the rest of the community.

The first part of the conference consists of a series of tasks to learn what's happening in the global and more direct environment. This sheds light on how the community is, or could be responding to environmental changes. Next the community does an appreciative inquiry into the past, exploring its history and heritage, followed by an assessment on the current state of affairs.

Based on the shared information of the environment and community itself, the second part of the conference puts people before the task of developing a vision of their community's most desirable future. The outcome is a series of agreed upon vision statements.

In the last third of the session, participants turn desirable vision statements into achievable goals by anticipating potential constraints and devising strategies to get around them. Finally, action plans and strategies for diffusion and implementation are developed.

Although search conferences are always designed to meet the specific needs of the client system, it generally looks like the adjoining figure.

Changes in the world important into the future
Trends and forces directly affecting our system
Common history of our system
Our current system: what to
keep, throw-out, create
Desirable future of
our system
Action planning
End of the search conference:
Diffusion to the community
Implementing the plan