

Moving *Forward* as an Organization

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Planning with a large group, which might encompass everyone in your entire organization, may seem like an unwieldy way to plan. But when that group works together on a task-focused agenda, people have a chance to take ownership of their past, present, and future. Participants can then confirm their mutual values, and commit to action plans grounded in a reality that they all share.

Once all participants are together, they are taken through a structured approach that is customized for the organization's circumstances and objectives. In the first exercise, they typically explore milestones and trends in their shared history. Participants focus attention on their common ground and explore trends up to the present.

Participants quickly come to understand internal, external, and even global forces that are influencing the organization. Together they create a detailed time line on a large sheet of paper. They discuss concerns, prioritize the trends they've identified, and explore common ways of viewing the course they have charted together.

Along the way they tell each other what they're proud of and what they're sorry about; but there is no necessity to resolve past differences. Often their perspectives on each other shift dramatically during these discussions, and individuals become more objective.

Then in smaller groups, participants imagine their organization in the future. They talk about what they imagine is going on in their envisioned future, and about how they overcame barriers to get there.

After sharing this information, participants develop three lists:

1. What they agree they want,
2. Potential actions to get there, and
3. Differences that remain unresolved

Simply by changing the conditions under which people interact, this technique based on *Future Search*, enables participants to bridge differences of: function, status, hierarchy, gender, age, race, ethnicity, and education. Versions of this method have been employed to help people to work together as peers on tasks of mutual concern in manufacturing, finance, insurance, medical, service, and government organizations.

Depending on circumstances and objectives, this approach may encompass 8 to 24 hours of meeting time; and it enables participants to improve cooperation in complex situations, including those of high conflict and uncertainty. A knowledgeable facilitator can design a workable process, set it in motion, and guide a diverse group of 5 to 40 participants to develop systemic improvements in their organization, working entirely from their own experience. People need no special training, orientation, vocabulary, or background to participate. They work in small groups, make reports to the large group, and join in whole group dialogues on what they are learning.

People achieve four outputs from the process--*shared values, a concept for the future, concrete goals, and an implementation strategy.*

Six principles underlie a successful meeting that uses this approach:

1. Getting the 'whole system' in the room, as much as possible.
2. Work to understand and appreciate the perspectives of others with specific communication techniques.
3. Exploring all aspects of a system before trying to fix any part.
4. Putting common ground and future action front and center.
5. Treating problems and conflicts as information, not action items.
6. Having people accept responsibility for their own decisions, actions, and plans.

Proven techniques for communication, time mapping, creative future scenarios, and common ground dialogue are all managed to support the principles, as participants explore the past, the present, the future, common ground, and action planning.

Success is most likely the outcome if:

1. Participants are interdependent (They need each other).
2. Key actors are present.
3. Participants wish to resolve their issues.
4. There is sufficient time for the scope of the task.
5. Facilitation is not overactive or over-controlling.