

## THE ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR FUTURE SEARCH

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Many recent management innovations depend on a clear and powerful image of the future as a basis for strategic decisions and as a means of enlisting commitment. Senge (1990) identifies the tension that exists between a vision of the future and a realistic grasp of the present as the creative driving force of change. The Future Search Conference (Weisbord, 1992; Weisbord & Janoff, 1995) and Search Conference (Emery & Purser, 1996) are two highly participative change processes that seek to harness this creative energy. Generally, 30 to 60 or so key members of a system come together to inquire into their overall context, activity, and hopes as a basis for collective planning and action. Through a several-day process of generating and clarifying data by system level (global, industry, organization, personal) and time (past, present, future), the participants begin to discover their common ground: not only what they have had in common but also what they face in common. From this basis, visioning of preferred futures or ideal scenarios, as well as planning, makes greater sense and further solidifies the understanding and commitment of participants.

Future searches have been conducted around the world by a variety of practitioners, with focuses ranging from developing organizational strategy and vision to revising a business school curricula, to multiple groups improving the day care in Saskatchewan (Weisbord, 1992.) Weisbord and Janoff (1995) see the future search as an evolving method that needs to vary with the particulars of a situation and that overlaps with other conference processes.

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The similarities and differences seem minor to us compared to the fact that so many folks are exploring methods for helping people experience wholeness in a time of unprecedented complexity, bewilderment, and change. . . . We believe that the best method for you is one that squares with your goals, values, and capabilities. (p. 12)

In that spirit, I have applied the future search logic to the front end of an organizational behavior (OB) course. *The OB Future Search* is a 3-hour set of activities adapted from the future search conferences. The objectives are more modest for a number of reasons, and the procedure is shorter. Unlike an ongoing enterprise, college courses are very part-time: They start fresh without history and have a limited future of 14 weeks or less. A core objective of a typical future search is a long-term, collective action requiring a depth of understanding, trust, and commitment. My immediate objective has been more individual in nature.

The OB Future Search is meant to heighten student awareness about emerging global realities and the individual and organizational adaptations necessary to thrive. The members of the class often fail to see their common ground and do not fully appreciate their interdependencies in the learning process. They are also relatively unaware of their environment and the challenges of the emerging global economy. Many do not have an adequate personal vision to energize and guide their learning and performance. Consequently, the class organization, like many work organizations, often fails to operate anywhere close to its potential.

Fully grasping one's context is, in fact, critical to knowing who we are, creatively expanding our choices, and taking responsibility (Freire, 1970). This awareness strengthens commitment to learning and increases the relevance of course topics (e.g. leadership, diversity, teams, quality, culture, etc.), individual and group assignment choices, and the active learning processes used in the course. The value of building team skills in a project and presentation is clearer. The OB Future Search becomes an organizing principle that weaves together the seemingly disparate topics and methods of a survey course.

By highlighting the personal challenges that we face, the OB Future Search challenges the often untested and inadequate mind-sets that students bring to required courses. The traditional institutional learning model emphasizes the speed and efficiency of covering material by an expert. Therefore, a "good" learner is a passive recipient of answers but experiences a felt inferiority and dependence with consequent defensive behaviors (Vaill, 1996). Vaill states that permanent white-water conditions have flatly invalidated most of the assumptions for good learning in the institutional mold. I believe that the pos-

itive momentum of this future search process and the change in individual orientation helps to establish a new, more useful learning culture. The following sections will describe this future search, some typical results, feedback from undergrad and MBA students, and a discussion of the overall impact of the future search on the course.

### **Step 1. Past Trends: Global**

I begin the process with a fairly brief explanation of the purpose and mechanics of a future search and a couple organizational examples (Weisbord, 1992). I conclude with something like the following statement:

I've adapted this organizational change process to our setting so that we can actively inquire into and understand the forces that are shaping our lives and organizations and therefore make better decisions about our commitments to learning and about some of the learning activities and topics we choose in the remainder of the course and our lives overall. So, let's get started.

The first phase is simple and fun. I ask the class to divide themselves into groups of 4. Each group is assigned one of the following time periods: the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, or 1990s. They have 5 minutes to brainstorm a list of events and milestones from that period. No discussion, just brainstorm. I give them an arbitrary target of 20.

Each group reports its results and all are invited to add more at the end. I (or various group members) record the items on the board by rough categories (see Table 1). There is time to laugh, to explain some of the events, and to show interrelationships (e.g., the technological-political moon walk of 1969 and the environmental Earth Day of 1970, or, in the social category, the political turmoil of Vietnam, the technological breakthrough of birth control pills, and the sexual revolution). Individuals, of course, are piecing together various relevant events for themselves and are beginning to see the amazing tangle of interdependencies and complexity of the events that we hear about piecemeal. For many, there is a positive energy in jumping up to the "big picture" level. If time allows, small groups are asked to grapple with the meaning and significance of the events and trends and report a short "story" (Emery & Purser 1996).

It is important to emphasize that no items are too silly or too small. All items add to the total pattern and are interrelated. The *Brady Bunch* TV debut is important because it is a part of the vast *overabundance* of pop culture information and political events that all groups generate. They have immediate conscious access to thousands of sports, fashion, TV, movie, music, and

**TABLE 1**  
**Sample Matrix of Overall Past Events**

<i>Category</i>	<i>1960s</i>	<i>1970s</i>	<i>1980s</i>	<i>1990s</i>
Social	Woodstock, free love, Beatles, tie-dye	Brady Bunch, polyester suits, disco, Elvis dies	"Me" generation, Madonna, MTV, AIDS	O.J., N.Y. Yankees, Rush Limbaugh, Barney
Political	Vietnam, draft, J.F.K., M.L.K., R.F.K.	Nixon, Carter, Iran	Reagan, Berlin, Tiananmen	Terrorism, Gulf War Clinton, Kosovo
Technological	moon		Computer, VCR, CD's	cell phones, WWW
Economic		oil crisis	M&A, deficits, S&L	global economy
Global				

consumer product items. There is also an ample supply of political and international events, but only from a U.S. perspective. The matrix helps to reveal that we don't know how much we don't know. The empty boxes are unknown. Our "news" and information systems are extremely narrow and driven by commercial and political interests.

There are also a number of positive consequences from this simple activity. Everyone participates and becomes involved due to the safety of small groups and reporting, the ease of the first task, and the fact that their data contributes to the emerging picture. Many become aware that others had important information that they didn't have, and they begin to see their peers as potential resources. Small group activity and brainstorming are seen as viable alternatives to individual work. Finally, some discover that the professor may actually know something and is a potential resource. Hope and anticipation are created by the successful group effort.

## **Step 2. Past Trends: Organizations**

In my course introduction, I draw a 50,000-year timeline with levels of technology and population that roughly traces the human presence on the planet. I use the timeline to illustrate the challenge we face in grasping both the basics and the farther reaches of human nature, particularly now, in the context of increasingly rapid and widespread change. The past 4 decades highlighted by the future search are so loaded and entrancing that it is a shock

to bring back the perspective of 50,000 years and the tremendous momentum of events that, like a tidal wave, bring us to the present. Where did organizations arise in the jumble of human activity? What have they been like the last 40 years? Why were they ignored in Step 1? Have there been changes in how we as human beings organize ourselves?

Posing these unanswered questions helps to direct the momentum of the initial step and establishes some readiness and, hopefully, a curiosity to inquire into the nature of organizations and their history. At this point, I ask small groups to again brainstorm but with a focus on both their experiences in, and the features of, big, bureaucratic organizations. I have them rule out experiences with small family-type firms and with any recent management innovations. Those without large company experience are directed to use their school experiences and part-time jobs as a basis for reflection.

These are tougher questions to address for younger students, and I often go around to groups to clarify, give examples, and encourage. I record these by bureaucratic features (e.g., chain of command, rules and regulations, etc.) and negative reactions (e.g., it's who you know, it stinks, you're being watched). I again record responses on the board and ask for examples when needed. After we establish agreement on our common picture, I give a brief talk about the origins of organizations, the steam engine, Weber, Taylor, the positive intentions and productive results of bureaucratic organization (e.g., clarity about accountability and development of expertise through specialization), and also the negative, unintended consequences in such traditional designs. I question the adequacy of a rational-economic model of human beings and look at the additional effect of Theory X assumptions. The topic of organizational history has been painlessly worked in. These ideas are now relevant to people puzzling through their own organizational experiences and the wider human context. I conclude with some focus on "Machine as God" (we're a Jesuit school) and some musings about how major advances run their course and eventually become out of sync with new realities.

### **Step 3. Emerging Trends: Global**

Usually, there is a class break around this point, and I assign some simple homework: Gather specific examples of emerging trends (two organizational and two other). This break also provides some of the "soak" time that a more typical future search spanning 3 days would provide. In our next class, small groups are asked to compile information on emerging trends in the world, and we record this on the board using the categories mentioned in Step 1. Again, there are many options as to which trends to amplify and how much to inte-

grate the various forces mentioned. Seemingly small examples illustrate trends that alter the way business is done and lead to new opportunities or jarring changes. For example, Internet shopping greatly changes the prospects for malls and delivery companies. There is always an impressive list, and I like to note the complexity and dynamic quality of the situation that we jointly face. The world isn't becoming any simpler. We have a common background and face a common future.

#### **Step 4. Organizational Design**

This is a good spot for some open systems thinking: "What are the qualities to thrive in a complex, rapidly changing environment? How well will those traditional, bureaucratic organizations do?" A usually abstract and confusing topic becomes relevant as we collectively try to grasp the nature of the emerging world and our experiences in organizations. I like to draw a steep pyramid next to the emerging trends data. We eventually come to the realization that the steep, rigid, top-down, mechanistic bureaucracy that did well enough in placid, stable conditions is in trouble. It has enormous momentum and low adaptive capacities. We try to build some ideas of what works in a complex, turbulent environment: flexibility, speed, commitment, and creativity. I ask the class to imagine another organization where a much larger percentage of the minds are involved in understanding the environment and working together to creatively respond in a timely fashion. I also wonder aloud what a class would be like with everyone cooperating, participating, and working closer to potential.

#### **Step 5. Emerging Trends: Organizations**

The small groups compile their information about emerging trends in organizations and report again. So much comes out that the recording and discussion is quite complicated, but it is also an opportunity to pull everything together and explain what some of these things really are. I make some rough categories: strategy, people/team, and human resource department trends. Of course, many items (e.g., TQM) fall across several groups, some trends are negative or exploitative, and many implementations go awry. We benefit from stories of disaster, as well as success. However, when these trends are viewed in the context of an increasingly turbulent environment and global economy and in contrast to traditional bureaucracy, the underlying open system logic of flexibility and adaptability through people becomes clear. A number of students tell me afterwards that for the first time, they have a sense

of where they stand in all of this. They have made insights and connections about their experiences and frustrations in traditional bureaucracies, new organizational programs that don't work well enough, the tumultuous world around them, and their own lack of preparedness for the emerging world.

In this step, I also like to express some of my interest and excitement with different trends and programs, and I ask them to note their own curiosities and interest because they will have opportunities to target some of their assignments later in the course. What would be good for you to know more about? Finally, to transition to the next step, I try to sharpen the awareness that their current orientation and behavior in school à la Vaill and Peters (see Step 6) will leave them ill prepared for world-class organizations. Is passively taking notes and getting by enough? Are we, as Americans, "guaranteed" continued dominance and comfortable middle-class lifestyles?

### **Step 6. Skills**

The question of skills and mind-set naturally follows from the images of emerging organizations. Again, I have small groups brainstorm some items, and we record and discuss these. "Imagine you've been assigned to a cross-functional team to meet with a team from another multinational company to discuss joint venture possibilities. What skills do you need?" I ask them individually to compare their lists against a handout that summarizes the work of previous classes and to identify some items that they might like to work on (see Appendix). Recently, I have assigned a short reading, "Thinking Like an Independent Contractor" from Peters (1994). I ask student groups to relate such ideas as "towering competence," the "age of homework," and "think resume" to our future search results and skills list. This is followed with a homework assignment: Evaluate each job and activity on your resumes for the contributions made to the development of the skills that we have identified.

### **Step 7. Opportunities in Life and at School**

What opportunities exist, right now, to build the knowledge, attitudes, and skills identified by our OB Future Search? This step involves some walking the talk and poses a difficult question for both professors and students. If the professor includes this step, he or she needs to follow through with a course design that offers opportunities to build the identified skills. It could even be possible to design the remainder of the course at this point. To do so, I might add a Step 2B (features of the traditional class) and a Step 4B to analyze this information in the context of emerging trends in the world. While I haven't

taken this challenge yet, I have experimented with various choices in individual and group projects and input on topics.

When asked to propose learning activities, the large majority of students stay inside the frame of their usual school experiences. Occasionally, a few will explore beyond the usual, and, when they do, they have sometimes underestimated the scope and difficulty of some “big” ideas: for example, video creations, basic research projects, etc. This generally requires some inquiry into their motives and objectives and some exploration of options within the frame of the course. Typically, the stronger their interest, the more willing I am to extend in supporting their effort. If we can find a way for a proposal to meet course objectives, I’ll help them run with it. For example, one student wanted to do a survey on motivation. After determining that he had some ability to work independently and the requisite statistical skills, we clarified the topic and agreed on a small research project: a literature review; a survey with a sample size of 60, statistical analysis, and charts; and a conclusion in lieu of the two main individual assignments of the course. With groups, I’m beginning to find that some will put enormous creativity into a presentation to reduce written requirements (or do so once to compensate for earlier grade problems). This leads to grading complexities but also to good learning, real team spirit, and rich material and ideas for me to “borrow” in the future. One undergraduate group videotaped themselves in role plays of skits that they had written and created to illustrate various leadership and supervisory styles. The video was both professional and wildly amusing and led to great class discussion.

In any case, the chance to struggle with these questions has value in itself. Later, when groups are formed, I prod project teams to ask what would be a *great* project (and I inquire of grade complainers if this question was really addressed). The future search has prodded me to ask the similar question, “What would be a *great* course?”

### **Evaluations and Adjustments**

As with all new experiments, feedback is important to understanding and improvement. The first few semesters that I used a future search, I managed to get a short survey out to the students at the end of the semester. Even 2½ months after future searching, the results were very positive. Many had felt that their input was important and that the active learning process created more ideas and more energy.

I was encouraged, and I began making adjustments. Some students simply required clearer instructions for the small group activities. Others wanted



reserved readings to review ideas and go further. Some requested a handout that summarized the future search, and others directed us to look at other courses and life activities as opportunities to experiment and develop skills. Several suggested to more explicitly use future search ideas throughout the semester.

More recently, I used (and analyzed) the same simple poll on both an evening MBA class ( $n = 28$ ) and two undergraduate classes ( $n = 69$ ) a week after the OB Future Search (see Table 2 for a subset of items). On a 5-point scale (*strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*), average scores per item ranged from a low of 3.3 (MBA, undergrad: "I have a better sense of my place in the world") to a high of 4.6 (MBA: "I better understand *why* these various management innovations are emerging now" and "The OB Future Search has created a positive expectation for the course"; undergrad: "Building a list of skills was useful").

The most interesting difference between the undergrads and the evening MBAs turned up in the correlations between these items. For the undergrads, items 1 through 6 were positively correlated with Item 7, a positive expectation for the course, and 2, 4, 5, and 7 were negatively related to 8, a preference for textbooks and lecture. For the MBAs, some items (1, 2, and 6) were also related to a positive expectation, but it is interesting that items 1 through 5 were also positively correlated with 6, "I feel motivated to begin working on skills." For those with wider organizational experience, the future search, to the extent that it expands one's understanding of the big picture, is a motivating factor for working on skills. For the undergrads, the active process of understanding led to a positive expectation for the course but not necessarily a desire to further their skills. Building the list of skills was valuable (4.6), but they may need more attention to specific next steps.

## Conclusion

Like a good case, the OB Future Search covers extensive ground and provides opportunities to focus on and develop a wide range of concepts, attitudes, and skills. Many topics (organizational history and design, career management, the emerging global economy, systems thinking) are covered in a new context, and most others (motivation, leadership, teams, diversity, organizational change, etc.) are framed and foreshadowed rather nicely by the search results. An interactive, experiential mode of learning is established, and open systems thinking is modeled throughout.

The OB Future Search helps the undergrad classes discover that they actually know a lot of what is going on (I've just helped organize it a little). They

**TABLE 2**  
**Sample Survey Items and Means**

<i>Items</i>	M	
	<i>Undergrads</i>	<i>MBA Students</i>
1. The future search has helped me understand the rapidly changing nature of business.	4.0	4.1
2. Role of people in successful future organizations (management innovations) seems more clear to me.	3.8	3.4
3. I better understand <i>why</i> these various management innovations are emerging now.	4.0	4.6
4. I have a better sense of "my place in the world" and what I need to do.	3.4	3.3
5. Building a list of skills required for the organizations of the future was useful.	4.6	4.4
6. I feel motivated to begin working on those skills.	4.1	4.4
7. The OB Future Search has created a positive expectation for the course.	4.3	4.6
8. I would rather have read a textbook and heard a lecture explaining that the world is changing and new skills will be needed.	1.4	1.25

get a taste of the real world, something they often call for. When we travel, new people, food, customs all provide fresh perspective in understanding one's self, relationships, and activities. Using their own experience and imagination, the search participants travel through time and space to better understand the contexts that they've been existentially "thrown" into and to therefore create deeper "purpose" for the course. The student culture looks smaller in the global context, and students begin to wonder if conformity to the norms of passivity, coolness, TV watching, consuming, and getting by is the best path. They begin to see that there are alternatives: We can be active in class; we can go out and learn; we can take small steps now; there is learning and hope in group effort; and so forth. New behavior poses substantial risks, but the gap between the required skills and attitudes and where the skills and attitudes are now provides energy to move forward.

For the evening MBAs, the search speaks directly to the organizational realities in which they find themselves. They know that change is here and increasing, but they don't know completely why. They want to join in and be successful, but many have had first-hand experiences of poorly implemented programs that have left them abused and skeptical. In fact, my last class main-

tained a semester-long focus across all other topics on the processes of bringing about change in organizations.

For all the classes, the OB Future Search is an antidote to the malaise and momentum of traditional class culture (Vaill, 1996) and is a basis for building a new culture of ownership, commitment, teamwork, and learning. The process of locating ourselves in past and emerging events, organizational and otherwise, challenges the predominant bureaucratic and pop culture worldviews. At its best, the search allows each student to start where he or she is and each to begin to organize learning based on his or her own needs and questions. It is an opportunity for students to make personally relevant the topics and skills that we feel are important. Some, for the first time, begin "living in the question" (Adams, 1996). Understanding organizational trends and specifying the necessary knowledge and skills helped many develop a positive vision of what they could be. For those, a new sense of purpose supplants the usual classroom behavior and creates anticipation and opportunities where there were none.

In fact, I found myself in this group. A good search not only acts on students but on professors as well. I began to understand that the OB Future Search had altered the classroom culture in a variety of positive ways and that I *needed* to operate on the level of culture change to be more effective in preparing my students and myself to face the future. The "intangible" benefits of a better learning culture, in addition to the more surface learnings about global change and management innovations, made the risk and the large investment in time worthwhile.

### **Appendix** **Organizational Behavior Future Search Skills List<sup>a</sup>**

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#### ***Technological Skills***

computer skills/MIS/Internet/spreadsheets, databases  
math, statistical process control (SPC), quantitative analysis  
high-tech equipment skills  
clear writing  
overall, continuous reeducation and awareness of advances (management, strategy, finance, operations, marketing, law, MIS, etc.)

#### ***Conceptual Skills***

managing change processes/organizational and work redesign  
problem solving/analytic reasoning/theory building  
culture management  
project management

overall, Open System Thinking in face of interdependent, dynamic internal and external environments; to design projects; joint ventures; change programs, strategy, and planning in global economy

#### *People Skills*

**Interpersonal:** rapport, respect, active listening, giving and receiving feedback, constructive criticism, influence, trust, encouragement, support, warmth, caring, multilingual, customer-supplier relations, diversity, networking, open-mindedness, negotiation, persuasion, job interviewing

**Team:** building team spirit, humor, pride, openness and trust, managing commitment, managing consensus, problem solving, brainstorming, creativity, decision making, goal setting, interdepartmental and organizational communications, cross-cultural teams

**Leadership:** creating goals and vision, communicating vision, loyalty, honesty, persistence, conflict resolution, empowerment, coaching, public speaking, charisma, inspirational, organizing departments and groups of groups, managing diversity

#### *Personal Skills*

**Stability:** life planning, stress/time management, financial management, moral/spiritual centering, ethical reasoning, self-discipline, self-confidence, determination, stamina, internal standards of excellence, introspection, self-objectivity

**Change:** creativity, spontaneity, tolerance for ambiguity, flexibility, initiative, risk taking, integrity, self-control, adaptable, entrepreneurial, resiliency, curiosity, & Learning How to Learn

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a. These categories are not mutually exclusive; many of the above skills could be in several categories.

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