FUTURE SEARCH CONFERENCE

We have chosen the methodology of a search conference introduced by Marvin R. Weisbord from USA and Matthias zur Bonsen called „Zukunftskonferenz" in german speaking countries. In the fall of 1999 we were conducting a future search process with key administrative and university leaders in Krems. The conference was offered as initiating a whole new way to design sustainable implementation strategies for the Danube region. Future searches as a new planning process, bring people together with diverse interests to create shared vision, innovation and collaborative action and do joint planning. The power of a future search is that it gives people the tools they need to build from common ground and to visualize a shared destination. The conference uses a systematic process in which groups design the future they want and strategies for achieving it.
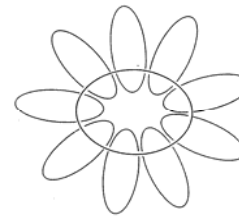
Functioning of Future Search Conferences

A search conference is a concentrated, intense way of working, well suited for strategy and planning processes. In a search conference the participants, two or three days, design the system´s most desired future and formulate creative strategies to bring that future about. Each conference is unique, tailored to specific requirements. The conference design by the conference manager provides the structure, the process and the content produced by the participants. The structure means participant selection, time limits and the sequence of group and plenary sessions outlined in the program. The process refers to interpersonal and group dynamics that take place in relation to this structure.

The way of working and the rules for group discussions combines system thinking with democratic strategy processes. People´s best thinking and positive energy are released to create tangible results, including real breakthroughs in tough situations. The Vision is made up of the group´s hopes and dreams as a common goal, a picture of what they see going on in their future.
Within search conferences there are certain rules, where conference participants are asked to find agreement, the ´common ground´ on which all can stand.

1. The whole system in one room

The method is based on ´the whole system in one room´, so that everybody can join in the necessary decisions. The process deals with the total system and produces an integrated plan. In today´s complex world, a system-wide analysis of key issues and multi-dimensional responses to them are necessary to meet the challenges of rapidly changing situations for any organization or business. Planning is done by the people who will carry it out. This approach assumes that each planning team has the wisdom and experience to decide what they need, and provides a systematic way of making those decisions.

2. Focuses on the future and on possibilities more than problems

Each participant telling about an orientation about the background based on historical understanding. Search processes also assume that development is a continuing process, where the past and the future meet in the present. You must know a system´s history to

understand its present situation, and you must understand the present to influence the future in desired directions. The conference focuses on the future, and on possibilities more than problems. The way of working leads to cross-disciplinary and cross-functional cooperation.
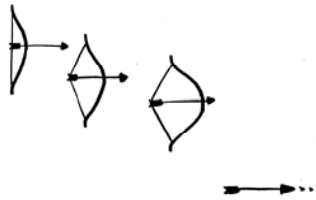
3. Utilize selfmanagement in group working, for reducing dependency and refusal [5]

The key to social responsibility is that stakeholders have an equal chance to influence decisions. We seek to build an atmosphere of trust that yields a deeper and non-superficial search of the trends in the environment. A general rule for all groups is that members have an equal chance to express their views. All opinions and perspectives must be respected by all the participants.

4. Discovering common ground

Show how you can use strategic conferences, based on discovering common ground and imagining ideal futures, to improve planning within and between all sectors of government, education and administration.

THE SEARCH CONFERENCE PROCESS

Background

The seminar "**Ecological design in the solar age**" will give the participants the philosophy behind ecological design and planning applied in practice, in particular in the field of transdisciplinary management for integrated land utilisation. **Learning** as integral part

of planning has become an important area of practice. We have chosen the methodology of a ´future search conference´, that gives people the tools they need for developing a shared vision, systems thinking and team learning.

The actual plan for our future search workshop was depending on the time available, the number of participants and their special needs. We have chosen a workshop for three days, with plenary presentations and discussions with lectures from invited persons, to develop planning issues based on consensus, and that creative options would enable actions for the summer semester.

Introduction

First we will get an overview and a detailed information about the Neusiedlersee region. We will get new ideas for our planning considerations.

The vice major of Neusiedl Mr. Halbritter was presenting the strategy concept of the city. Prof. Kyselka was offering new planning development models in the region of Moravia, Western Slovakia and the Weinviertel. Dr. Kurt Puchinger was introducing an INTERREG project "Joint Regional Development Strategy for the Vienna, Bratislava, Györ Region.

Phase 1   **Searching for ´Common Ground´**

The process started with a scan of what´s happening in the world surrounding the participants. We were using brainstorming for sharing common information about the project ´landscape without borders´. All inputs were recorded on flip charts and hung on the wall in the council- room of the city hall. This scanning of the environment was setting the tone for the workshop. This simple technology assists in the symbolic representation of the shared world of the participants.

They can see that their persception is legitimately a part of the whole group.

Phase 2 **Desirable Trends – Mind map**

In the second phase attention is drawn to the present. Assuming a thorough phase one, the workshop repeats the above procedure in the second phase. This time the group brainstorms trends that are washing over the focal system. The probable trends are those they consider likely to extend into the future weather they are desired or not.

The upcoming challenges for the project were worked out through **mind mapping**. Using brainstorming, the group suspends judgement and evaluation and allows for conflicting observations to be expressed. In a "landscape of thoughts", which had been devised together, the participants collected all the relevant themes and arranged them in a clear form.

In a second step, these themes were evaluated with the help of stickers (**diagnosis**). This method allows all the participants to quickly gain an overview of the complexity of the issue. Such an overview is an important tool of information and orientation in the process of developing one´s opinion and intentions. The group then moves to sort these trends into desirable and probable categories.

Phase 3 **Prouds and Sorries**

In this phase attention is drawn to the evolution of the present situation in the three lateral region of Slovakia, Hungary and Austria, why and how it came into being, what sanctions it had and has, what its current character is. Participants usually find this phase particularly engaging, especially when past constraints have inhibited the sharing of such information.

Phase 4 **Future Scenarios**

This phase explicitly calls for creativity and innovation. The future of the system can now be designed using ideal characteristics that reflect the participants values. This phase is not directed toward concrete strategies or solutions, although they might be suggested during brainstorming. On the contrary, we suggest people devise curative, unconventional and surprising conceptions of what the system ought to be. This kind of activity is best performed in small groups. When a small group generates enough design characteristics they switch their work with another group.

Phase 5 **Formulation strategies**

The formulation of strategies follow the same mode as the previous phase. Four small groups generate the means by which the idealized future can be attained and develop a list of strategies that the group endorses. A copy of the idealized future document is supplied to each work group so that the targeted future is the same negotiated future they can strive for.

Phase 6 **Plans for action**

At the end, we produce action plans. In our process, the first step is to identify causes of problems in a definite number of areas. Groups then suggest possible remedies The next step for each problem area is specifying what can be done after the conference by whom, how and when. Students and small groups may concentrate on different problems. Finally, each group present integrated plans with priorities on short and long term actions and discuss these in the plenary.