

FUTURE SEARCH CONFERENCE IN ASPERN SEESTADT

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. The Institute of Soil Science at BOKU in Vienna is preparing an Erasmus IP in the new Town of Aspern Seestadt this year. In Vienna there will be a change of course for an intelligent city, with new forms of governance to integrate increasingly different interests of heterogeneous urban societies, establishing a stakeholder process for a masterplan “ Smart City Wien 2012-2015

Future search conferences as a new planning process, bring people together with diverse interests to create shared vision, innovation and collaborative action and do joint planning. We need a new paradigm in planning. Weisbord for example, describes idealized planning and interactive processes of learning, empowering, democratizing and partnering. He shows within the functioning of future search conferences, how to increase everybody's power at all levels, sharing information and fostering learning processes.

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

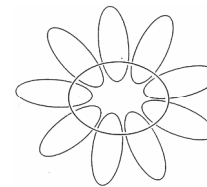
A future search conference is a concentrated, intense way of working, well suited for strategy and planning processes. In a search conference the participants, two or three days, design the system's most desired future and formulate creative strategies to bring that future about.

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.

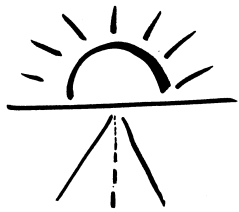
1. The whole system in one room

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.



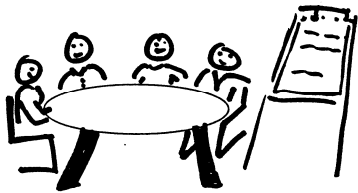
This approach assumes that each planning team has the wisdom and experience to decide what they need, and provides a systematic way of making those decisions.

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



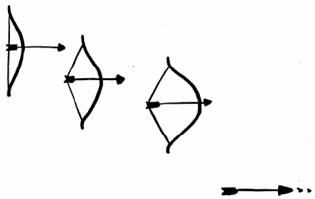
Each participant telling about an orientation about the background based on historical understanding. Search processes also assume that development is a continuing process, where the past and the future meet in the present. You must know a system's history to understand its present situation, and you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



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 summer school “**Permaculture Design Course in Aspern Seestadt**” will give the participants the philosophy behind ecological design and planning applied in practice, in particular in the field of transdisciplinary management for renewable resources in permaculture and sustainable land use. Permaculture design is a system of assembling conceptual, material and strategic components in a pattern which functions to benefit life in all its forms. **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 two 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 try to get an overview and a detailed information about our personal experiences – where do we come from, what are we doing, what do we want to share with the group? We will get new ideas for our planning considerations.

Phase 1 Searching for 'Common Ground'

The process is starting with a scan of what's happening in the world surrounding the participants. We were using brainstorming for sharing common information about the project 'Permaculture Design Course'. All inputs will be recorded on flip charts and hang on the wall in the

seminar room. This scanning of the environment is 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 perception is legitimately a part of the whole group.

Phase 2 External and Desirable Trends – Mind map

In the second phase attention is drawn to the present. First we will analyse external trends which may have consequences to our work. 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 whether they are desired or not.

The upcoming challenges for the project are 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 has to be devised together, the participants are collecting all the relevant themes and are arranging them in a clear form.

In a next step, these themes will be 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 world. A world in transition needs new ways of strategic thinking. 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. 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 during the Intensive program in Aspern Seestadt by whom, how and when.

The Students will work in small groups on themes of ecological design (community gardens, municipal composting, edible landscape, solidarity economic project to improve multifunctional land-use systems responding to the bioregion, etc.) and may concentrate on different problems. Finally, each group present plans with different priorities for various actions, what they are going to do within the permaculture design course and discuss these in the plenary.