2. FUTURE SEARCH CONFERENCE

(This section is excerpted from VanDeusen, 2000.)

Basic format: Workshop conference, with emphasis placed on self-managed small group discussions.

Purpose: Use a “whole system” approach, and a future perspective to guide planning in the present.

Uses: When issue or problem resolution may require a change in organizational mission, functions or structure, i.e., anytime?
Duration: Two to three days.

Participants: 40 to 80 people representing stakeholder groups. Over half may be internal to the organization.

Key factors: Guiding principles:
- Get the whole system to the room
- Share values and issues within a personal and global context
- Focus on creating, not problem solving
- Focus on learning, not teaching
- Support equal status
- Emphasize personal commitment and ownership
- Use self-managing teams
- Develop shared meaning

If the whole system is present, action plans can be developed as an integral part of the event.

Identify and build on shared values and beliefs rather than attempting to build commitment by “solving a long list of problems.”

“Tasks ... enable people to identify the unifying threads that usually get lost in the midst of trying to deal with everyday, transactional issues.” (VanDeusen, 2000, p. 13)

Once the common ground has been elicited, participants are able to sustain a collaborative spirit even as they take action in different parts of the system.

Steps:
**Past.** Identification of significant past milestones builds a shared appreciation of and context for the issues.

**Present.** Significant trends and themes are charted: how are stakeholders responding? Identify strengths and weaknesses of the present system. Note differences but do not resolve.

**Future.** Mixed groups develop and present scenarios of preferred futures for the organization or theme. Horizon is often 10-20 years.

**Common ground.** Identification of common themes and values that crosscut all scenarios from the basic framework for unified planning and development. “This is where a future search departs from other strategic planning
approaches. Broad commitment is generated concurrently with intellectual work on the plan content.”

**Action planning.** Elements from the common-ground scenario are transformed into areas for action planning; participants work in groups to develop the plans; initial drafts are shared and feedback obtained; next steps are discussed.

**Post-conference:** Task forces/work teams take over development and implementation.

**Review meeting.** A one-half to full-day review meeting is held between one and three months after the conference; annual reviews are common.

**Critical success factors:**
- **Leadership:** conference planners must identify focal issues around which the conference is organized.
- Facilitation teams manage task and emotional vectors in the work of small and large-group activities.
- Purpose must be clear and meaningful.
- Participation: wide enough to ensure that all relevant perspectives (all parts of the system) are present.

“The structure of the conference is of high import. Weisbrod and Janoff (1995) recommend that facilitators not tinker with the design principles that they have set forth ...” (VanDeusen, 2000, p. 13)