

SEARCH CONFERENCE

What is it?

The search conference was designed in the early sixties by Fred Emery and Eric Trist while they worked together at Tavistock Institute in Great Britain. It is a highly effective planning technique that has been used around the world by business, public sector, not for profit organizations and communities. Traditional strategic planning sessions usually start with a focus on issues, problems and constraints, but the search conference turns this sequence on its head. The search conference is designed to have participants focus on just the opposite: to concentrate on identifying the broader context and changing trends. Only after opening up to the influence of the world outside does the conference proceed to look at issues that are close to home. The search conference design requires people to suspend judgement about specific outcomes until a shared overall picture has emerged. In simple terms, the design moves participants to first take a broad look outside of their immediate system, and then gradually into the agreed set of purpose and actions.

How Does it Work?

The conference agenda is designed to help the participants explore a desirable future of the organization.

There are three phases:

Phase One – Environmental Appreciation:

During this phase the participants look at the changes in the world and how these affect their system.

Phase Two – Systems Analysis:

Participants explore the unique character of their system, where it has come from and where it wants to go – history of the system, analysis of the present system and the creation of a desirable future for the system.

Phase Three – Integration of systems and environment:

Participants concentrate on bringing this information down to earth in the form of an action plan. This is accomplished by looking at the major constraints that will be encountered in implementing the desirable future. Participants then work on a plan to overcome these constraints, including who will do what, when and identify which/if other people need to be involved in the implementation phase.

This methodology respects the knowledge and expertise of all individuals that are active in the system, rather than relying on outside experts.

What makes it different from other planning sessions?

The search methodology has been used around the world for more than 30 years. By applying a few basic principles, this planning strategy produces results in 16 hours that often take months or years, or are simply unthinkable. It bridges lines of culture, class, gender, ethnicity, power and hierarchy by working as peers on tasks of mutual benefit. Freed from having to resolve intractable conflicts or problems, participants discover common ground they never knew existed. The search conference highlights how much more we can do when we open the door to people we don't normally associate with, think globally before acting locally, focus on future aspirations rather than past problems and conflicts, and take responsibility for acting. Instead of trying to change each other, participants change the conditions under which they interact.

Who participates in a search conference?

Stake holder groups are formed and representatives from each group are selected and invited to participate. It is critical to have the right people attend. By this I mean, the people who have a stake in the matter, who have knowledge and information to share, and who have the authority and ability to carry out action plans.

What do participants need to know about the search conference?

A search conference is like a jigsaw puzzle solving. The focus is on putting the right pieces of strategy together that will produce the desirable future. In a search conference, each person contributes knowledge and expertise about some pieces of the overall puzzle. Participants bring their own work and life knowledge. We ask all participants to read some material prior to the search conference, and also ask everyone to bring a current news story or magazine article that reflects an event, trend or development that they think is shaping the future of their system. It could be anything that describes the possible future of the system.

Who has used Search Conferencing?

Motorola, Microsoft, Exxon Chemical, Hewlett Packard, Ford Electronics, Levi Strauss, Xerox, American Police Forces, the Public Sector and many others.

Why would participants want to come to a Search Conference?

It is an opportunity to:

- Contribute to charting the course of the future of their system
- Understand current issues
- Participate in a methodology that is innovative and new

- Engage in creating plans to be more effective
- Resolve issues
- Dialogue from a new perspective
- Create a collaborative working atmosphere
- Find solutions to current and future challenges

Conditions for experiencing a successful Search Conference:

1. Search conference sponsors must understand the participative, democratic and open process of the search conference; the participants attending the conference will usually be the ones who take responsibility for the implementation and diffusion of plans. Sponsors must understand that they cannot manipulate the agenda to steer participants in a predetermined direction.
2. The purpose of the Search Conference must be crystal clear to all participants.
3. The right participants must be invited (see comments above)