

Future perfect

“The project grew ... with no design and no clauses (other than an injunction to think in the future perfect and create a much cleaner Sydney Harbour) ... in an ecologically symbolic representation of the success of the project, three 80-ton whales came into the harbour to frolic under the famous Sydney Harbour Bridge ... whales had never been this far into the Harbour before: The Olympic dream appeared to have been spectacularly realized.” Pitsis et al (2003)

The big idea

Using a future perfect approach to planning helps to achieve a shared vision of the future. It is a form of time travel that encourages you to consider preferred futures and their potential impact on what you are doing now. The process involves scenario planning, which is designed to generate a range of plausible futures to move towards a preferred vision of the future. It is a collective and creative approach that moves people out of their more usual focus on present and short-term problems.

Purpose

The purpose of using futures search is to allow organisations and/or communities to learn more about themselves and their aspirations by bringing everyone together. Together you create a preferred view of the future, which in turn generates practical action planning for how to get there. This approach generally has three uses (Weisbord & Janoff, 2000):

- It supports those involved in creating and acting upon a shared future vision for their business or community
- It enables those involved to discover shared intentions and take responsibility for their own plans
- The events can help groups implement a shared vision that already exists

It is probably best known through its use as part of the Olympic Games preparation in Sydney and by [Shell Petroleum](#).

The tool

There are a number of steps involved in scenario planning:

1. Identify the issue or problem: it is better to start from the inside out so work with a group who have a direct interest in what you need to address. You are asking a clear question 'what do we need to know about the future so as to address or improve ... ?' Heinz did scenario planning that looked at the future of the tomato! You could look at the future of theatre or design or precious metal etc, depending on your area of interest

Review the past:

2. Invite a group of relevant stakeholders to attend the planning session/s
3. Prepare three timelines and place them around the space for people to complete major milestones in their lives. They should be labelled global, local and personal

Explore the present:

4. Share trends and experiences in the present – you can ask people to bring newspaper cuttings as examples of trends that are happening now
5. Outline all the key drivers for change at macro (you can use PESTLE analysis for this aspect) and micro levels
6. Ask people to consider what they are proud of in the present and what they are sorry about in terms of what is happening
7. Rank the drivers or trends by importance and uncertainty in relation to your starting inquiry question. This sorting will result in the formation of the scenarios you develop

Create preferred future scenarios:

8. Build four future scenarios based on the most important and most uncertain key driving forces in the previous step
9. Develop the scenarios into plausible stories and as far as possible incorporate both desirable and undesirable features within the scenarios. Beware a tendency to become overly pessimistic
10. Detail what might happen under each scenario. They can be presented as a view from a character you have created who lives in that future or you could imagine the front page of a newspaper from that time – any mechanism that builds a good story

Action planning:

11. From the stories of the future, ask the groups to create three lists – ‘common future’ (common themes that have emerged – what everyone wants), ‘potential projects’ (concrete proposals for how to get what you want) and ‘not agreed’ (areas of disagreement or confusion that have not been worked through yet)
12. Shortlist potential projects and discuss the ‘not agreed’ issues
13. Form action teams and complete group and personal actions plans
14. Plan a review meeting when everyone will come together to update on progress

Take the next step

Consider an issue that you are passionate about. Imagine planning a future search conference to address the issue. Who would you invite? What would your question be? What are the drivers in the present that make it an important issue for you? What preferred futures might you consider?

Top tips

- Try and get as many people as you can, who are affected by the issue, in the room together
- Focus on common ground and the future rather than problems and conflicts
- Think in terms of a global context to generate local action
- Make use of other resources to support your search, such as the [Future Search Network](#), [Third Sector Foresight](#), [Global Future](#), [International Futures](#), [Mapping the Global Future](#) and [Outsights 21 Drivers](#)

References

- Pitsis, T. S., Clegg, S. R., Marosszeky, M., & Rura-Polley, T. (2003). Constructing the Olympic Dream: A Future Perfect Strategy of Project Management. *Organization Science*, 14(5), 574-590.
- Weisbord, M., & Janoff, S. (2000). *Future Search: An Action Guide to Finding Common Ground in Organizations and Communities* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

