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Using Future Search to Address Wicked Systemic Problems (1.5 CE)

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Abstract

Most of the problems plaguing the world, including many facing psychologists, can be classified as "wicked problems," that is, problems with so much complexity that they defy easy solutions. This paper will outline Future Search (FS), a proven effective method that can be applied to wicked problems in a way that leads to paradigm shifts, out-of-the-box thinking, and the building of new coalitions and relationships. These benefits accompany the primary benefit of FS: helping an organization or community and their stakeholders move forward together to find solutions to wicked problems with high degrees of consensus and commitment. As an example, the impact that FS has on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion is discussed.

Wicked Problems

When we look around us at the world we live in, it is easy to feel despair. Issues such as poverty, the income and wage gap, affordable housing, rising healthcare costs, political polarization, discrimination of all types, intractable international conflicts, and climate change (to name just a few!) seem to have no solution, and no end in sight. Despite lots of experts, endless study, repeated attempts at new policy or laws, and training, deep and lasting agreement is rare, and the problems remain. These problems have no obvious solutions. One way to categorize these types of conundrums is to classify them as "wicked problems." The first known use of this label was in 1967, in an editorial in the journal Management Science, in which C. West Churchman

defined wicked problems as "that class of social system problems which are ill-formulated, where the information is confusing, where there are many clients and decision makers with conflicting values, and where the ramifications in the whole system are thoroughly confusing" (Churchman, 1967). Note that the term "wicked," as used here, does not refer to something evil, but rather as resistant to change or difficult to understand. Others have since expanded the definition, and for those interested in precise criteria for how to define a problem as "wicked," I refer you to the Wikipedia page on wicked problems, at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wicked_problem. Regardless of the formal definition, one can easily recognize a wicked problem as one that defies the typical approaches such as meetings, conferences, summits, commissions, laws, campaigns, training, hiring experts, new policies, etc.

A particularly poignant example of a wicked problem is that of civil unrest. In 1968, the Kerner Commission studied the urban rioting that descended on and tore apart American cities such as Detroit, Newark, Los Angeles, and others. One of the witnesses to the Kerner Commission was Kenneth B. Clark, who said, "In referring to the reports of earlier riots, I had read of the 1919 riots in Chicago, and it is as if I were reading the report of the investigative committee on the Harlem riots of 1935, the report of the investigative committee of the Harlem riots of 1943, the report of the Macomb commission on the Watts riot… I must again, in

candor, say to you, members of this commission, it is a kind of Alice in Wonderland with the same moving picture re-shown over and over again: the same analysis, the same recommendations, and the same inaction." (quoted in Cobb & Guariglia, 2021).

Though these examples have been taken from social issues, public and private organizations can also face wicked problems. Perhaps these don't have the wide reach of the social issues mentioned above; nevertheless, for those toiling in an organization they are no less frustrating and maddening. Planning for the future in a turbulent economic environment, deciding on the design of a new product, merging two organizations, starting a new business – these can all present wicked problems for people in these situations.

There can be a vicious cycle when traditional approaches are applied to wicked problems. People who are components of the system suffering from a wicked problem can have reactions that end up making the problem worse. Grudging acceptance of a harmful status quo, sabotage, work-arounds that don't address root causes, funding going to the wrong places, and plunging morale can all exacerbate wicked problems. Under these circumstances a solution may be found, and those involved often breathe a sigh of relief and move on to new fields. Those not involved have a sense of frustration, sometimes opposition, and even sabotage. All of this sets the scene for recurrence down the road.

So, what is it that dooms traditional solutions? The easiest way to understand this is to look at the whole system (Fig. 1) (Phillips, 2022). As you can see by the schematic representation, and as we all know, everything connects to everything.

Fig 1. Complexity: everything connects to everything
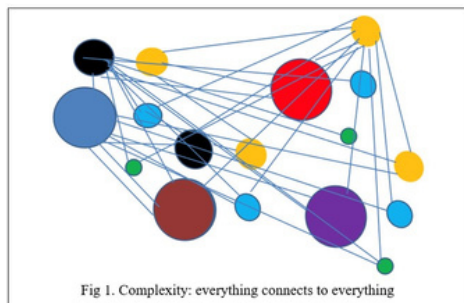
But in an attempt to make a problem manageable, traditional attempts at solutions focus only on one aspect of the system, thereby ignoring the interconnected complexity inherent in systems (Fig 2) (Phillips, 2022).

Fig 2. Complexity is dismissed to make the problem manageable
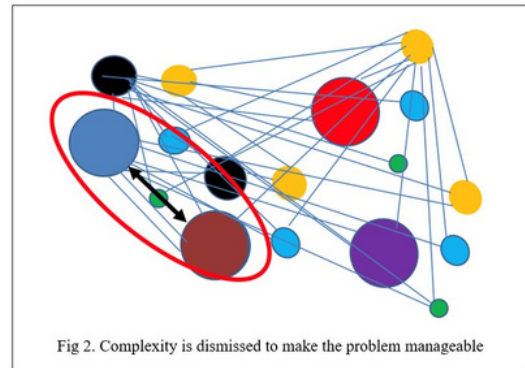
And focusing on only one aspect or one relationship in a system ignores reality (Fig 3) (Phillips, 2022).

Fig 3. Reality is ignored
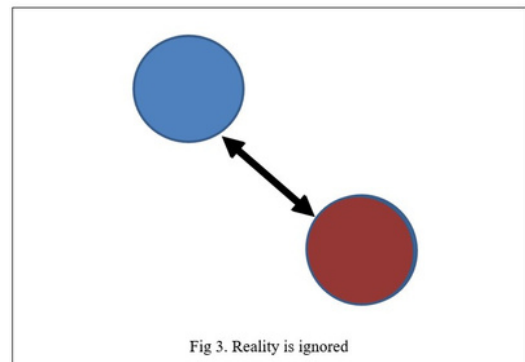
The major shortcomings of applying traditional approaches to wicked problems are the failure to consider the whole system, the error of not including all stakeholders to the problem when designing solutions, and the problem of telling people what the solution is rather than co-creating them with all the stakeholders. Future Search (Weisbord & Janoff, 2010) avoids all three of these fatal flaws.

Introducing Future Search
Future Search (FS) was developed in the 1980s by Marv Weisbord, an organizational development consultant, and Sandra Janoff, a psychologist. Basing the method on group dynamics, systems theory, and social

psychology, Weisbord and Janoff designed a process that "gets the whole system in the room" (Weisbord & Janoff, 2010) to discover the common ground that exists in multiple stakeholders, and then harnessing this to spur these stakeholders to take action to address the wicked problem in their midst. Since its introduction, the method has been used hundreds of times, in sectors as diverse as business, communities, health systems, human services, religious congregations, school districts, higher education, environment, and government.* In addition to a design for how to get stakeholders together for planning and action, FS also encompasses a facilitation style, based in part on the differentiation and integration theory of Yvonne Agazarian (1997).

Future Search is based on four principles:
1. Get the whole system in the room
2. View the whole system before planning
3. Focus on common ground and the future, not on conflicts and the past
4. Self-management and responsibility for action

Get the whole system in the room
It's easy to say you have to get the whole system in the room, but what does this really mean? How do you define the system and where do you draw the boundary? When thinking about which stakeholders to include, who A.R.E. I.N.?

A – people with Authority on the issue (government officials, legislators, regulators, company leaders, decision-makers)
R – people with Resources of money, time, energy (foundations and philanthropists, government funding sources, retirees, activists)
E – people with Expertise on the issue (academics, scholars, researchers)
I – people with Information on the issue (workers on the front lines, media, journalists, PR experts)
**N** – people with Need around the issue (citizens, clients, customers

* For examples in each sector, see https://futuresearch.net/sectors/. For a partial list of sponsors, see https://futuresearch.net/about/sponsors/.

While not necessarily exhaustive, the handy acronym provides a good starting point at defining the system, and who the stakeholders are. People planning a FS need to ask themselves, who or what group will we wish were present if they were not? Whose input would be important to get? Whose view of the system is essential in crafting plans for the future? Whose involvement do we need if we are going to take some actions? And maybe most important and most difficult: who is likely to resist any change if we don't include them?

View the whole system before planning
Typically, stakeholders are very knowledgeable about their part of the system. The common parlance is to talk about people being in their silos. But when people only know their own part of the system, they are blind to causal relationships that are essential to the systemic ecology. They will find, to their peril, that such blindness will lead to unintended consequences, and often strident resistance to steps they might want to take. The Indian parable of the six blind men and the elephant is a playful way to understand this problem (Fig. 4) (illustration by Hans Møller, used with permission).

Fig 4. Six Blind Men and the Elephant
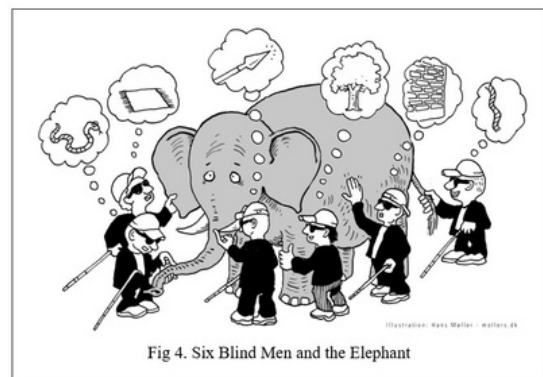
As you can see, the man touching the elephant's ear, thinks he's encountered a carpet. The one handling the trunk "sees" a snake in his mind's eye. The one touching the tusk, a spear; the guy grasping the leg thinks it's a tree; the one stroking the body imagines a wall; and the one pulling the tail thinks it's like a rope. Each one is somewhat correct, but they are all fundamentally wrong – none of them can conceive of the whole animal, and how all the parts are connected. This is what happens when people fail to see beyond their own silo or turf.

Focus on common ground and the future, not on conflicts and the past

One of the most common traps in tackling wicked problems is the idea that first you must resolve conflicts between stakeholders. But most of these situations include conflicts that have resisted resolution for ages. Future Search envisions that these conflicts may not be resolvable, but that it's not necessary to heal past schisms in order to move forward. People looking at past conflicts get more solidified in their positions and have trouble thinking out-of-the-box and finding creative solutions. Instead, FS entails using the past conflicts as data, not to be ignored, but also not to be worked on. By keeping the focus on the future that everyone desires, creativity is unleashed, positions are softened, and people find they have more in common than they realized.

Self-management and responsibility for action

Another thing that trips up well-intentioned approaches to wicked problems is the idea that "someone else will do it." In FS, the stakeholders manage their own involvement rather than project the need to act on their leaders, or on the facilitators. Many large group interventions require a large consulting or facilitation team to cover all the stakeholder groups. Not so for Future Search. In general, two facilitators guide a planning group, and then facilitate the structure of the FS, setting the conditions for the participating stakeholders to do their best work. The philosophy is that when you create the right conditions for success, and provide emotional safety, large groups can accomplish amazing things. In addition, FS involves public commitment to specific actions, and there is a follow-up process that provides accountability, thereby providing the mechanism for stakeholders to take full responsibility for their plans and actions.

If the four principles are followed carefully, at the end of a FS the results are profound.
1. A "common ground agenda" of usually 8-12 items to which everyone agrees (a unanimity model, not consensus or majority).
2. Complete buy-in to the common ground agenda and commitment to implementing it, so no need to go out and "sell" it to stakeholder groups, since they all had a hand in creating it.
3. Action plans to implement each element of the common ground agenda.
4. A structure to support the implementation of the common ground agenda.
5. A follow-up structure to insure implementation of the common ground agenda.

But there are also some important side-effects that naturally come along with the results above.
- Participants learn how to conduct productive meetings.
- Leadership is developed as participants take up leadership roles during the Future Search.
- Coalitions that did not previously exist can develop.
- Funding opens up, since funding sources were included in the FS, and had a hand in creating the common ground agenda.
- All stakeholder groups will be heard and will have input, minimizing complaints about views being ignored.
- The structure provides an opportunity for people who don't normally speak with one another to interact and learn about other perspectives and initiatives they might not be aware of, enabling a great degree of creativity.
- It builds the community and increases interdependence between stakeholder groups.
- Leaders love this method because they know the community is 100% behind them.
- By engaging in an exploration of the total system, stakeholders gain an expansive perspective of the issue at hand.

What Happens in a Future Search?
A Future Search takes about 16 hours, spread over three days – typically the first day is an afternoon or evening, followed by a full day, and ending with the morning of the third day. Note that the design specifically calls for two "sleeps" between the days that come at very specific points in the process. These are strategically important to allow people to "sleep on it" at key moments (details on following page). The highly interactive and experiential conference is broken up into five parts: review of the past, survey of current trends, envisioning a desired future, discovering common ground, and action planning. In the process of engaging in these activities, participants meet in

different types of small and large groups. In small mixed groups made up of representatives of each stakeholder group, each small group is essentially a microcosm of the whole system. They also meet in their stakeholder groups and as one large group.

Reviewing the past

After introductions of the method and a chance for participants to get to know one another, they fill in with colored markers large blank timelines of the past (usually set at 30 years or so) hung on the walls, each about twelve feet long by 2 feet high. One timeline contains global events, another contains peoples' personal events (e.g., marriages, children, graduations, deaths), and a third concentrates on the issue or organization/community that is the focus of the FS. After these are filled in, the timelines are moved so that they are aligned on one wall, and patterns may become apparent in the relationship between global events, personal events, and the issue at hand. Mixed groups analyze the timelines to tell the story of their system in the past.

First focusing on the past and not yet looking to the future, but rather sharing between stakeholder groups, fosters deep listening. This experience is at times transformational: "Wow! I had no idea. No idea of what it was like for you." Such insights lay a foundation for a more compassionate and collaborative approach to the future. Participants from extremely diverse stakeholder groups find that they share common human challenges and face them with similar values. This emotional connectivity begins to form a sense of community on which to build common ground, providing a solid foundation for further work.

Surveying current trends

Once the timelines are filled in and analyzed, participants' attention shifts to the present. The entire group of all participants creates a mind map of current external trends that are impacting their system. See Figure 5 for an example of a mind map of current trends from an actual FS.

Fig 5. Mind Map of Current Trends – Sustainable Cherry Hill
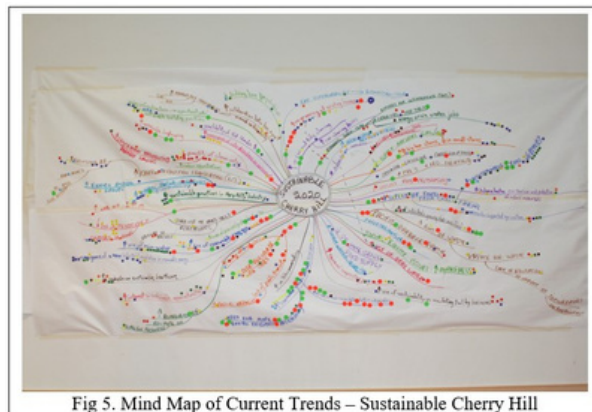
Each stakeholder group is assigned a color and given a strip of adhesive dots. The participants put dots on the mind map to indicate the current trends they think are most important for the group to address in their planning, and the result is a quantitative indication of the priorities of the system. In addition, the different colored dots give a detailed view of the differing priorities of each stakeholder group.

As you can see from Figure 5, the mind map is quite complex, reflecting the reality of the system. Participants understandably may feel overwhelmed at what they are facing. The first sleep happens at this point to give people a chance to refuel and renew their enthusiasm, rather than get bogged down by the feelings generated by the mind map.

The following morning, stakeholder groups meet and analyze the mind map, looking in particular at where their colored dots have bunched up, signaling the priorities of their group. As with every phase of small group sessions, each group reports out their analysis. Once the external current reality of the system is fully explored in this way, the next activity calls for the stakeholder groups to look at their own attempts to address the external trends. This takes the form of "Prouds and Sorries," which can be the emotional turning point of the FS conference. The groups have a chance to both crow a little about what they are proud of, but also must own up to the ways that they feel they have fallen short. It's a turning point because it acts as a great equalizer when people at the top of the system (those with authority), those at the bottom of the

system (the clients or customers), and everyone in between have to admit their regrets. It changes the feeling in the room and equalizes the stakeholder groups in a way that nothing else can.

Here, too, staying focused on the present and not yet what should be happening or could be happening in the future, continues to build a common listening, understanding, and appreciative foundation for the next step.

Envisioning a desired future

With a feeling of warmth generated by the Prouds and Sorries, the mixed groups meet over lunch to start envisioning the future they desire for their system. They are given the assignment to make a creative presentation of where they want their community or organization to be in, say, five years in the future. The planning committee has provided props for these presentations, so there is a buzz of activity as the groups dream of the world they want to inhabit and let the creative juices flow. Each group gets seven minutes to perform their presentation (e.g., a skit, a song, a poem), while everyone else takes note of what common elements appear in the future visions, as well as what is particularly striking or innovative, out-of-the-box, and creative.

Once all groups have presented, the mixed groups meet to share and compare the lists they have each made and collate them into one list. As the groups report out their lists to the full conference, these group lists are then collated into one list that reflects the desired future of everyone. This collated list becomes the seeds of the common ground agenda.

Discovering common ground

The whole group meets now and has what is called the "reality dialog" when the components of the desired outcome must be massaged into realistic goals. In addition, since the model is a unanimity model, everyone must agree to each component. This is where skilled facilitation becomes very important. If even one person presents objects to an item, then that goal is put on a separate list, "things we don't agree on," and it is no longer worked as part of the FS.

After the list is finalized as the common ground agenda, it is the end of the second day, and time for another "sleep." The facilitators ask everyone to go home and "sleep on it," and come back the third morning ready to decide which item on the common ground agenda they would like to work on.

Action planning

On the morning of the third day, the items of the common ground agenda are posted on the walls around the room, and participants are instructed to "vote with your feet" and go to the item they would like to work on. Thus, committees are formed as "action teams" to start planning how to implement these goals. They are asked to come up with three things they will do in the first three months, and three things they will do in the first three years. When they report out, they also ask for help from whatever other group's involvement is needed, and they publicly announce when their next meeting will be, so that others may join their action team.

About six to nine months after the FS conference, a follow up meeting is held at which all the action teams report on their progress, as well as what help they might need from others.

Applications

As you read these steps, it is likely that potential applications of FS are occurring to you, pulled from your own community or organization. It can be interesting to think about who the stakeholders might be, using the A.R.E. I.N. acronym. For examples of where FS has been used around the world, and in different applications and sectors, see https://futuresearch.net/sectors/. There you can read stories from sectors such as Business, Communities and Human Services, Congregations, Education, Environment, Government, and Healthcare.

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion

Perhaps one of the most wicked problems facing many organizations and communities is how to increase Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI). How does Future Search address DEI? Inherently, when you "get the

whole system in the room," you are, by definition, insuring diversity and inclusion. But, how this operates in practice really depends on the FS Planning Committee. Along with inviting participants with an eye to functional diversity using the A.R.E. I.N. guidelines, it is important for the planning group to keep careful track of demographic diversity as well. Variables such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual identity, and age are all important, but different situations may make some of these variables more or less vital for that specific application. FS facilitators can help the planning group pay attention to these factors.

In addition, as the planning group is assigning participants into the mixed groups, they can also take steps to see that each mixed group has identity diversity. In this way, the mixed groups are, as much as possible, microcosms of the system in terms of demographics, along with the functional diversity insured by the FS structure.

But FS goes further in promoting DEI. As corporations and communities have paid more attention to DEI issues, and have made attempts to raise consciousness to them, many interventions have been tried. But experience has shown that some work better than others (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016; Pedulla, 2020). Many of the techniques used today include sending employees to DEI programs. Studies indicate that these efforts can be counterproductive, creating a backlash. As Dobbin and Kalev (2016) report, "Yet laboratory studies show that this kind of force-feeding can activate bias rather than stamp it out" (emphasis added). They hypothesize about peoples' innate tendency to become oppositional to attempts at control, just to assert their individual autonomy. They go on to write:

> "… companies get better results when they ease up on the control tactics. It's more effective to engage managers in solving the problem, increase their on-the- job contact with female and minority workers, and promote social accountability—the desire to look fair-minded. … Some of the most effective solutions aren't even designed with diversity in mind." (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016).

When an organization or community uses FS to focus on the future, seeking to discover common ground, they are engaging in a solution that is not designed to address diversity, but rather to transform the system. But in so doing, they are meeting the three basic principles Dobbin and Kalev cite: engage managers in solving the problem, expose them to people from different groups, and encourage social accountability for change. These map quite well into the FS principles of getting the whole system in the room, and self-management and responsibility for action. People do not resist change that they design themselves, in contrast to the natural reaction to attempts to control them. This coincides with the core message of Weisbord and Janoff (2015): Lead more, control less.

Pedulla (2020) seems to agree, saying,

> "… get managers and other leaders involved from the start. Often, organizations have experts design programs that are then deployed to the managers. This strategy often lacks a reality check: Does this program fit into the way managers already work, or are managers now required to add something into their already complex days? Involving managers in the design process can increase buy-in and smooth implementation, making interventions more sustainable and long-lasting."

So, both by deliberate intent and action taken by the planning team, as well as aspects that are inherent in FS – exposing people to others in the system and involving them in designing changes in their own system – DEI goals are often achieved. And these wicked problems are addressed in a way that is fun, generates excitement and enthusiasm, transforms a system, and gets real results.
References Appear on the Following Page

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Jeffrey Axelbank, PsyD, is a psychologist working for over 25 years in both clinical and organizational consulting roles. He has worked with schools, community groups, companies, and organizations on such issues as navigating changes and transitions, those struggling with conflicts between subgroups, companies wishing to address corporate culture, strategic planning, leadership development, and succession planning. Dr. Axelbank specializes in working with diverse large groups, whole system interventions involving multiple stakeholder groups, using methods such as Future Search, Open Space, and World Café.

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