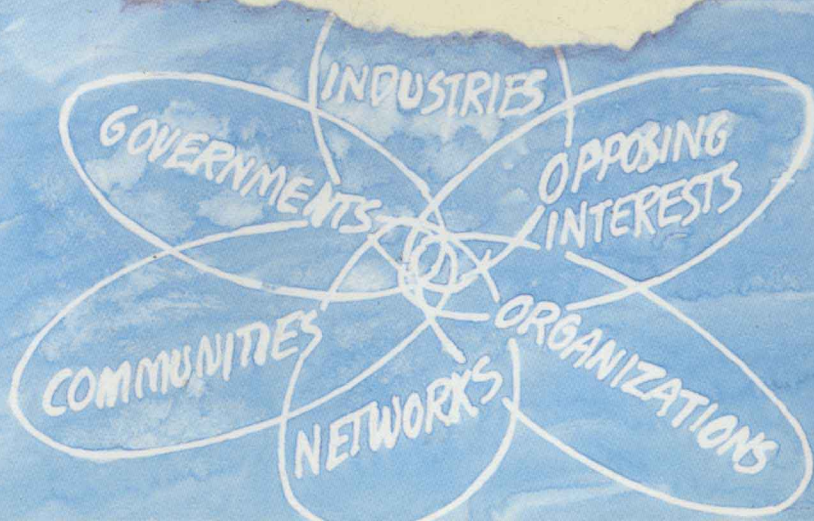


# DISCOVERING COMMON GROUND

How FUTURE SEARCH CONFERENCES  
Bring People Together to Achieve  
Breakthrough Innovation,  
Empowerment, Shared Vision,  
and Collaborative Action



MARVIN R. WEISBORD  
and 35 International Coauthors

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***Dedication***

***To All Who Would  
Enlarge Common Ground  
On a Diverse Planet***

## Preface

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### New Paradigm Planning

Nothing I have written in 30 years sparked more letters and phone calls than “Inventing the Future,” a chapter in *Productive Workplaces* (Jossey-Bass 1987). There I told of my enthusiasm for “future searches” as a new planning process. As a result, I met some visionary chief executives, and got to manage strategy conferences in communications, farm banking, natural foods, office furniture, publishing, and social welfare.

More, many veteran facilitators, using Chapter 14 as a recipe, cooked up their own applications—such as revising a business school curriculum, Federal agency strategic planning, and solidifying a large medical center’s mission. They confirmed not only that the method made intuitive sense, but that skilled people with similar values could repeat it.

They also supported my main theme—that the world was moving from *experts* solving problems FOR people toward *everybody*, experts included, improving whole systems. They shared my belief that getting everybody improving whole systems is the best strategy if you want long-term dignity, meaning and community.

And they validated what is by now a cliché to readers of the business press. Old management methods no longer work in the face of mind-bending technologies and economic roller coasters. A “new paradigm of work” is sweeping the post-industrial world, not easily, not painlessly, but sweeping nonetheless. The new buzz words have become learning, empowering, democratizing, partnering. Everybody, it seems, wants to bridge gaps of culture, class, race, ethnicity, gender and hierarchy. The search is on to find methods equal to these values. Future search conferences—events that bring people together across diverse and improbable boundaries to do joint planning—show unusual promise.

At the same time, only a handful of leaders have caught on to the fact that a three-day strategy conference might be the best short course in

managing the future. After all, the method requires no teaching, only learning. It's too simple. The point is easy to miss when you have no lectures OR training. Instead, we rely entirely on assembling the right cast of characters for a form of "blind people and the elephant." The world we all share is the elephant. We use dialogue to describe it. People ALREADY know how to do this! They just don't know that they know it.

Now, in this book, you can get an in-depth look at strategic conferences that embody learning, empowering, democratizing and partnering. All emphasize the search for common ground in a world increasingly fragmented and conflicted. I have gathered examples from around the world to lend credibility to the hundreds of people eagerly blazing this trail. I also want to make the path less rocky for the thousands who will follow. Anyone who holds the underlying values will quickly grasp the potential of this roadmap. That's why I believe this paradigm, in the next 25 years, will replace conflict-management and problem-solving—the modes that served so many of us, and vice-versa, for the last 25.

### **Merging Values, Theories, and Techniques**

In this volume I've sought to highlight similarities and differences of a variety of conference designs. My comments in the text reflect my wish to learn from, and to integrate into my own practice, what others have done. This is not a survey of everything out there. It's a guided visit to sources of my own practice, buttressed by side-trips down paths I stumbled on while researching my own. The common thread is my own excitement.

In these events we weave together values, theories, and techniques in a special way. This integration takes us down a path toward new management practices that really do "work." By using them, we enable more control of technology, better economic choices, and joint planning among diverse people. The conferences usually involve 30-85 people for two to three days. They have been run in every sector—public, private, voluntary, government, business, labor, health care, education, local, state, national, global.

### **Not Just a Meeting**

This conference model represents a wholly new way of doing things, using meetings, a form most people know all too well. Managers and leaders spend a high percentage of their days attending or running meetings. That's where ideals are shaped, embodied, owned, transmitted, fine-tuned, validated or trashed—to emerge as new missions, goals, policies, procedures, or systems. Yet, as far back as I can remember, we have all been dissatisfied with meetings. Our legendary frustrations



have spawned a sophisticated meeting management technology—for content and process both. It's important that this book's contents not be read as another manual on how to run better meetings.

When we speak of conferences that make possible levels of action previously unobtainable, we are way beyond "better meetings." We are sketching the parameters for a whole new way of (self) managing. We are describing a new integration of structure, function and process. This mode enables us to keep abreast of what's happening in "real time;" more, it makes possible real time course corrections.

Nor should you think of this as a cookbook. Rather, it's more like a new philosophy of eating. The authors scope out a new vision of a healthy diet for organizations seeking relevance in the global village. They offer a new way of making satisfying meals for people fed-up with piece-meal problem-solving and frustrating meetings.

## Purposes

The book's purposes are three. To:

1. Show how you can use strategic conferences, based on discovering common ground and imagining ideal futures, to improve planning within and between all sectors—business, government, labor, health care, education;
2. Suggest group methods of discovery, analysis, and dialogue that broaden our global perspectives, expand our horizons, utilize self-management and lead to committed action;
3. Build a bed-rock of democratic social values and core concepts under rather simple, task-focused techniques.

Moreover, I have a personal mission. There is a growing, world-wide interest in improving the quality of life, at home and at work. I believe that represents common ground for every person now living. I would like this book to serve as a catalyst for an informal global support network of people exploring and extending the use of these conferences. We have a unique opportunity to learn from each other and to amplify one another's successes.

This book provides readers a way into this network. Here you learn who is organizing strategic future conferences, why, and with what effect. You can study the theories, methods and skills needed to organize one. You can assess various practices, different models, and varying opinions on what works. You can read cases on their unlimited uses, and ponder the dilemmas and pitfalls too. I hope to encourage concerned leaders everywhere to experiment with this format. I believe this mode constitutes a learning laboratory for 21st Century strategic management.

## How Is the Book Organized?

The book's nine parts represent a cornucopia of resources assembled here for the first time. I feel fortunate to have as contributors 35 professionals working in Australia, Canada, Colombia, the Channel Islands, England, Malaysia, Norway, Pakistan, Scotland, The Windward Islands, Turkey, and the United States. You will meet them through brief biographies in each chapter. Their experience enlivens every page.

**PART 1** gives my overview of methodologies and a detailed account of the first "search conference," a key source that will deepen your understanding if you want to manage similar events. I also include a summary account of the design and planning for some 88 "collaborative community" events in the 1970's that opened up new possibilities for strategic change. Here also are the basic conditions for success.

**PART 2** covers generic methods, underlying theory and an example of how one consultant translated this into a document for orienting participants. It also introduces another aspect—the linkage between dialogue, search processes and new ideas of science that I consider important to a full appreciation of what makes these events different. **PART 3** gives cases and examples for a wide spectrum of purposes in single business and public sector organizations.

Then in **PART 4** we go to "domains" (issues shared by many diverse parties) such as electricity in Colombia or conservation in Pakistan or Canadian children—issues that require interaction among many sectors—and in **PART 5** to "referent" organizations, like the Australian Diabetes Foundation. "Referents" exist as clearing houses and/or network developers for diverse institutions and persons with parallel goals.

**PART 6** offers two community development models that evolved in parallel to the work in Part 1 from a similar value base. Both broaden our insight into what's possible.

**PART 7** offers a pot-pourri of personal experience and advice for facilitators—the training of conference managers, and theory/practice statements by practitioners. **PART 8**, on pitfalls and dilemmas, illustrates what might go wrong for folks new to this way of working—and veterans too.

**PART 9** has speculations on what the future holds—Fred Emery's imaginative leap into telecommunications, Steve Burgess' "creative search gatherings," and my own imagining of future applications.



I have included a collective bibliography, all sources referenced by all authors, and to make the book even more useful, there is an address list of authors. Where appropriate, I show examples of the diverse conferences authors have run. The list is impressive, growing, and provides one answer to the inevitable question, "But has it ever been done by \_\_\_\_\_?"

Learning these processes involves two kinds of exploration. One is a journey into the practical theories and methods of some folks you will meet in the opening chapters. The second takes us on a voyage of discovery into ourselves—our enthusiasms, hang-ups, and internal tugs-of-war. In writing and editing this volume, I have helped myself greatly with both trips. I hope that in reading and using it you will do likewise.

### **Acknowledgements**

First, there are 35 coauthors who made possible this book. My friend Ivar Brokhaug especially stimulated my imagination with tales of his work with motorcycle gangs and rural villages in Norway. Fred Emery and Eric Trist were generous with their files and memories. Merrelyn Emery slowed me down, cheered me up, and challenged me to offer this material as a full banquet rather than a "dog's dinner" of half-cooked letters and papers.

I gladly acknowledge the support of Ken Ross and Don Treinan, of The Alliance for Employee Growth and Development, John Mackey of Whole Foods Markets, Randy Evans and Richard Haworth, of Haworth Inc., Jane Henry of the Farm Credit System, Robert Fishman of Resources for Human Development, Steve Piersanti, former President of Jossey-Bass, Stan Rifkin, formerly of Software Engineering Institute at Carnegie-Mellon University, Chris Dennis and Pedro Mata of Grace Cocoa, and Susan Millard and Herman Simon of Quaker Oats Pet Foods. All organized strategy conferences on the strength of a chapter in my earlier book, thus deepening our experience with "future search" and validating my belief in the method.

Steve Piersanti did more, making this book a priority at his new firm, Berrett-Koehler, shaping the framework both as a skilled editor and a successful executive building on these values and ideas. I'm grateful to Pat Anderson for her diligence in checking covers and subtitles with prospective buyers, and to Alan Trist for an imaginative book design that captures the spirit of the contents.

There are others to be thanked—Deborah Zucker for her thoughtful editing and work with authors in the early stages, Dominick Volini for years of co-facilitating conferences and reminding me of the simplicity

of trusting people to do the right thing, Joseph Weisbord for opening my eyes to the implications for urban planning, and Sandra Janoff for her dedication in helping design and run practitioner workshops that enable principled applications.

Then there are hundreds of enthusiasts—experts, generalists, managers, engineers, scientists, entrepreneurs—who have phoned, written, attended workshops, and shared their designs, triumphs and dilemmas. I'm particularly thinking of Marilyn Sifford, who organized a learning project in Philadelphia that launched more than a dozen conferences among non-profit organizations, and Mary Ann Holohean of the Fund for the City of New York, who did the same in her city. Finally, thanks to Gloria Co for picking up a thousand pieces, transcribing many papers that appear here, and knowing where to find every file I ever misplaced.

*Marvin R. Weisbord  
Wynnewood, PA  
June, 1992*

## The Authors

Marvin R. Weisbord, an entrepreneur and author, worked as a consultant to business, education, government, medical, non-profit and voluntary organizations in North America and Scandinavia from 1969 to 1991. In 1991 he started Workplace Revolution, a non-profit program to help people apply the consensus-building ideas embodied in *Discovering Common Ground*. He is a partner in Block Petrella Weisbord, a firm that helps people restructure their work, and in Blue Sky Productions, a video company documenting innovations in self-management around the world.

Biographies of the coauthors, listed here in the order in which they appear, are given in their respective chapters.

Eva Schindler-Rainman	U.S.A.	Rita Schweitz	U.S.A.
Ronald Lippitt	U.S.A.	Elaine Granata	U.S.A.
Fred E. Emery	Australia	Beth Franklin	Canada
Oguz N. Baburoglu	Turkey	Alastair Crombie	Australia
M. Andy Garr, III	U.S.A.	Alan Davies	Australia
Rolf Haugen	Norway	Dick Axelrod	U.S.A.
Ivar K. Brokhaug	Norway	Cliff McIntosh	Canada
Margaret Wheatley	U.S.A.	Margaret Wanlin	Canada
John Briggs	U.S.A.	Patricia R. Tuecke	U.S.A.
John T. Wooten	U.S.A.	Tim Hutzal	U.S.A.
Kathie M. Libby	U.S.A.	Tony Richardson	Australia
Gary Frank	U.S.A.	Merrelyn Emery	Australia
Dave Angus	U.S.A.	Mary Fambrough	U.S.A.
Bob Rehm	U.S.A.	Maurice Dubras	U.K.
Rodger Schwass	Canada	James A. Cumming	U.S.A.
William E. Smith Ph.D.	U.S.A.	Chris Kloth	U.S.A.
David Morley	Canada	M. Stephen Burgess	Scotland
Eric Trist	U.S.A.		

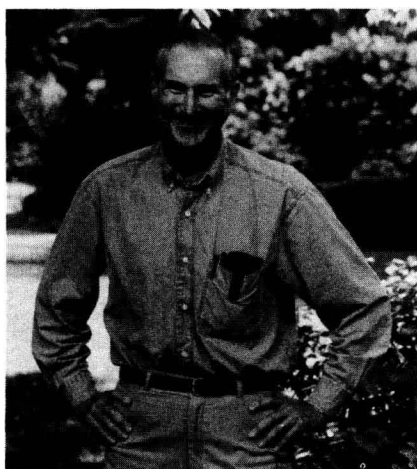


Photo by Joyce George

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## PART 1

# ORIGINS, CORE CONCEPTS, AND VALUES

---

## Introduction

"I am not a creator. I am a swimmer and a dismitter of all irrelevancies. Everything we need to work with is around us, although most of it is initially confusing. To find order in what we experience, we must first inventory the total experiences, then temporarily set aside all irrelevancies. I merely separate out some local patterns from a confusing whole. The act is a dismissal of pressures. Flight was the discovery of the lift—not the push."

— *Buckminster Fuller*  
(Seattle Science Museum exhibit, noted 11/10/87)

The opening five chapters on our journey of discovery establish the values, precedents, broad applicability, and underlying conditions for a new practice of social change.

They offer a convincing rationale for making major course corrections in the way we manage corporations, communities and governments. More, they outline a theory and practice equal to the task. These chapters are the fruits of my inventory of experiences, my own and others, making one kind of sense from a confusing whole.

In Chapter 1, I describe this book's origins. I show what makes future search conferences different from any you are likely to have attended—in their assumptions, structure, tasks, and process.

In Chapter 2, I invite you to a behind-the-scenes tour of a seminal strategic planning meeting of two merged aircraft engine companies in 1960 England. Led by Fred Emery and Eric Trist, the innovators of modern work design, it opened the doors to a new strategy for confronting technological and economic "turbulence." The Emery/Trist process made possible a radical shift in the way we think of planning—who should be there, what they should do, and how they should do it.

In Chapter 3, I have adapted material written by the late Ronald Lippitt and Eva Schindler-Rainman, on some 88 community conferences they designed and managed in the 1970's. They demonstrate a dramatic method for bringing widely-divergent communities to act on local citizens' common stakes in the future. More, we are fortunate to have Schindler-Rainman's recent reassessment of that work.

Chapter 4 outlines the historic threads that make up the tapestry of my own work in this arena and the rich potential for future variations.

Finally, in Chapter 5, Fred Emery and I, in a recent exchange of letters, explore the guidelines for a social change practice based on dialogue. Emery draws on 30+ years of experience as an innovative action researcher/theorist and I on my background in managing and consulting during the same decades. This exchange underlies my contention that the principles and conditions for successful search conferences apply not only to 3-day meetings. They can be used to conduct a wide range of human affairs in democratic societies. To the extent we master them, we stand a chance of reversing many excesses of bureaucracy, fragmentation and mistrust. – MRW