

BUILDING COMMUNITY FROM CONTROVERSY:

**A CASE STUDY OF A
FUTURE SEARCH CONFERENCE**



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In organizations and in society, leaders are plagued by the problems associated with rapid change, decreased resources and increased expectations. Competition from abroad, violence in the workplace, the homeless and crime are only a few of the major problems begging for solutions. Yet, effective solutions continue to escape us. What works in one situation, fails in the next, or creates more problems later.

Solving problems, even creative problem solving, too often places people in the position of reactively responding to outside forces. A decision may relieve a situation but have little impact on a successful long term solution. Robert Fritz (1984) argues that in order for problem solving to be creative, the forces must change from having something "go away" to bringing some unique realm into being.

As the paradigm of whole systems (see, for example, Tracy, 1993; Senge, 1990; Emery, 1965) continues to gain acceptance and advocates of chaos theory (see, for example, Greyersen, 1993; Cartwright, 1991;

Bahlmann, 1990; Priesmeyer, 1989) suggest an underlying interconnection among all events and organisms, the difficulty of solving individual problems becomes increasingly apparent. Effort and money spent solving one problem is wasted if that problem is actually the manifestation of a deeper system failure. Solving a problem in one area may cause an intensified reaction in another.

This study examines one model for solving complex, multi-functional problems. The Future Search Conference is designed for ambiguous problems without boundaries (Weisborg, 1992). Enlisting stakeholders with diverse interests, the Search Conference builds on their skills and knowledge, in a process that defines a desired future and develops action steps to realize it. In three days, participants scan the whole system, discovering its history and establishing shared values, common ground and visions of the future. Consensus themes are identified and converted into action steps.

The Future Search Conference, however, is not without risk. Relying on the decision making of a broad base of stakeholders with a history of conflict is risky for leaders more accustomed to solving problems and making decisions with a closed group of managers. Spending three days with thirty to seventy participants in an idealistic process consumes a