

The Future Search that Didn't Happen

by Han Rakels

Prologue: Being prepared for no surprise

In my life as a future search facilitator I have experienced successes and failures, whereby the failures turned out to be a success somehow anyway, as I learned from my mistakes. At the end this has made me have a deeper understanding of the process and my contribution as a facilitator. Tens of Future Searches later, I am very careful not to jump too eagerly into every opportunity that appears in front of me, knowing that in my enthusiasm clients sometimes become convinced of making the right decision (choosing for future search), whereas they are insufficiently aware of all the implications. Having said this, here is my story about “the Future Search that didn't happen”.

How the story began

In December 2009, Gregory – the innovation manager at a college - was tasked to take a multi-stakeholder initiative to the next level. He approached me with the following scenario:

In Limburg, the most Southern province of The Netherlands, a major problem exists. The population is aging and young people are moving away. Socio-economic conditions are worsening. Yet, it is a beautiful area and the 2nd most popular tourist zone in The Netherlands, after Amsterdam. A small group of initiators, consisting of representatives from the hotel and catering business, wellness centers, health care, vocational and professional training institutions, the tourist promotion office and two main towns in the region decided it was time to develop a new concept on hospitality. A hospitality that exceeds all expectations of guests to the region, that is warm and friendly, comes straight from the heart (and is not an acquired skill), and is a way of living, creative and surprising. The idea was to start developing this concept through a Hospitality Academy, which would be a place of innovation, where training and education takes place, where stakeholders meet and are involved, where creative ideas are born and put to the test.

Gregory said, “We need to build wide ownership and explore the idea. Could you do a mind map session with us, 2 hours or so?” I told him that, although that would definitely lead to some more ideas, it would not lead to the level of commitment and ownership he was looking for. I told him about Future Search and his eyes began to twinkle. This was exactly what they needed. Full of energy he travelled back to the South of the country, only to call me two days later and say that he hadn't been able to explain the idea to top management. Could they see me, together with him and have the concept explained again? A few days later top management was on board and excited. We decided that the rest of the stakeholders would learn about future search and decide if this would be the way to go.

Thus it was in March, when a group of some 30 diverse stakeholders came together, I facilitated a Future Search orientation. An explicit go/no-go moment was built in towards the end of the meeting. With the green light on, and 15 people volunteering to form a planning group, we were ready to prepare for a successful event. During the first meeting we confirmed that we had the right people in the group; one or two additional people were invited and joined the group.

The rollercoaster story of the planning group

The journey began. The group came together once a month. Scoping and re-scoping of the theme was done, an inspiring definition of the new hospitality reality was drafted, and stakeholder groups

were defined. The original June dates were postponed to late September as the group wasn't ready for it yet, and finally pre-announcements were dispatched. But there were also concerns: Some people wondered how much this would cost, how much time this would ask from them. One person expressed that they were only committed to this preparation phase (not the follow through of possible actions). Well, this is all part of the ride, and by addressing the concerns continuously by talking about them, explaining and re-explaining the principles, and by asking and asking again questions like, "Are you still in for this?" and "Is your stake in the outcome still clear?" and "Is there more you first need to understand?" or "Is there anything else you need to do what you need to do?", we (Gregory and myself) thought that we were on track.

However, our intuition cautioned us: Do the stakeholders really want this enough? We sensed that there was not enough drive in the group. The key here is the word "enough". Yes, there was will and enthusiasm and people did show up for the planning meetings, and had committed to jointly put the funds together. And we proved to be right when the time came to get final confirmation from participants. All members of the planning group were assigned to personally call a number of people (mainly those they already knew). When the next (one but final planning meeting) took place we had around 60 people on the list, and checking their availability learned that 20 had confirmed for the full time, another 20 were still question marks (hadn't been reached), some 20 were available on day 1 and/or 3, and so on. This was 3.5 weeks before the planned event. We gave it another 10 days, and not much had changed.

The ending

I called Gregory and suggested that we pull the plug. This was not going to work. We were not going to get the right people in the room and were not meeting some critical success factors, especially the full involvement. He was so relieved (and disappointed)! But we agreed to host a 1 day event, basing it on world café in the morning and doing open space for action planning in the afternoon. It was a wonderful day with 50 people representing the whole system in attendance. But it was not a Future Search.

Lessons learned

The case was discussed during the learning exchange in Brussels. Here are some of the reflections (without having a single answer to what actually was the situation; probably a bit of everything):

- Was there *enough* sense of urgency in the system? Or was it merely that stakeholders saw an opportunity and found it interesting, important, useful, creative, nice to develop a hospitality academy, without the situation being pressing enough?
- Did the planning team (and stakeholders) have a clear idea of their stakes? Or didn't they have good enough picture of what there was to gain for them (and what to lose?)
- Was the planning team empowered enough? Or were they believers, insufficiently having internalised what a future search is and can do (suggestions made were to take the group through a 1 day FS)?.

I am inclined to say that the first point has been the main issue, having successfully and smoothly done Future Searches where people were hardly aware of how the process worked, but the air was vibrant with urgency. It is hard to tell when the sense of urgency is enough. It can't be measured, but insufficient urgency can be sensed if you are quiet enough.

One thing is sure. When you do what is right (or almost right) as a facilitator and do what you are supposed to do during the planning stages (and I trust I did this for at least 85% in this case), sooner or later the level of urgency will expose itself (as in this case when the right people in the room weren't going to be there). At that point it only takes a bit of courage to call it off, which then is the final "right" thing to do.

Epilogue

And guess what: During the 1-day that replaced the Future Search, participants concluded that there is not enough awareness and urgency in the sector to realise how critical their situation is. Three days ago (early November), Gregory called me and said: Ready for a shock? Our top management decided to pull out from the whole initiative. Reason: no space in the budget for this innovation for next year.

What is left: A system with stakeholders that will show in the coming months if it will pick up the pieces and proceed because it really does find it important to move... I'll let you know when that happens if it does!