

Copyright 2005 by Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff.

**Clearing the Air:
The FAA's Historic Growth Without Gridlock Conference**
Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff

THE CHALLENGE

This is a tale of political, technological, organizational, geographic, economic and human complexity that defies the most sophisticated planning methods. In the spring of 2004, officials of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), a United States government agency whose mission “is to provide the safest, most efficient aerospace system in the world” were worried about a summer crunch in the skies. To head off this near certainty, they invited a cross-section of the aviation community to a 2 1/2 day meeting. The participants, cynical and jaded by years of frustrating encounters, considered changes that would upset decades of accepted practice. Despite their profound skepticism, a diverse slice of system users, regulators, and technical experts showed up. To what extent would they collaborate when they realized that the required action—unprecedented course corrections in the way air traffic is managed--might cause pain for all of them?

BACKGROUND

Consider this. Airspace, FAA's highway system in the sky, is finite. So are the numbers of airports and runways. At a given moment there are 5000 to 6000 aircraft competing for altitudes, routings, and airport landing slots in the United States airspace (which includes large parts of the oceans off both coasts). The U.S. has 600,000 certified pilots. A small, personal “Very Light Jet,” price tag \$1.4 million, has generated 2400 orders. That is more planes than are flown by the three largest passenger carriers-- American, United, and Delta Airlines—combined. Four businessmen wanting to meet with a client 1500 miles away and be back the same day can fly as high and almost as fast as a jumbo jet carrying 400 people. So, for that matter, can four golfers off to Florida for the weekend. All compete for airspace with an even-larger general aviation fleet, discount passenger carriers, and a military fleet that is the largest of all.

But for the unfortunate events of 9/11/01, this situation might have reached a crisis in 2002. The FAA had been working for some time on updating its operations to take advantage of fast-changing technologies. Today, for example, modern business and commercial jets can take off, fly to distant airports, and land without pilots touching the controls. Pilots can maintain safe altitudes, speeds, and headings independent of ground control. Global positioning technologies make possible “point to point” flight without reference to radio signals from the ground. The FAA, in theory, could manage the whole system from a single control room rather than its 20 enroute regional centers. Yet few technological advances are useable in the near term on a scale likely to resolve the air traffic system's paradoxes.

The reasons are at once economic, political, and logistical. In a time of shrinking federal budgets, the ideal air traffic system carries an astronomical price tag. The politics include both the U.S. Congress and the controllers union (NATCA) seeking to

preserve employment. The logistics are tied to mind-boggling systems complexity. In the short run, keeping the system going and growing is, despite a welter of rules and regulations, dependent to an extraordinary degree on voluntary cooperation. Jack Kies, in 2003 the FAA's Program Manager for Air Traffic Tactical Operations (essentially chief controller), was considering a National Airspace Services Summit bringing together perhaps 20 key leaders of the aviation community to seek agreement on systems improvement.

Past experience suggested such a meeting with "the usual suspects" was likely to lead to the usual outcome: controversy without resolution. Steve Bell, an air traffic controller and former controllers' union president, now a training consultant on Kies' staff, had been investigating cooperative solutions. He urged Kies in the fall of 2003 to consider a Future Search as a way to break with past precedent. The motivation for people to attend would be the near certainty of coming aerial gridlock. Meeting with Kies and other FAA staff not long after, we listened at length to a tale of task forces, committee reports, meetings at many levels, and increasing frustration. Another summit might well be seen as just "the feds" calling another meeting,

This, the FAA executives iterated, was exactly what they did not want. The clock had ticked well past the hour for talking. Air traffic patterns over the United States, said Kies, had become an interlocking web. Delays anywhere in the system could ground planes thousands of miles away. For decades air service providers expected the FAA to live by the slogan "first come, first served." Traffic controllers honored flight plans in the order submitted. No aircraft, in theory, should be favored over any other. (In practice there were many ways to "game" the system for individual advantage.) There were a few exceptions. If a storm over Chicago, for example, backed up airplanes in Los Angeles, New York, and Miami, controllers held some planes, expedited others, and rerouted traffic to minimize delays for as many people as possible.

PLANNING THE FUTURE SEARCH

It was in this context that Kies, in November 2003 convened several aviation experts to help plan an unusual multi-stakeholder conference. The initial group included two executives from of the National Business Aviation Association (NBAA), Senior Vice President, Operations, Bob Blouin, and Director of Air Traffic Services and Infrastructure, Bob Lamond; a Senior Vice President at MITRE Corp., Amr ElSawy, working with the FAA on new technologies; the FAA's Deputy Director of Air Traffic Plans and Procedures, Sabra Kaulia; a Northwest Airlines executive in charge of air traffic control matters, Lorne Cass; and the President, David Watrous, of RTCA, a private corporation seeking consensus solutions to aviation issues. In support roles were Steve Bell and his colleague Paul Branch, a traffic controller and trainer.

Kies got right to the core issue. "The United States is the global leader in aviation," he said, "but to stay that way we need to rethink airspace design and traffic control. We need to increase the capacity of the airspace. We're at a point in time when we need to change the course of this mighty river. That means giving up our parochial positions. Like it or not we are interdependent."

This meeting, he continued, would not be simply another session to surface issues. It would involve both FAA staff and air traffic system users with the authority and resources to make substantive decisions. The meeting would succeed, he went on, only if they could collaborate for the greater good. The emphasis would be on discovery,

not argument. Could airspace users agree upon a set of “minimum critical specifications” to avoid gridlock? In short, would they be willing to seek common ground?

This was a startling proposition for executives accustomed to the politics of airspace management. All agreed there was a problem that required substantial participation by diverse airways users. How many and who they should be were not so obvious. There was considerable skepticism that any meeting design was equal to the treacherous crosswinds of aviation controversies.

For us, the question was not about finding common ground, which we were confident could be done. Rather, we wondered about our ability to adapt Future Search, which we had aggressively maintained was not a problem-solving process, to short term problems. In conversations with Bell and Branch, we got a blinding flash of the obvious. Though Future Search asks people to imagine planning 5 to 20 years into the future, the outcomes are usually immediate action on critical issues. We decided not to alter our generic meeting design. We would look at the system’s past, present, and future as a necessary precondition for acting on common ground.

It took two all day meetings to work through the implications. The planners decided that the title had to instantly capture the attention of the aviation community to the urgency of the problem. After more than an hour of brainstorming, they settled on “Growth Without Gridlock: Systems Operations in the 21st Century.” Next the planners spent some hours listing possible participants, settling at last on 92 stakeholders—national and regional airlines, freight carriers, private, business and military flyers, technical organizations, consultants, unions, FAA staff, and other government officials.

In their second meeting the planning group was joined by Russell Chew, former operations head at American Airlines, now the first Chief Operating Officer of the newly-created Air Traffic Organization (ATO) that combined FAA’s air traffic operations under a single head. Chew had determined to create a professionally-managed, economically-sound, data-driven system, emphasizing safety and customer service.

Chew, like all the others, had no Future Search experience. He acknowledged that no ideal way existed to head off what Kies anticipated would be a long, hot, delay-ridden summer. He accepted on faith that with the “whole system in the room” new actions might be possible. He would put his credibility on the line to get key airline executives in the room for three days. Still, he had no illusions. The event was a gamble. Chew’s boss, Marion Blakey, FAA Administrator, chief executive of the 46,000-person agency, had called for the effort to begin with. Now she agreed to lend her support to the new format, to kick off the conference and to be present for the action plans. Chew and Kies had full authority to act on operating proposals that emerged.

THE MEETING

Some 60 stakeholders showed up, a good cross-section of invitees. All had been to endless meetings. Few had experience with large-group interactive dialogue. Chew was concerned. “I promised people that this would be a meaningful use of their time,” he told us. “If we see that we’re not going in that direction, I want to let them go home.” As great believers in ending meetings that go nowhere, we found Chew’s orientation reassuring.

Administrator Marion Blakey opened by noting this was the first time ever for the FAA to bring in diverse customers to challenge the status quo, identify priorities, and to

develop new collaborative strategies. Russell Chew challenged participants to address gridlock and capacity growth over the next 25 years as economic concerns, not simply operational issues. FAA costs were expected to exceed revenue, and the Aviation and Airport Trust Fund was dramatically declining. Merely “throwing money” at the current air traffic system would not solve the problem, for the money was not available. He urged conference participants to accept responsibility for collaborative decisions and take action now.

Jack Kies presented a startling two-minute computer simulation of traffic density on the busiest day of 2003 compared to forecasts for 2020. He showed how limited gridlock already present in the system would increase in the future. He was looking, he said, for system strategies that maximized existing resources. “We need to look at ourselves to see the solutions to the problems.”

We briefly described how we would proceed. The agenda consisted of five segments requiring a half day, a full day, and a half day. People would pool their experiences of the past and present, dramatize their desired futures, assess their common ground, and decide what, if anything, they wished to do. The main method was dialogue in small groups and among the whole group. We made three points crucial to Future Search. First, we would do no problem-solving until all issues—global and systemic--had been explored by everyone. Second, we considered conflicts and past problems information, not action items. Third, participants would manage their own small groups, reach their own conclusions, and do their own analysis and summaries.

No one need change their minds for this process to succeed. We were looking for common ground that already existed. We also pointed out that people learn in different ways so we would be patient if everybody was not always at the same place. Indeed, having worked in many cultures, we knew that if people did not fight or run away, their anxiety about differences and confusion over what was going on would lead to greater clarity.

The Past

To review the past, we asked that people write key points on three long “time lines” on the wall covering the last 30 years: Personal, Global, Air Traffic System. The purpose was to get diverse people into a shared context that included everyone’s experiences. Each of eight groups, all consisting of diverse stakeholders, was assigned a timeline to study. Each was to present a brief story and their understanding of what the story meant for the work to be done here. Observing the *Personal* time line, one group noted that most people in the room had at least 30 years in aviation and brought a diversity of operational experience. “We’re skeptical of change – but we’re also in leadership roles and can’t pass the buck any longer.” A second group reaffirmed their commitment, ownership and accountability for the future of aviation. “If we don’t have it,” they asked, “who does?”

From the *Global* time line, groups noted 30 year trends toward globalization, advanced technology, and higher security concerns, cyclical conflicts and fluctuating fuel costs—a more complex world, harder to predict. From the *Air Traffic System* time line, groups observed that competition had increased along with consumer demand. They highlighted industry de-regulation, “hub & spoke” operations, low-cost carriers, route congestion, bankruptcies, mergers, and alliances for “code sharing.” They acknowledged the centrality of collaboration, and also its paradoxes.

The Present

Next, participants were invited to identify present trends that affect Air Traffic Operations. Recorders wrote these on a 6-foot by 12-foot “mind map.” The whole group faced the map, one person speaking at a time so that all could see and hear the relevant trends. Nobody could say that an issue was “left out” unless every person chose to overlook it. The map made possible a feat hard to accomplish in large groups—getting everybody talking about the *same* world, one including all perceptions. Thus 60 people quickly developed a rich portrait of a world in flux, one that no single person could detail alone.

To help focus their conversations, people were asked before breaking to place colored dots on those trends they believed ought to be addressed next day. This was NOT a priority-setting exercise. The dots (each stakeholder group had its own color) provided visual information about concerns. Participants put most of their dots on 11 trends. A major one was shrinking budgets. Against this was the increase in demand for services, fueled in part by the rise of regional jets. Another was increasing use of RNAV, a navigational system that allows each aircraft to fly its own course independent of ground navigation aids. Many groups noted congested skies and airport delays. Moreover, people noted a decades-old institutional resistance to change that many doubted could be changed.

We have found that such issues can be related to one another. So we asked stakeholder groups to make their own maps showing the connections among the key trends of greatest concern to them. In addition, they were to note what *they* were doing now about these trends, and what they were *not* doing and wanted to do. This provided clues—unavailable until now--about all other stakeholders’ hopes, fears, and commitments. It’s hard to summarize the detailed observations of nine stakeholder groups. One striking pattern was linking technological changes to systemic social issues.

Many groups cited demand exceeding capacity, not easily addressed because of system inertia. Another group added that “the challenge we must learn to meet is how to integrate conflicting viewpoints. How do we move from the status quo of ‘muddling along’ to assuming an objective long-term viewpoint?” All observed that the march of technology and consumer demand made the future increasingly unpredictable. The group including private, business and military flyers, with the largest fleets of high technology aircraft, made the point that the airlines were not the only ones competing for airspace.

Several groups acknowledged the importance of good labor relations—the many unions involved in aviation—as critical to a well-functioning system. The conversations ranged across every level of concern. Some stakeholders, conversant with the politics and economics of air travel, had little understanding of the system’s technical complexity. Others patiently sought to explain. Still others fidgeted in their chairs at talk that seemed to go everywhere and nowhere at once.

Soon, though, a coherent story emerged. Air travel declined after September 11, 2001, but by early 2004 had returned almost to previous levels. Consumer demand would soon exceed the system’s capacity, and the summer of 2004 could be the worst yet. The last four years had produced some responsive changes. CDM (Collaborative Decision-Making, a joint industry/government traffic management initiative) had been helpful, but it had not increased en-route capacity. Even with funding, many busy airports could not add runways. What most people saw as essential to the future was something few had yet been able to do: problem-solve in a spirit of collaboration and

interdependent support from all stakeholders. This was a political as well as pragmatic imperative.

Said one executive, “It is time to demonstrate together to Congress and the public that the FAA and the industry as a whole will produce as promised, will be prudent and productive with funding, and be responsible to consumers.”

Prouds and Sorries

We now asked people to take responsibility for their concerns. What were they proudest of in their own behavior and what were they sorriest about? The purpose was to help people own up without blaming or breast-beating, reducing defensiveness and enabling greater objectivity and mutual acceptance. In response, stakeholders validated justifiable pride in their emphasis on safety, training, and crisis management. On the sorry line, many acknowledged without acrimony several sensitive themes. Groups admitted their own tendency toward “finger pointing,” difficulty in collaborating, seeking to maximize personal advantage at the expense of the common good, and difficulties in allocating shrinking resources. The FAA directors summed up an emerging theme when they owned up to “parochialism and turf protection – internally and externally.”

The dialogue that followed these reports proved to be a pivot point for the conference. People had given frequent lip-service to cooperation. Now, its many paradoxes when practiced by competitors became manifest. You could feel the electricity crackle as people began voluntarily to soften adversarial positions. One participant, viewing ruefully his “marginally omnipotent” perspective, said he had learned so much from those who were willing to share and that he came to realize how little he knew about the whole.

Several others talked of what they had learned:

“A review of the last 30 years reveals so many events and circumstances that no one would have been able to predict--weather, labor strikes and bankruptcies all the way to the tragic events of September 11, 2001. As we look ahead, we must work toward the collaborative design of a system that is supremely flexible and responsive to ambiguity, uncertainty and unpredictability.”

“In years past we each had the luxury of taking a parochial perspective that was self-serving. As an industry those days are behind us. We must recognize our interdependence, and then design, embrace and implement the actions to support our joint mission.”

“Simply, ‘throwing money’ at our current concerns or assuming that our solutions will come solely through technology would be erroneous.”

Or, as one airline executive summed it up, “We have got to be willing to share the pain!”

Dramatizing the Future

Participants returned to the diverse groups in which they had worked on Day One. They were asked to put themselves six years in the future and imagine an Air Traffic Operations system that would (a) be technically feasible, (b) benefit society, and (c) be personally motivating. “Today is March 3, 2010. Imagine that you have created a system as gridlock-free as you can make it. You have a set of responsive operating norms and agreed-upon procedures for making changes when necessary. Describe this, and identify what actions you took in the summer of 2004 that got you on the right path.”

There were eight scenarios with many common features. One group, for example, offered a graphic showing the net benefits of saving time by seeing the air traffic system as a whole--one plane takes a delay to save another plane a longer delay, based on trust in the system for reliability and predictability. "Express lanes" in the sky have been implemented when demand exceeds capacity to help free up airways and speed traffic.

People imagined that the big obstacle back in 2004 was lack of collaboration. After the Future Search, went this scenario, they agreed to common objectives and measurements and were able to control costs, increase revenue, and put in place needed technology and training. Barriers were overcome by providing incentives to users, educating one another on positive impacts of sharing burdens, using technology to improve collaboration. Organizational stability grew from not counter-lobbying against one another's interests, instead using more transparent financial reporting, improved labor relations, and collaboration to address capacity-demand imbalances. One group proposed a new acronym, CCCA: "Constructive Collaborative Communication Among Stakeholders for 'Systems Thinking'."

Finding Common Ground

Now people were asked to sit again in mixed groups and write down what they believed was common ground for every person present. Each group posted its items on one wall and people moved paper strips around until all related issues were grouped together. The following key clusters emerged:

- Further developing System-Wide Information Management (SWIM) and on-going information exchange among system users.
- A daily reporting system (using a 10 a.m. conference call among airspace users and FAA staff, that had been disregarded by many).
- Broadening and deepening the existing Collaborative Decision-Making Process (CDM).
- System wide efforts to get all aircraft to declare "early intent," giving traffic managers advance warning of demands on the system.
- A cooperative effort to eliminate "gaming," the common practice of finding loopholes in the system to benefit your own flight.
- Increasing capacity where needed on a daily basis, through policies and technologies that FAA would implement with cooperation from other users. This included a fair process for allocating capacity when actual demand exceeded projected capacity.
- Modifying "on-demand first come, first served" practices to improve traffic flow and avoid extreme delays.
- Creating "express lanes" where demand and capacity required them.

The list differed in detail, though not in spirit, from the common ground we had seen many times before. It iterated deeply held values--stakeholder collaboration, a wish to create more user equity, valuing diverse views, participative problem-solving, "transparent" governance, and economic responsibility.

This discussion would not be complete without a nod toward "financing" on the "not agreed" list. All could accept Chew's data showing that the system was in dire financial shape. What they could not agree on was an equitable funding policy. The business and private flyers believed that they were already paying their fair share

through fuel taxes. The airlines argued that airline ticket taxes paid most of the price tag for air traffic control. This issue, all agreed, would take a lot more work.

Perhaps the central insight of Growth Without Gridlock was that the United States air traffic system, with 20 control centers, thousands of airborne craft, hundreds of airports, and tens of thousands of individual daily decisions, was an indivisible entity. Optimizing the whole would require a great deal of understanding from those asked to accept small delays for the sake of the greater good. In a few hours of dialogue, Jack Kies' personal aspiration had spiraled into a pledge by diverse system users.

Indeed, Air Traffic Organization CEO Russell Chew, hardly trusting this turn of events, felt obliged to test people's commitment at the end of the second day. He asked the group whether they would act on their insights. "I don't want to waste anybody's time," he said. "You don't have to come back tomorrow if you don't intend to do something." Nobody said a word. Growth Without Gridlock had landed at a destination never before reached by the nation's flyers: the pain would be shared.

Action Planning

It was with this stark realization that people undertook action planning on the third morning. Participants were asked to select common ground themes to translate into policies, programs, procedures, and structures. Five voluntary groups formed. One wrote an overall vision statement affirming the centrality of stakeholder involvement in ameliorating problems of system capacity and financing. Another wrote a "long term vision" supporting the FAA's shift toward a business-like entity "based on sound economic principles." They affirmed the intent to grow the system by using technology where possible and by new procedures where constraints existed. They called for performance-based standards and measurements, priority to high tech aircraft, improving the forecasting of demand, and upgrading of airports. Members agreed to join in educating Congress and the public on air traffic challenges.

A historic breakthrough occurred when one of the airline executives said he was ready to work with Jack Kies in tackling the "first-come, first-served" norm if certain others, whom he named, would participate. He was joined by 21 others--private and business flyers, airlines large and small, senior FAA executives--the largest action planning group we had ever seen. No one sat. For an hour and a half they stood around a flip chart exploring with single-minded focus what changes they would be willing to make *immediately* to this complex, immovable system.

At length the group proposed an unprecedented "System Access Plan" enabling the FAA to relieve congestion daily based on data from the whole system. All flyers would accept short delays and longer routes when this made the overall system work better. The system would be implemented on a trial basis within three weeks. Review would take place daily in the 10 a.m. phone call between the FAA Command Center and the users.

The group also recommended that an "Express Lane" strategy be invoked when any airport experienced a 90 minute delay. In such a plan 15 or 20 aircraft at many smaller airports might be delayed 5 or 10 minutes to open up "holes" in the air traffic flow for hubs with long delays. That way FAA controllers could "flush" congested airports rather than indefinitely hold planes on the ground. More—a vindication for business and private flyers—the policies would apply equally to airports large and small and to planes regardless of capacity.

Another group worked out—for the long future--limited conditions under which pilots with the right technology might maintain their own separation rather than have ground controllers do it. Such a plan would hinge on industry and public acceptance and might take years to implement.

Each group read its statements and plans aloud. They were confirmed by all stakeholders. Now a microphone was passed around the room for people to say a few words about what they personally planned to do. Many spoke of closing the door on parochial attitudes of the past, now realizing they were part of one system. Numerous others committed to follow-up, communicate, prepare, educate and support the agreements with their own organizations.

At this point, a senior FAA executive, with years of experience in conflicted meetings, took the microphone again. “I was having breakfast this morning with some of you,” he said, “and I thought to myself that we had been at this for a day-and-a-half. I had my fingers crossed that somehow in the next couple of hours we would come up with something on which we agreed. I thought we would need a miracle...Not a MIRACLE miracle, just a small enough miracle to have this broad customer base really find some common ground and align ourselves to start doing things differently.” He paused for breath. “I think perhaps a miracle did pop out. With these commitments, we ARE doing something different. This is a huge step for the aviation community!”

The conference had by then been in session a total of 18 hours.

At the end Russell Chew thanked participants for their contributions. He noted that a report would be distributed to all within a few days. Marion Blakey, who had re-joined the group, said how much she appreciated the commitments to immediate action in 2004, and to critical long-term principles. She would address issues that needed to be tackled in other parts of the FAA. She also committed to engaging with Congress and the Administration to ensure resources to support the work. At a press conference afterwards, Administrator Blakey said, “Air travelers may experience more short delays but fewer long ones. The plan, if it works, should reduce the total amount of time that all flights are delayed because of bad weather or crowded airspace.” She added, “it’s not just a question of redistributing the pain, it’s a question of lessening the pain for everyone.”

REFLECTIONS

For years we have thought of Future Search as a way of creating a values-based “strategic umbrella,” making possible short term planning against a backdrop of desired future scenarios. The FAA meeting presented a more complex situation than usual. Experts, committees, task forces and technical teams had worked for years on ideal systems for the national airspace. Future scenarios abounded. What troubled most of the actors was what to do in the short run.

This meeting, like every other we have done, had to be viewed as an experiment. None of us had been to this place before. Still, we were not flying blind. We had reason to be optimistic that a new kind of summit, based on Future Search principles, would lead to new outcomes. Having the “whole system in the room”—people with authority, expertise, information, resources and need—had been proven repeatedly to lead to action when people realized they could no longer point fingers except at themselves.

We also had faith in using differentiation-integration (D-I) theory as a way of managing both the meeting’s structure and process. Having people differentiate their views in *stakeholder* groups AND integrate their values and aspirations in *diverse*

groups guarantees they will take a spectrum of views into account. As stakeholder groups highlight their concerns, they sharpen rather than blur their differences. Paradoxically, they also reveal uncharted common ground. Many groups discover differences amid apparent sameness and similarities among ostensible differences. People develop a more balanced view of “reality.” Integrated solutions become more feasible.

Making conflict a matter of information, not action, enables people to find and act on common ground *that already exists*. This may not always be obvious. Common ground is not the same as pressuring people to go along with the majority in a gesture toward harmony. We seek *real*, not reluctant, alignment. People cannot discover how much they already agree upon when they spend up to 80 per cent of their time trying to reconcile views on a few problematic issues. We are quite willing to put even a majority position on the “not agreed” list if anyone dissents. That list will not be “worked” unless some people choose to do it at the end while most others are working the common ground.

In a common ground dialogue people also discover improbable allies. Sometimes conflicts dissolve when they are found to be based on false assumptions and predictions. Pilots and passengers experience only a fraction of the air traffic system--what happens to the airplane they happen to be in. Observers in the FAA’s Virginia Command Center can see on one wall every plane in U.S. airspace under traffic control—thousands of points of light. While even a very large group cannot see it all, people can educate one another to system aspects hereto unknown, giving each an understanding of the whole none had at the start.

Beyond understanding, there is the centrality of *interdependence* if joint action is desired. Most “failures” of collaborative methods can be traced to imposing them upon people who see no need for working in harness. In the aviation community, the web of relationships and the requisite cooperation became quickly manifest when the “whole system” was in one room rather than in far flung offices, cockpits, and control centers. Under these conditions, “sharing the pain” began to look like a better strategy than sharing the gridlock.

We also know that if people won’t make the shift toward greater cooperation, we can’t make it happen for them. All we can do is offer opportunities they never had before. No group methods so far discovered are equal to the task of reorganizing systems as complex as this one. Yet, the repeated use of such methods surely can ease the traumas of relentless growth and technological change.

A year after the conference we talked to several participants who said Growth Without Gridlock had been a breakthrough meeting. The core agreements--dropping the first-come, first-served policy, and the 90-minute “flush” combined with “express lanes”--were meaningful steps. The summer of 2004 saw fewer delays than anticipated. The aviation community learned that with simultaneous access to one another members could cooperate for mutual benefit.

More, they recognized that in a world of ever more crowded skies, no alternatives to cooperation existed. Many hoped they would have follow-up meetings to build on the progress so far made. “There were no guarantees,” wrote Bob Lamond, of the National Business Aviation Association, in a report to his members. “But the participants agreed to take a risk...to put parochial positions behind for the good of the entire community. Growth Without Gridlock was a one-of-a-kind event.”

Postscript on Techniques Vs. Principles

Please note that *the principles underlying this meeting are more critical to its success than its techniques*. You can use time lines, mind maps and future scenarios until Mars becomes an earth colony. Without the whole system in the room, exploring everyone's views, putting conflicts and problems on hold, acting on common ground, and inviting people to take responsibility, you are unlikely to get systemic action of the kind reported here.

Acknowledgments

While planning and managing this meeting we were supported at every stage by Steve Bell and Paul Branch, FAA traffic controllers and trainers. Future Search Network members Sandy Silva and Michael Randel served as recorders, capturing all small group reports and much verbatim dialogue. This chapter draws heavily on their report. We thank members of the Growth Without Gridlock planning group for their help in assuring the accuracy of this account.

--end--

References

www.faa.gov
www.rtca.org
www.nbaa.org
www.futuresearch.net

Randel, Michael and Sandra Silva. *Growth Without Gridlock: System Operations in the 21st Century*. A Report of the Future Search Conference at the National Conference Center, Lansdowne, Virginia, March 2-4, 2004.

Weisbord, Marvin and Sandra Janoff. *Future Search: An Action Guide to Finding Common Ground In Organizations and Communities*, 2nd Edition (Berrett-Koehler, 2000).