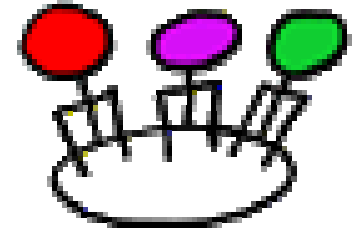


Making Your Job Easier . . .



Using Whole System Approaches to Involve the Community in Sustainable Planning and Development

By Kenoli Oleari

As public servants, municipal managers often face extreme—and conflicting—expectations from political leaders and their constituencies, staff, unions, private and public interest groups, individual citizens, neighborhood organizations and others. At the same time, a manager must provide a rational and effective framework for accomplishment of the agency’s mission.

The success or failure of government projects often hinges on constructive public involvement and meaningful community buy-in. This is particularly true in the planning process, where stakes are high and the process is critical and challenging.

This article will provide an introduction to several approaches to large group management designed to meet these kinds of complex demands.

These approaches—known as *whole system approaches*—provide techniques that have proven successful at moving complex groups through visioning, planning, rapid change and implementation while making allies of the conflicting voices and interests managers deal with every day. These techniques—also known as *large or whole group interventions*—have been used successfully in many sectors, including

business, government, communities, nonprofit, and others.¹

Whole system approaches provide processes for engaging the myriad voices and interests shouting—and needing—to be heard. They have been used in urban and rural settings and in many different countries and cultures. They work well both in polarized situations and in communities with histories of positive citizen involvement.

This article introduces the concepts that make whole system approaches successful and compares them with a traditional planning process. The discussion focuses on *Future Search*, an approach that is particularly useful in community settings. It also provides an

¹ To simplify, this article uses the term community organization; however the principles and techniques apply to any group - businesses, government agencies, social families, nonprofit or religious organizations, and where people come together for organized activity.

overview of other popular whole system techniques.

Learning to See the Whole Organization

Our understanding of how organizations work most effectively has changed dramatically during the past century. Largely, this shift is from a hierarchical understanding to a view of the organization or community as a whole—a collaborative and interdependent unit. This shift has resulted from observations that engagement—rather than a command and control approach—greatly increases the likelihood of accomplishing desired results. [Axelrod, 2000] This effect has been observed in many areas of organization development, including visioning, strategic planning, design, re-design, and implementation. [Weisbord, 1987, and Weisbord, 1999]

The shift of perspective toward whole organizations (or whole systems) has enabled the development of tools that engage all stakeholders to create outcomes that are practical and sustainable. It relieves managers of the onerous task of solving scores of complex problems. Change throughout the organization becomes self-directed and self-motivated. Thus, negative reactions, often triggered by top-down decisionmaking, are minimized.

A handful of successful methods have been developed for engaging the complex relationships that characterize organizations. These approaches have reached widespread application and maturity during the past decade.

Businesses have been the first to embrace the whole system concept. To remain competitive, businesses need to respond to change in ways that can be implemented quickly throughout an organization and that can be sustained.

Expected Outcomes of a Whole System Approach

- **A clear, common vision to guide the planning process as it grows and changes**
- **A process that supports and furthers healthy community**
- **An increased, ongoing, capacity of the entire organization or community to plan and make effective choices**
- **A high degree of “buy-in” and ownership by all stakeholder groups**
- **Ability to implement plans**
- **Building and deepening of relationships between participants**
- **A greater chance of obtaining political and financial support**
- **A commitment to action**

A growing number of communities is also using these techniques successfully. Whole system approaches have been used in communities as diverse as those in South Africa and Nigeria and Eskimos in northern Canada. Although process managers sometimes did not speak the language of conference attendees, the processes were effective because the dialog is primarily between participants. Increased use of these approaches will provide many advantages to community and government organizations.

Why A Whole System Approach?

Classically, organization development has been seen as a process of problem-solving or conflict management. Problems and conflicts will always arise and, appropriately, demand attention. However, when thinking is limited to problem solving, opportunities for change, improvement, and collaboration may be overlooked.

In contrast, whole system approaches provide tools to affect the entire system, not just the problematic portions. They enable groups to

build the kind of involvement and capacity that supports sustainable, positive, and future-oriented results. Whole system approaches could be called *democracy in action*, for they exemplify the coming together of every voice along with a commitment to positive action by all participants.

In many meetings, we spend 80% of our time focusing on the 20% of things about which we disagree.

In a government setting, for example, a whole system approach would involve the public from the very beginning, along with planners, politicians, and others affecting or affected by the issue. This involvement is continued through the life of the project. In a very real way, the complexity of voices in the system (often perceived as a liability) becomes an asset, adding to the richness of the process and greatly increasing its chance of success. Participants develop “ownership” in the process and become its advocates through crucial stages. Personal relationships are built. Initiative and influence are spread deeply throughout the

organization or community. A high level of support for implementation results, and everyone learns the skills of collaboration to attain the desired goal.

How This Process Works in the Context of a Community or Local Government

A whole system approach starts with a planning team of a 6 to 25 representative *stakeholders*.

A stakeholder is a member of the community who represents a key “voice”— someone who might be affected by or can affect the project being addressed. This includes people who have the power to support the process or stop it, as well as everyone who will be affected by the process. It includes various categories of affiliated and unaffiliated individuals and demographic groups, i.e., all the rich diversity of the system.

The planning team clarifies the issue to be addressed, searching out a way to frame it that will engage the larger community, department or agency. It then plans a conference that will be attended by 60 to 100 or more stakeholders, from mayors and city managers to the average citizen. In this conference, stakeholders come together over several days to participate in a

System: A Complex Network of Relationships

The word *system* refers to a “complex network of relationships.” The term describes the everyday world in which we all live and by which we sometimes feel overwhelmed: the people, families and organizations, demands and expectations, bosses and staff, and practical and political realities. (As Zorba the Greek said, “...the whole catastrophe.”) Because “system” is an abstract concept, most people find it difficult to visualize, even while experiencing the system’s influences. Each of us makes daily choices about how to engage this reality and how to juggle demands and priorities—essentially, how to survive. Our focus is usually on the details of life—not on the complex patterns that affect us moment by moment. Thinking in terms of whole systems increases our ability to influence our lives and organizations in new, powerful, and productive ways.

Stakeholder or Representative?

A stakeholder is not a representative. A representative is beholden to a constituency and cannot act alone. Stakeholders are members of a stakeholder group because of their life experiences, not because of any mandate. A stakeholder holds all of the information and experience of the group, without being under the official mandate that binds a representative. A stakeholder can act, create, collaborate, affect others and be affected as an individual. A representative can act only as the group directs.

The system knows who its stakeholders are.

series of focused and highly structured activities.

Information gets into the room through the participation of stakeholders with real-world experience, not through experts with theoretical knowledge. Any voice that is not in the room is missed; each stakeholder group needs to be represented.

It is important that people who have practical influence are present, so such conferences commonly include mayors, chief executive officers, and other influential individuals rather than their representatives. In addition, it is important to include people who live out the edicts of more influential people. Anyone else with important knowledge or influence also has a voice at the conference through a stakeholder participant. People of all ranks and influence sit down at tables to work with each other on an equal, face-to-face level.

In a community setting, stakeholder groups might include unaffiliated community members, nonprofit organizations, government agency staff, political representatives, businesses, faith groups, public safety groups, and others. In a public school system, stakeholders might include union representatives, community members,

and janitors, as well as parents, teachers, students, and administrators.

A Typical Public Process Compared

A typical conventional approach to public involvement is depicted in Figure 1, where it is compared to Future Search, as an example of a typical whole systems approach. Often the traditional process falls apart before Step 5, or even Step 4. Plans may be completed, or partially completed, and then sit on shelves for years.

Step 1, Initiation. Although most planners are very conscientious about wanting to incorporate public opinion, it is hard to obtain effective input. Important data is often missing. The lead agency may conduct town hall meetings, scoping processes, or focus groups. However, such activities often attract the loudest and most organized voices and leave others out. At best, such efforts are time-consuming and require complex data analysis.

Step 2, Draft Plan. An internal planning team from the lead agency, or a consultant, develops a draft plan, based on the data obtained in Step 1. Because this process is not directly visible to the public, it is hard for people to know if they

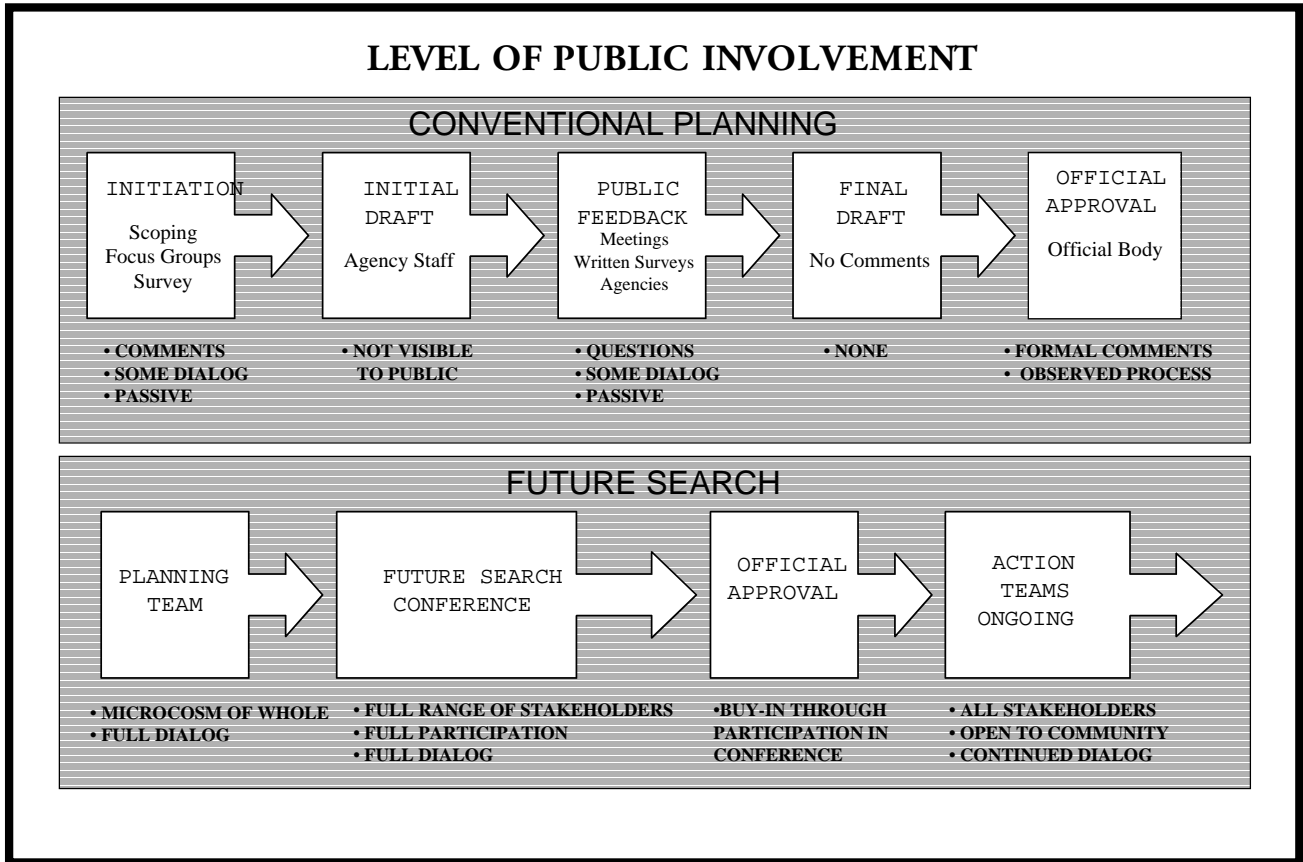


FIGURE 1. Compared to a typical public planning process, a whole system approach is less expensive, requires less time, provides processes to ensure the involvement of all stakeholder groups, and allows for ongoing participation—a true community experience.

have been heard. “Invisible” processes, when carried out by public employees or consultants, are highly vulnerable to opinions of senior staff, to political manipulation, or to influence from forces with economic or other clout.

Step 3, Public Feedback. Public meetings, surveys, discussion groups, and written input are traditional ways of enabling public feedback of draft documents. Often, however, these processes focus on public fears, concerns, and feelings of being left out (the 20% of things we disagree about). The public has only the word of planners that their earlier comments were considered. Even when

responses to public comments are published, the process takes time and doesn’t provide an opportunity for in depth discussion.

Step 4, Final Plan. As at the draft stage, the final plan often requires integration of conflicting voices and results in multiple compromises. The outcome, developed behind closed doors by an internal planning team from the lead agency or consultant, is often distrusted or rejected.

Step 5, Official Approval. Before the plan can be implemented, it must go through the political process to be approved by an elected governmental council or commission. It is often hard to get a plan approved by a body

that has not been involved in its development and has more ownership of other concerns. Because commitment has not been developed through earlier stages of the process, the result becomes highly vulnerable to political manipulation. When a plan is approved, it may be changed for political reasons in ways that undermine its integrity. Sometimes, even when a plan is not controversial and receives full approval, it sits on a shelf for years because commitment to implementation does not exist.

Even when the typical public process produces an outcome that can be implemented easily, putting it into effect is a tedious process requiring many public meetings, much staff time, and sometimes many consultants plus expensive and complex logistics. It is often requires political maneuvering to gain approval by the necessary bodies. And, in the end, it often takes many months or years to complete.

The Whole System Approach: In contrast, the Future Search process diagrammed in Figure 1. Shows public participation in each stage of the process. By the time the project reaches the official body for approval, community members, city staff, political

officials and others have all had a chance to work side-by-side on the project. This increases the likelihood of it receiving official approval as an integrated whole with public support.

The Example of Future Search

A whole system process such as *Future Search* can be conducted with a small planning team guided by one or two consultants. Depending on the complexity of the issue, the process may be completed in a few months; in other situations, it may take longer. Future Search includes the public at every stage, utilizes an integrated approach that doesn't require complex data analysis and generally results in a high degree of buy-in and commitment to change and implementation. The three stages of the Future Search process are the **planning team**, the **Future Search Conference** and **followup**. The following paragraphs describe the basic steps in the process.

Planning Team. The sponsoring agency or group assembles a planning team. This team is a microcosm of the larger complex of stakeholder voices who will participate in the

When To Use a Whole System Approach	When Not to Use a Whole System Approach
<p>When you have an important issue or opportunity that requires collaboration of people with different points of view</p> <p>When the situation is complex or polarized</p> <p>When traditional methods are not working or are taking too much time</p> <p>When you want to improve communication and collaboration between people with many points of view</p> <p>When you are willing to support full participation by all stakeholder groups</p>	<p>When you are already committed to a solution</p> <p>When you don't want to invite people with whom you disagree to participate in the process</p> <p>When you cannot put the attention and effort necessary for full planning and implementation of the process</p> <p>When you are not willing to support full participation by all stakeholder groups</p>

Future Search conference. The team usually includes 6-15 individuals. The work of the planning team is the key to engaging the whole system in the process. At each meeting, the team reviews its current understanding of the goal for the conference and asks if any other voices need to be present to proceed effectively. Members of the team may change or be added as this process proceeds.

This team has three critical tasks:

1. Create a statement or question that will be the focus for the Future Search conference.
2. Decide what stakeholder voices need to be present at the conference and make sure they are present and fully committed.
3. Make logistics arrangements and provide support for follow-through on actions arising from the conference.

The first task accomplishes two things. First, it helps to clarify the goal of the process in a way that will focus participation to best support the desired outcome. Second, the team's efforts to understand and articulate the goal helps the team determine what stakeholder voices need to be involved. In the second task, the planning team determines who should attend the conference in order to accomplish the desired goals. To gain

It is not necessary to have every stakeholder present, just an adequate number from each stakeholder group and each demographic group represented in the community.

the necessary stakeholder participation, the planning team must include members who are credible to each stakeholder group. Team members invite key individual stakeholders to participate. Participation is confirmed when it is clear that an invitee is willing to commit fully to the process. Several contacts may be necessary to elicit this commitment.

In addition to inviting individual stakeholders, and to make sure that all necessary voices are

present, a planning team may want to open the conference to other members of the commu-

Future Search

Future Search works well for most communities. It is less expensive to conduct than traditional processes and does not require complex logistical support. It takes the community through a proven process that is easy to facilitate. The process is flexible and can be used to support, complete, or frame a variety of needs—from creating a vision and planning to analysis and implementation.

nity who wish to attend.

The third task creates the environment that will help to make the conference a success. The space must be comfortable, large enough to accommodate the entire group, and include space for smaller groups to accomplish their tasks. Windows are necessary, so participants can see the outside world. Supplies such as flip charts, colored markers, and other items used in specific processes should be available. Support for follow-through is also important, so that the action teams that come out of the conference will have resources to help them get started and stay connected as they work toward their individual goals.

When the work of the planning team is completed, and commitments from all stakeholders are obtained, a Future Search conference is held.

Conference. In this 3-day conference, stakeholders will work in groups of 8-10, sometimes with others from their stakeholder group and sometimes in mixed groups, where they will work with a mix of people from other stakeholder groups. Groups are given doable tasks that can be accomplished without outside facilitation. The conference facilitators

Three Whole Systems Approaches—An Overview

This section describes some basic features of three whole system approaches applicable to community and governmental settings.

FUTURE SEARCH provides a simple, straightforward structured process adaptable to specific needs, which creates a very powerful common experience for the participants. It provides good support for groups that don't have developed process skills as well as more experienced groups.

- It is structured.
- It is fairly easy to implement without extensive experience.
- It provides collaborative and meeting skill development techniques.
- It does not require consultant-intensive participation which makes it less expensive.
- It engages stakeholders in a range of activities that appear to provide a powerful synergy for community and action towards a vision.
- It can handle groups of 50-500 people.

REAL TIME STRATEGIC CHANGE is a collection of large group tools that can be applied in various ways. It is useful, in particular, where large numbers of people need to be engaged and where buy in or modification is needed for already existing plans.

- It is flexible.
- It is often used in a consultative mode to advise already existing plans or plans made by a separate planning body.
- It can engage very large groups (even >1000).
- It requires a fairly large a team of consultants and logistics personnel.

OPEN SPACE is an extremely flexible process involving a minimum of structure. It is based on the assumption that people who are passionate about something will find ways of self-organizing and provides a framework within which they can do that.

- It is designed on the spot by participants.
- It is very flexible.
- It appeals easily to a range of participants.
- It is easy to implement with minimal facilitation.
- It works for very small to very large numbers of people.

Open Space, in our experience, is most useful for groups that already have a common focus and some experience with process. We use it quite often as a followup to another large group process, or as a part of other work.

may provide suggestions about process, but each group decides how they will accomplish their assigned tasks. People work side-by-side, sometimes with colleagues, and sometimes

with people they don't know, or with whom they may have come into conflict in the past. Reports from these groups are brought back to the whole group and processed.

A Future Search conference usually includes 50-100 people, while participation of as many as 500 people is not unusual. Parallel conferences can be held to integrate larger numbers into the process.

During the conference participants will work together to:

- Discover the group's shared common history—personal, organizational and worldwide. The result is posted on timelines and analyzed by small groups that report back to the large group.
- Create and discuss a shared map of the present.
- Envision a number of possible future scenarios and presented them to the group.
- Identify areas of common ground from the future scenarios.
- Build action teams based on this discovered common vision.
- Make personal commitments to accomplish specific actions over specific time periods.
- Make plans for follow-up.

Followup. On the final day of the conference, stakeholders form action teams to implement the areas of common ground identified at the conference. Plans are made to include other community members as appropriate, and goals are set for moving toward action objectives. A date is usually set for followup meetings and measures are identified for keeping the

various teams and the general public informed about the activities of the action teams

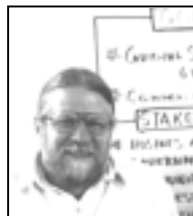
Conclusion

This article is an overview of how whole system approaches work and how they may be applied to the work of municipal managers. While local governments are doing much good work for their communities, the use of whole system thinking, along with one or more of the developed whole system approaches, holds great promise for increasing the effectiveness and success of their work.

In addition to practical advantages, whole system approaches provide opportunities for new kinds of community experience. Communities are realizing that goals cannot be attained in an atmosphere of distrust and polarization. Wonderful benefits and unimagined opportunities are arising like a phoenix out of communities that come together to use these tools to build a common dream.

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