

Search Conference

Engagement range	Inform/Consult/Partnership
Difficulty level	Medium to Hard
Cost	Medium (\$1,000 to \$10,000) High (over \$10,000)
When might you use it	To communicate an issue To develop community capacity To develop action plan
Number of people required to help to organise	A team of people (three - six) may be required
Time to organise	Medium (six weeks to six months) Long (over six months)
Size of audience	Large (over 30)
Issues/resources to think about	Publicity; Venue; Furniture; Catering; Staffing; Moderator/facilitator; Overhead/data projectors and screen; Audiovisual recording equipment and amplification; Artists/photographer; Printed public information sheets; Props for working in groups (pens, paper, pins, etc.); Children's requirements; Response sheets
Innovation level	Medium to High

Description

A search conference is a large-group task-oriented 'conversation'. Search conferences emphasise face-to-face interaction among stakeholders to create a new community. The process of meeting and discussion engenders new ideas. The venue and seating plan of the conference are designed to engender conversation and good relationship building. Search conferences have been used to help organisations to merge when they have differing visions and to bring together trade experts to develop curricula based on their tradecraft and skills.

In a community setting, search conferences have allowed 'ordinary' citizens to use their local knowledge in developing plans for economically depressed regions. Search conferences are held over one or more full days, during which participants explore ambiguity and difference in the interests of forwarding research and action.

Objective

- To identification of specific actions which ought to be taken.

Desired Outcome

- Future plans or visions that are practical and can be implemented for an organisation.

Uses/Strengths

- Develops creative and achievable strategies.
- Produces collaborative and participative approaches.
- Generates consensus.
- Develops shared values.
- Develops commitment to strategies formulated.
- Combines formulation and implementation.
- Integrates cultural, regional and/or value differences.
- Achieves completion of a task in two or three days (and sometimes evenings) that would take months if left to specialised analysts and experts.

Special Considerations/Weaknesses

- Focus is on learning, not teaching.
- Conflict and differences are acknowledged, but not dealt with.
- Equal status of participants is supported.
- Personal commitment and ownership are emphasized.
- Self-managing teams are used.
- Shared meaning is developed.
- Can be logistically challenging.
- Can be time consuming (two – three days).

Step by Step Guide

Search conferences have three broad stages: pre-planning; the conference; and implementation. Pre-planning:

1. **First Planning Session:** (six - eight hours). Determine whether a Search Conference will meet your needs. If it will, decide on the conference themes and purpose, arrange a venue and draw up an invitation list.
2. **Secure keynote speakers.** Their presence should break the ice and set the flavour of the event, but not dominate it.
3. **Second Planning Session:** (three - four hours) This serves as a progress 'check-in' and a time to redirect efforts if necessary. Questions are answered and all conference plans are finalised. It is best to hold this session with the facilitator present, however, when travel costs are a major concern it is possible to substitute an extensive telephone conference call between the planning group and the facilitator.

The Conference

4. **The Search Conference:** (one full day or more). The participants will share information, discuss issues, and complete a series of small and large group tasks, which culminate in a strategic goal setting and action planning session. These tasks should encompass the following:
 - Analyse the environment (background, possible future, what is working/not working)
 - Analyse the 'SYSTEM', what routines, practices, restrictions, rules and structures influence the present known community issues, the community itself and its environment.
 - Plan how our system can best flourish, within our environment (this should develop realistic action plans engendered through new understandings).

Implementation

5. **Follow-up Session(s):** This is a time to celebrate individual and group successes. Evaluate the ultimate success of the conference by how easily the action plans can be implemented. Progress is assessed and plans are modified as needed.
6. **People are give roles and deadlines set.**
7. **The action plans are put into practice.**