The Future Inquiry Workshop in practice and research

Verna Blewett*  

*Appleton Institute, Central Queensland University, Adelaide, South Australia, AUSTRALIA

1. What is the Future Inquiry Workshop?

The Future Inquiry Workshop (Blewett and Shaw 2008) is a structured, large group process that provides the framework to allow diverse participants, who represent ‘the whole system in the room’, to seek common ground and identify strategies for action that lead to a commonly desired future. The theoretical underpinnings of the Future Inquiry Workshop are appreciative inquiry (Whitney and Cooperrider 1998) and the future search conference (Wiesbord and Janoff 2000, 2010). Both of these modalities are in turn grounded in the work of early theorists on leadership, socio-technical systems, group dynamics, and group development. The process is tightly directed within a one-day timeframe. It is structured in order to validate diverse opinion and thus allows disagreements in the room to be used, rather than ignored.

The tasks that make up a Future Inquiry Workshop are self-managed to allow everybody to share information, to interpret it and to decide action steps. There are no long speeches, expert presentations or assumptions about what the groups need to do to be successful. Instead, each phase the process is the same: everybody contributes their information, discusses it and decides what it means and what to do. Working together in small groups, as well as in the total group, participants pool information, analyse it, present conclusions and develop plans for agreed action.

During the meeting participants look at the past, present, and future of the topic in question. They develop a comprehensive list of trends affecting the topic, what the present responses are, and how they want them to be in the future. They also have a chance to think through the kinds of relationships they want to have among people in the future.

2. Where is it used?

The Future Inquiry Workshop has been used in both research and practice. Its use in a large research project located in the safety-critical rail industry in Australia and New Zealand is reported elsewhere in this Congress (Blewett, Naweed and Hirsch 2015). In practice we have used the process to assist firms develop strategic plans or solve problems that they face. At the industry level we have used the process to determine what industry stakeholders are prepared to do in response to the issues that they face. For example, in the Digging Deeper project, set in the mining industry in New South Wales, Australia (Shaw, Blewett et al 2007) we used the Future Inquiry Workshop to test recommendations and garner industry support for action before the report was finalised. Future Inquiry has been used in various ways in Australia, New Zealand, India and East Timor, so we know the process is robust enough to be used in different cultural contexts.

3. When to use it—or not

There are known conditions for success for the Future Inquiry Workshop (Blewett and Shaw 2013). These include careful planning of place, content and people. The right place means having healthy food and a room that will accommodate all participants comfortably with wall-space for displaying materials and natural daylight. The right content means setting a boundary around the discussion at the outset to ensure that the focus is maintained throughout the day and establishing the conditions for effective self-management throughout the day. The right people means having representation of all stakeholders in the system in question. If critical people are left out, are not available or are prevented from being in the room, then failure will be built into the workshop from the outset. If the conditions for success are not met by the commissioning body, or the facilitators, then it is often better to use a different process or, as the facilitator, say ‘no’ to the work. For example, during the set-up for an industry-level Future Inquiry Workshop in the health sector, we were told the employee unions could not be invited. We opted to cancel the event until the commissioning
people agreed to their presence. The workshop was ultimately run successfully and people on both sides of the industrial fence were able to identify their common ground.

4. Props

Low-tech is the catch-cry of the Future Inquiry Workshop. This is for several reasons. Firstly, low-tech barely ever fails, whereas computers, networked systems and other hi-tech devices often do fail, particularly in places like hotels, resorts and conference centres. Flip charts on easels on the other hand can be moved around the room without cables, can be hung on the walls for display throughout the day so that everyone has access to the information throughout the workshop, and can be readily typed up or photographed for long-term storage or access. Participants arrange and rearrange the furniture throughout the day, that is, they move their chair into varying sized circles or groups. There are no tables in the room for participants because tables get in the way of open discussion. A circle of chairs around an easel with flip chart means that everyone in the group can read what’s put on the flip chart and everyone has the potential to influence and be engaged in the discussion. Water-based pens, such as children’s thick marker pens, mean that people write in large writing that’s easy to read from a distance. Marks on clothing and fingers are readily removed and there is no solvent smell in the room. Name-badges have the preferred given name in large letters, surname in small. There is generally no affiliation or title, but if these must be used, they are also written in small type. The focus is on the preferred given name to insist on the general humanity of the participants and to help equalise power differentials in the room. Finally coloured sticky dots are used on the name-badges to identify stakeholder groups. This considerably simplifies breaking into small groups. Matching dots are used during one of the exercises during the workshop.

5. The output and beyond

Fast feedback on the content of the day is an imperative so that participants can rapidly build on the energy that is generated during the Future Inquiry Workshop. As the consultant and facilitator we aim to provide an ‘output document’ within 36 hours of the end of the workshop. Given we have an assistant type up the materials on a lap-top throughout the day, this is generally achievable. The document is a record of all the written materials produced during the day and includes photographs of drawings that are part of this record. We do not edit these, but produce what is before us; in a sense the output document like the minutes of a meeting. We email the output document either to all participants direct (if we have an email list) or to a key person in the commissioning body. We draft the covering email to let people know what the document contains and to give participants the opportunity to correct errors and expand acronyms. We let them know that they are not allowed to add or change data. If they want to do this, we are happy to accept that information and add it as a separate document.

The more important outputs are the decisions that are made about the first do-able steps towards the desired future. Participants need to meet following the Future Inquiry Workshop to firm up their action plans; sometimes this may involve people who were not part of the workshop. In some instances a follow-up meeting is held with key people two or three months after the Future Inquiry Workshop to help ensure that action plans are on track. This can help re-focus the effort and provide a mid-term goal for the participants to work towards.

References


