



Future Search Network and The Natural Step to Work Together

April 24, 2012



Michael Donnelly, Karl Henrik Robert, Jonas Oldmark, Marv Weisbord, Sandra Janoff
meet at The Natural Step offices in Stockholm

Stockholm Sweden was the setting for a powerful coming together of two of the world's most robust processes, one grounded steadfastly in the world of sustainability, based on science and the other in the world of social science and organisational development. The two organisations were invited to meet by Michael Donnelly from Ireland who practises both processes and who has for a long time recognised the potential for the two to work more closely. This potential had already been lived out by a late, esteemed colleague, Ralph Copleman who organised his own community in New Jersey to work the two processes together.

The Natural Step, founded in the eighties by Swedish cancer scientist Karl Henrik Robert, is deployed in large and small businesses and in municipalities around the world. It helps organisations and communities to move step wise towards sustainability and it emerged from an exploration by Karl Henrik who, whilst treating cancers, became curious as to the wider environmental factors driving the growing rates of the illness. His query led him into dialogue with the scientific community, a dialogue that produced four fundamental principles that underpin sustainability of our planetary system. For the past 20 years those principles have been peer reviewed, and tested by practical application in hundreds of settings in communities and in businesses around the world.

Similarly, Sandra Janoff and Marvin Weisbord created Future Search, a principle-led meeting design, in the eighties: a culmination of their research, learning, and experiences in the worlds of systems thinking, group dynamics, and organisational development. Their goal was to create a process that would robustly transform any systems capacity to act and to honour the experiences of all parts of the system.



They have inspired a community of practitioners and supporters who have spent the last twenty years experimenting through action research and sharing the result. The stories that come back from the 370 members of the Future Search Network demonstrate its success in all countries, cultures and settings.

The two processes share common values – a cohort of practitioners around the world with a desire to make the world a better place, a systems based approach, and a target audience of leaders who are ready to do their bit to improve success for their own organisations and the communities they interact with. Both processes are steadfast in their desire to increase the pace of uptake, to increase the capacity of leaders to handle the change that is needed.

The meeting inspired commitment to act on three fronts:

1. To work together with the same clients in the same process – i.e. using Future Search as the vehicle for implementing a sustainability-focused vision of success (honouring the principles of both processes).
2. To work together to engage more leaders around the world in this dialogue.
3. To educate each other's members on the two processes – e.g. offer Natural Step training to Future Search network members and vice versa, to have Future Search as a part of the Masters course in Strategic Leadership for Sustainability; prospective PHD theses to analyse the combination of the two processes.

What is Future Search?*

Future Search is an innovative planning method used world-wide by hundreds of communities, companies and organizations. The method enables large diverse groups to (1) find common ground, (2) take responsibility for action, and (3) develop commitment to implementation. The method is especially useful in uncertain, fast-changing situations when it is important that everyone have the same large picture in order to act responsibly. Because it is largely culture free, Future Search is used on virtually every continent for social, technological and economic planning.

A Future Search may involve 60 to 80 people and sometimes 100 or more. People work in small groups as "stakeholders" (shared perspectives), and in mixed groups that are a cross-section of the whole. Every person has a chance to speak and listen. This makes possible a shared picture based on the experience of all those present. The meeting also is managed so that the entire group can be in dialogue at important points along the process. The minimum length is four sessions of half a day each, spread across three days to allow for "soak time." One intensive planning meeting often sets the stage for projects that continue with high involvement for years.

How Future Search Works

Future Search is designed based on principles that enable people to work together without having to defend or sell a particular agenda. This opens the door to creative



new opportunities. The fact that the whole system is in the room at the same time enables a responsible, realistic foundation for joint action to emerge. Coupled with the creativity that is released during the structure and choreography of the tasks, uniquely durable and surprising solutions and proposals are put forward. The process is based on four fundamental principles:

Future Search Principles

- Get the "whole system in the room"
- Think globally, act locally--Explore the same world
- Focus on the future and common ground, not past problems and conflicts
- Self-management and responsibility for action

The Future Search Network

The global community of Future Search practitioners is held together by a non-profit initiative called Future Search Network of which Sandra and Marvin are the co-directors. The network is used to inspire collaboration, share good practice and insights, and to maintain a communication channel among the many different types of practitioner that is out there – from the freelance consultant to the corporate change manager. Right now there are around 370 members of the Network and about 4000 have received direct training from Sandra and Marvin on running a Future Search. Each year a global Learning Exchange is hosted in the country of a Network member, at their invite. The most recent was in the Netherlands in September 2011.

A more recent development has been the creation of "Masterclasses" where Sandra and Marvin lead a conversation that examines the question of "what would you do if..." where participants raise scenarios and are able to find the answers from the shared experiences of others present and particularly from Sandra and Marvin.

In 2011 Future Search Network was awarded the Global Impact award by the Organisational Development Network. This award is not an annual award.

Sandra and Marvin have between them published some ground breaking books on the approaches they use including:

Weisbord, Marvin. *Productive Workplaces*, 3rd ed. (Jossey-Bass, 2012)

Weisbord, M. & Janoff, S. *Future Search: Finding Common Ground for Vision, Commitment and Action*, 3rd ed. (Berrett-Koehler, 2010).

Weisbord, M. & Janoff, S. *Don't Just Do Something, Stand There!: Ten Principles for Leading Meetings That Matter* (Berrett-Koehler, 2007)

* by Sandra Janoff, PhD and Marvin Weisbord. See www.futuresearch.net



Introduction to The Natural Step (from the website)

If you can – read this to start: <http://www.naturalstep.org/en/our-story>

The Natural Step is a non-profit organisation based in Sweden. It was started in 1987 by Oncologist, Karl Henrik Robert who had led a dialogue among the scientific community in Sweden to determine the implication of human way of life on the planet.

That dialogue led him and his colleagues to identify four principles that must not be contravened in order for society to realise its own sustainability. In the intervening years these principles have remained the same yet have been rigorously tested both academically and experientially. It appears that they apply to any scale or any content and as such are used around the world in hundreds of settings.

Alongside the four principles is a wider framework, now called the Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development (FSSD), which describes how organisations can manage the change process needed to go alongside adoption of the principles into an organisation's strategy.

Recently The Natural Step has been undergoing an organisational transition of its own. The intellectual property of the framework has been Open Sourced and is widely available to anyone wishing to use it.

There are Masters courses established at Blekinge Institute in Karlskrona which has a reputation for excellence in engineering. There are distance learning courses.

Around the world the framework is used by consultants and a network of TNS affiliated organisations. Several countries have a formal TNS organisation – such as France, Italy, Canada, Australia, Japan etc.

The practitioners of FSSD are not formally connected by any mechanism but they do communicate on one of several forums online - e.g. on Linked In.

More recently The Natural Step has been involved in a three year applied research programme called Real Change. It is currently establishing a global research alliance looking at deepening the application of the principles and framework for more strategic interventions.

Karl Henrik's work on the principles was recognised by winning the Blue Planet Award (the environmental equivalent of the Nobel Prize), and by being made a Global Fellow by social entrepreneur organisation – [Ashoka](#).



Sustainability: critical for success (From the TNS Website)

The Natural Step (TNS) Framework is based on **systems thinking**; recognizing that what happens in one part of a system affects every other part. Think of a soccer team. We can't understand why the team lost the game until we look at how each player – the goalkeeper, defenders and forwards - all worked together on the field. We won't learn much if we just study one member of the team. The TNS Framework gives an organisation the tools to look at the whole team, understand the rules of the game, define success, and move towards it together.

Any successful team must have a **common language** and understanding in order to facilitate cooperation. The TNS Framework provides this shared mental model of sustainability by helping people across organisations, disciplines and cultures to communicate effectively, build consensus and ultimately move toward their vision. We use an **upstream approach** that anticipates and avoids problems before they occur, rather than reacting to their downstream effects.

This scientifically rigorous Framework gives organisations the tools to perform a gap analysis using the lens of sustainability, and then work toward closing the gap. Furthermore, The Natural Step Framework complements other sustainability tools and methodologies, such as life cycle analysis or environmental management systems, by providing the context and strategic vision that makes them more effective.

The Natural Step Framework:

- uses metaphors such as a funnel to illustrate the problem with our current industrial system, and a scientific understanding to identify how we can open the walls of that funnel.
- defines sustainability with 4 sustainability principles that individuals and organisations can use to build strategies toward sustainability.
- has evolved through a practice that demonstrates that strategic sustainability requires:
 - backcasting from sustainability principles (planning from success)
 - prioritisation of actions to ensure that all selected actions are (1) moving in the right direction (towards sustainability), (2) flexible platforms that avoid dead-end investments, and (3) good business decisions (ie. offer an adequate return on investment).

The Natural Step Framework has been used in strategic decision-making by hundreds of organisations, in multiple sectors, across supply chains and in various scales, offering concrete and simple ways to accelerate change toward sustainability.

The concept of "backcasting" is central to a strategic approach for sustainable development. It is a way of planning in which a successful outcome is imagined in the future, followed by the question: "what do we need to do today to reach that successful outcome?" This is more effective than relying too much on forecasting, which tends to have the effect of presenting a more limited range of options, hence stifling creativity, and more important, it projects the problems of today into the future.



In the context of sustainability, we can imagine an infinite number of scenarios for a sustainable society – and ‘backcasting from scenarios’ can be thought of as a jigsaw puzzle, in which we have a shared picture of where we want to go, and we put the pieces together to get there. However, getting large groups of people to agree on a desired future scenario is often all but impossible. Further, scenarios that are too specific may limit innovation, and distract our minds from the innovative, creative solutions necessary for sustainable development.

So strategic sustainable development relies on ‘backcasting from sustainability principles’ – which are based in science, and represent something we can all agree on: if these principles are violated, our global society is un-sustainable. To achieve a sustainable society, we know we have to not violate those principles – we don’t know exactly what that society will look like, but we can define success on a principle level. In that way, backcasting from principles is more like chess – we don’t know exactly what success will look like, but we know the principles of checkmate – and we go about playing the game in a strategic ways, always keeping that vision of future success in mind.

Natural systems are complex and non-linear, and while we understand more and more about how they behave on the principle level, we still cannot predict the weather. Social systems are far more complex. Still, we try to force these systems into models so we can ‘understand’ them and ‘predict’ how they will behave. To do this, we are forced to make assumptions that often make the models reductionist, simplistic, and absurd. For example, in economic systems the assumptions that all people are ‘rational actors’ and that there is ‘perfect information’. In large part, this is due to a tradition of compartmentalized disciplines in academia, where the social scientists have pushed a quantitative, value-neutral approach to studying these systems in the misguided pursuit of establishing concrete laws similar to the laws of nature.

Even if we could predict the future, why would we want to? We have the power to create a better future. The complexity of social systems within the biosphere demands a whole-system perspective and employing backcasting from sustainability principles. In this way, we can acknowledge the value-laden reality of social systems. We can all take a transdisciplinary approach to learning to better understand the basic constraints we must operate in. And together, we can implement the dramatic change in societal design necessary to create a sustainable society.

The Four System Conditions...	. . . Reworded as The Four Principles of Sustainability
In a sustainable society, nature is not subject to systematically increasing:	To become a sustainable society we must...
1. concentrations of substances extracted from the earth's crust	1. eliminate our contribution to the progressive buildup of substances extracted from the Earth's crust (for example, heavy metals and fossil fuels)
2. concentrations of	2. eliminate our contribution to the progressive



substances produced by society	buildup of chemicals and compounds produced by society (for example, dioxins, PCBs, and DDT)
3. degradation by physical means	3. eliminate our contribution to the progressive physical degradation and destruction of nature and natural processes (for example, over harvesting forests and paving over critical wildlife habitat); and
4. and, in that society, people are not subject to conditions that systemically undermine their capacity to meet their needs	4. eliminate our contribution to conditions that undermine people's capacity to meet their basic human needs (for example, unsafe working conditions and not enough pay to live on).

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