

Does the search conference deliver on its promise?

A new method for achieving community excellence

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The results from using the search conference as a regional planning process by the Macatawa area (the cities of Holland, Zeeland and five adjoining Michigan townships) prove that democratic planning is alive, effective and working well in the US.

On a sunny May morning in 1995, one hundred and ten people are gathering in Christ Memorial church in Holland, Michigan to attend the *Second Annual Macatawa Search Conference*.^{*} The agenda for the day is to review the last year's achievements, reassess the long range desired future for Macatawa, and to establish priorities for the coming year.

The stage was set for this day a year earlier when 63 citizens of the 7 municipalities that make up the Macatawa area gathered for a 3-day search conference in Big Rapids. This initial search conference established a jointly determined vision for a desired future for the area and a plan to implement it.

During the search, priority groups action planned, involved other initiatives and people and began the journey to reach their objectives. The 1994 plan was adopted as both the regional strategic plan and led to the creation of a new organizational form for the Macatawa regional council. By the end of that search participants agreed to work together to improve the quality of life in the Greater Macatawa Area through creative, cooperative, and comprehensive work in the following areas:

- Economic development
- Lifelong learning
- Environment
- Personal safety
- Healthcare

- Residential life
- Land use and transportation
- Social services

Today (May, 1995) people are gathering together to celebrate the accomplishments of a year's commitment.

The large meeting space is transformed into a science-fair-like exhibition complete with visual displays, videos and an array of other artifacts. Eight priority action groups are presenting the year's accomplishments along with stories of how they overcame obstacles. At the same time, the action groups are, each in turn, getting plenty of feedback on their work through small group discussions.

Macatawa's Environmental Action Team report — Greg Holcombe from the *Environmental Action Team* explains: "We defined our purpose on the environment to initiate actions to identify and preserve sensitive and unique natural features and properties within the Greater Lake Macatawa watershed for public enjoyment, use and accessibility. The overall goal of this effort is to create and protect a *Greenway Network* in the Macatawa region. This network will be an interconnected system of public and private parks, forests, streams, and other open, undeveloped lands. These areas will be connected along Lake Macatawa tributaries by greenways which will provide corridors for use by citizens and wildlife."

^{*} Rather than being a new search, this was a follow up search to the first search conference.

Holcombe continues: “Inspired by the great parks and open spaces in this country such as Grant Park, Lincoln Park, and the Forest Preserve in Chicago, Fairmont Park in Philadelphia, and Boston Garden, our first goal was to map all the property that would compose the aspired Greenway Network”. Holcombe then pointed to the large Macatawa Greenway Network map they constructed during the year.

“Our next challenge,” Holcombe noted, “was to determine how these core properties would be formed into the Network by interconnecting them with Macatawa river tributaries. Fortunately, many of these mapped properties are already afforded long term protection through their present use — such as parklands, school uses and to a degree most of the Macatawa River streambanks.

The group’s current goal is to continue identifying property owners and discussing possible agreements, land sales, etc. This summer we will set some model agreements. Simultaneously, city councils and other policy boards have been made aware and are asked for input.”

You may be saying to yourself now, “this sounds like any planners report; what’s the big deal?” The essential difference is that Mr. Holcombe is not a professional planner — he is a volunteer. To help you understand how this action planning group was able to make such progress, some background and understanding of the search conference process is in order.

What is a community search conference?

The search conference is a participative planning method in which people create a plan for the most desirable future of their community. During a search conference usually some 20–50 citizens (community leaders, businessmen and women, parents, workers et cetera) become a learning/ planning community. Together they create a vision, develop action plans and strategies and agree to stick with it all the way through implementation.

How is this approach different from other planning approaches? The search conference method is based on the clear understanding that our world, or social environment, has made a radical shift from being relatively stable to being highly dynamic and unpredictable.

In such environments uncertainty and ambiguity reign. Strategic planning, tactical and operational sessions which assume that the future can be created by extrapolating the past into the future are obsolete. Plans based upon linear projections from historical data are bound to falter, as they meet with the unpredictable and fast changing present. The search conference has been researched, tested and designed to help organizations quickly adapt to changing environments.

The search conference is based on active, adaptive learning and planning — Unlike the salamander which simply changes its color to adapt to the environment, search conference participants actively and creatively plan in a puzzle solving manner so that they are both learning from and changing the environment as they go. The search process also requires people to do some serious introspection in their effort to both learn about and to get outside of the box of their system.

Active adaptation... In short, active adaptation is dependent on an individual’s and organization’s ability to:

- Learn from the environment...
- Learn about the system...
- Plan a better system.

Before returning to the area’s second search, let’s take a look at why the people in this area came to use the search as a means to change their community.

Why shapeshift an old Dutch settlement?

The Macatawa area is probably one of the healthiest economic climates in the state. New industries are attracted by the area’s solid work ethic, abundant resources and quality of life. For long it has been the home for outstanding companies such as the Prince Corporation, Haworth, Herman Miller, Beverage America, Bil–mar and Heinz. There is virtually no unemployment in the area with some companies having as many as 90 job openings a week.

A socio–ecological perspective... The vast majority of these big companies are owned by residents of the Macatawa area. Direct local feedback by their neighbors on how their business effects the community, as well as their own direct perception helps them to face and deal with a

“The search conference method is based on the clear understanding that our world, or social environment, has made a radical shift from being relatively stable to being highly dynamic and unpredictable.”

Search conference underpinnings: its theory, values and philosophy assume people have the ability to plan their future...

Traditional goal setting and planning methods assume that experts are essential to gather the appropriate data and to craft plans that can be implemented. Traditional planning methods also assume that it is possible to create 5, 10 and 20 year plans based on historical data.

The search conference acknowledges the value of data gathered by experts, but also places greater value and emphasis on the direct knowledge of participants in any system and on their ability to select goals and plan their future.

- Participation is equal and open (leave your hat at the door). All ideas are valid...
- It is democratic by design, people are responsible for the control and coordination of their own work...
- Explores how the surrounding world, with all its changes, forces and uncertainties, effects the community or region (reality checkpoint for future planning). Remembers the past, evaluates the present and creates a preferred future to end with a plan that is...
- Realistically balanced between the assets of the community and its (ever) changing environment...
- Focuses on future possibilities...
- Has no presenters, lectures, keynote addresses, games, or training sessions. Ordinary people can make perfect sense of the real world and are the experts doing the real work of learning, planning and implementation...
- Rationalization of conflict. As disagreement on certain topics is unavoidable and often legitimate, it is unrealistic to strive for consensus in a community. Rationalization of conflict is about finding the common ground between the arguments as the basis for the community to move forward...
- Builds on the notion that people are purposeful, want to learn and create their own future.

Search conference design...

The search conference resembles a funnel in its design. It begins with the widest possible perspective, then it narrows down to specific key actions, widening again as the group diffuses and implements its vision to the rest of the community.

The first part of the conference consists of a series of tasks to learn what's happening in the

global and more direct environment. This sheds light on how the community is, or could be responding to environmental changes. Next the community does an appreciative inquiry into the past, exploring its history and heritage, followed by an assessment on the current state of affairs.

Based on the shared information of the environment and community itself, the second part of the conference puts people before the task of developing a vision of their community's most desirable future. The outcome is a series of agreed upon vision statements.

In the last third of the session, participants turn desirable vision statements into achievable goals by anticipating potential constraints and devising strategies to get around them. Finally, action plans and strategies for diffusion and implementation are developed.

Although search conferences are always designed to meet the specific needs of the client system, it generally looks like the adjoining figure.

Changes in the world important into the future
Trends and forces directly affecting our system
Common history of our system
Our current system: what to
keep, throw-out, create
Desirable future of
our system
Action planning
End of the search conference:
Diffusion to the community
Implementing the plan

wide range of social, economic and ecological issues as resident citizens and businesses. Keeping pace with the area's long standing tradition of social responsibility, many of them have reached out in the past to help.

Again, this all sounds as if we were describing heaven, not Holland, Michigan. But with a healthy

growing economy comes increasing complexity, many new relationships and problems more associated with big cities than with small town Michigan.

Increasingly, a growing population and changes in its cultural mix created both multiple demands and calls for new responses from the social,

economic, political, ecological and physical infrastructures of the area. Some of these trends as noted in the *2010 Report on the Macatawa area* were:

- A projected population increase of around 20 percent by the year 2000 and 50 percent by 2010...
- A growing Hispanic and Asian population in a conventional Dutch culture...
- From having one of the lowest unemployment rates in the state, the area began to experience an increase of gang and drug related crime (in 1993 the first police officer fell to the hand of gang violence)...
- Lack of affordable and adequate housing...
- Increasing language barriers...
- Transportation problems that require comprehensive study and solutions.

The need for more regional solutions and the rising concern for the quality of life in Macatawa area sparked the idea of doing a comprehensive regional planning process to help get a better handle on the future. **I**

Now, for the first time, people in the community realized that there was both the need and opportunity to move beyond piecemeal solutions. Working together through the search conference would enable them to both select and move toward a more desirable future.

Back to the search of 1995

When we left off looking at the sights and sounds of Macatawa's second search conference, we had just heard an overview of the *Environmental Action Team's* accomplishments. The next group is one working on personal safety. Here we see Bridgett Staub and Sgt. Gene Koopman reporting out and asking for support on the *Personal Safety Action Group* which found a place in the more comprehensive *Federal Weed and Seed Program*.* Bridgett is explaining what they've been doing and what's happening right now:

- "A task force has been established to combat gang violence, with, among other things, the help of a computer database to track gang related activity..."
- Increased street-level law enforcement presence in targeted neighborhoods including additional policing with bike and foot patrols as well as prevention programs for residents...

Planning in the Macatawa area...

To coordinate and steer these region wide developments in a positive direction the Macatawa Area Coordinating Council (MACC) was formed. The MACC is an area wide association of the cities of Holland and Zeeland, and the townships of Holland, Park, Laketown, and Fillmore. MACC is vested with area wide transportation planning responsibility through its federally-mandated Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) status. During this period, MACC has also been invited to work on various other area wide planning efforts by its member organizations including housing, harbor access and dredging, land use policy, and law enforcement efforts. The MACC was the initiator and sponsor of the search conference.

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- Prevention programs are working to strengthen police school relationships, train community members to deal with juvenile crime issues, provide parenting education, and break down the cycle of domestic violence...
- *Safe Haven* sites have opened at Community Education buildings in the target neighborhoods...
- Human Services agency activities are coordinated to maximize availability to residents, often right at the *Safe Haven*...
- Childcare workers from within the target neighborhoods are being identified and trained...
- Neighborhood restoration efforts, including repairs and *paint blitzes*, are helping to overcome deterioration.

Economic development needs are being closely examined in an effort to provide solutions to high poverty levels, unemployment, and underemployment. Sgt. Gene Koopman stated publicly a week later at *Weed and Seed's* first anniversary: "In spite of the obstacles we still need to overcome, this year has clearly been the best experience in my 20 years with the police force."

The Healthcare Priority Group — The *Health-care Priority Group* is breaking ground in its effort to coordinate healthcare and medical services in the entire area. They have been the driving force behind getting the community hospitals of Holland and Zeeland to think in terms of partnership and begin reducing redundant services. Lynn Kotecki explains enthusiastically: "Our next goal is to organize a search conference on healthcare as a way to get all the right people in the room and knock down the barriers that hinder the breakthrough change we so desperately need."**

*Washington recognizes the Macatawa area as the model of how this program ought to be implemented.

**Lynn Kotecki, in a recent update of their progress, reports "On Monday, October 16, 1995 all the key players of the healthcare system, companies, hospitals and other health care providers will meet in a strategic planning forum. What drives this is the idea to have a variety of healthcare related people mutually interact to think beyond local solutions and focus on the well being and health of all people in the Macatawa area. This should break through some of the increasing problems of false competition, duplication of services, healthcare benefit deals, rising costs, community access to healthcare, etc."

The Land Use/Transportation Priority Group

— Daniel Driesinga explains that the objective to explore future regional land use and regional planning through a geographical information system (GIS) database proved to be so extensive that the *Land Use/Transportation Priority Group* split off a separate sub-group to just do that. The GIS sub-group has made significant progress.

The group is aiming at supplementing the already existing Board of Public Works GIS database with additional electronic data already on file with local governmental units and educational institutions. One of the key benefits of a GIS database at a central data exchange location is the ease in which map and database changes can be made as information changes.

Merging several sources of information and data generates numerous GIS uses for: zoning and land use maps; transportation systems; water, sewer, and other utility system maps; election districts; school bus routing and school district maps; tax code maps; environmental contamination site maps; property ownership maps, etc.

These are but a few of the exciting achievements that the priority action groups presented this past May. The rest of the day was spent on small group and plenary discussions around the feedback from the *science fair*, evaluating current actions against the changing world and, in response to that, the setting of possible new task groups. Many new initiatives were generated, most of which could be absorbed by the existing action groups. By the end of the day the *Community Access and Technology Group* was added to the list of priority action groups.

A look at the first Macatawa search and why it was successful

I can hear some of you readers saying now, “Everything went well and they even did a second follow up search, but how and why did it go so well?” Fair enough question, let’s take a look at what makes a search conference live up to its potential.

The purpose of a search conference, again, is to harness the skills needed to understand both complexity and rapid change in our communities and related environment, and then to use those skills to create both a vision of a desirable future and the plans for how to get there.

A word of caution... Even if a search produces the very best plans and implementation process imaginable, these can all unwind if participants assume that getting to the desirable future is simply a matter of carrying out those plans in a linear fashion.

Underlying strengths of the search — The underlying strength of the search is that it gives the community the ability to constantly probe and scout the environment for new or unforeseen changes, as well as the ability to then create new or enhanced strategies to maintain its course to its desirable future. Both during and after the search (in the diffusion and implementation phase) the community and its plans are not unlike a sailing ship, aiming for safe harbor. The changes in course that the ship takes to account for shifting winds and changing currents are analogous to the search community using multiple feedback, learning and self-referencing loops to stay on course toward its desired future (and in some cases, even alter the desired future). To reach its long term objective the search community needs to have people in the crow’s nest to spot far away changes, people forward and aft, starboard and leeward plumbing for changes in depth and people reviewing the map. They must also maintain their ability to get all hands on deck to adjust their sails when necessary, upgrade navigation equipment and optimize radio contact. And if the plans no longer fit a rapidly changing environment, the community needs to retain its ability to even redesign the ship.

In non-metaphorical terms, the community needs to retain its ability to continuously monitor the following aspects of the search process:

- Initial reasons and purpose for the search...
- Identified boundaries of the system: i.e. the group of people who have the knowledge and experience to meet the purpose of the search...
- Ongoing trends, forces and changes in the environment...
- State of affairs within the system...
- Most desirable future state...
- Non-bureaucratic nature of the search community. [2]

Delivering on its promise — Search conferences deliver their promise if proper and careful attention is given to:

- The pre-work...
- The search itself...
- The extended phase of diffusion and implementation.

Pre-work: defining purpose and selection of participants... The hard work of a planning group establishes the front end of the process. Here in Michigan the planning group was well aware that soon virtually every public policy would require some form of coordination across and between local independent municipalities. This fact urged the planning group to clearly define an inclusive mission or purpose for the search conference. At the first Macatawa search reception in March 1994, the overhead projector flashed up and read:

“A gathering of the diverse people of the Macatawa area in a collaborative quest to create a common vision and develop paths to a significant future place.”

The reception was called to life to help the selection of participants for the search. Rich vander Broek, a planning group member recalls: “It was a grueling selection process, in which our committee took a great deal of effort and time to formulate a slice of our community that was representative of income, age, culture, religion, the education and business community and so forth. The reception informed community members about the upcoming search event and laid out the participant selection criteria which included the limits to the group size of the search conference, diversity, area wide representation, and ability to contribute to the process (not just those two days in May). In all, three months later sixty-three people showed up at the *Big Rapids Search Conference*, and Maria Cruz reminded us: ‘I was able to see the different roles in the community, for myself I was a student, Hispanic and a female, so age, diversity and gender were all there!’”

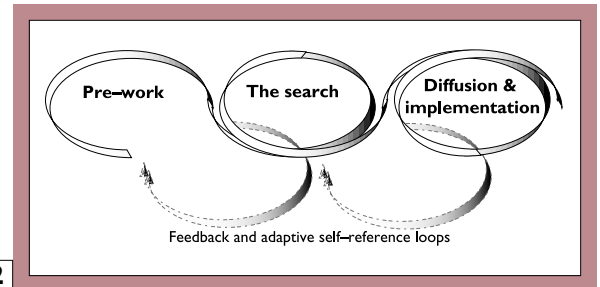
The search itself

In the late afternoon of Tuesday, May the 24th, 1994, participants started to pour in as they prepared themselves for their first evening session. Freedom from phone calls and other distractions, truly made this search conference a two and a half day social island.

Staying on course requires feedback and learning loops...

The changes in course that the ship takes to account for shifting winds and changing currents are analogous to the search community using multiple feedback, learning and self-referencing

loops to stay on course toward its desired future.



The search as a heuristic device...

Why does a two and half day event have such a lasting impact on how people think and work? In a search conference people are putting in practice a radically new and different way of working together — quite the opposite of what most of them are used to in their jobs.

Most organizations, institutions or conferences for that matter, are through their expert assumptions, designed to control information, to restrict learning, and inhibit creativity, all for the sake of preserving order and the idea that it is this *order* that makes the world go round.

The search conference offers an alternative — democratic in its design — it puts the responsibility for control and coordination clearly in the hands of those doing the work. While I am not saying that this is easy, it does have a real advantage. People are making their own decisions, are responsible for their own learning, and are dealing with the challenges of a variety of tasks. As people look to themselves as well as to others for direction, mutual support and respect become indispensable. Seeing the whole picture, to look beyond the usual piecemeal solution coupled with the ability to actually influence the outcome adds real meaning to the work. And, not in the least, it provides opportunity for people to grow and get ahead in life.

Once people have experienced their own authentic power and social creativity in the environment of the search conference (or other democratic designs), the assumed limitations just fall away. From there on, it will be difficult for most to ignore dysfunctional bureaucratic work arrangements.

Learning about the environment — After the orientation, introductions and listing of hopes and expectations for the coming two and a half days, the group begins by brainstorming a long list about the significant changes in the world that they believe will have an impact on the future. The wall is quickly covered with statements and phrases:

- Evolution of new culture...
- Emphasis on speed...
- Breakdown in family structure...
- Medical advances...
- Population explosion...

Tell me the landscape in which you live, and I will tell you who you are —
Jose Ortega y Gasset

- Power of money...
- People in ethnic conflicts...
- Both spouses working...
- Different religious traditions...
- Computers and communication...
- Aging population...
- Environmental resources...
- World finance marketshare.

Participants are beginning to see their community in a much larger context and when later, the shared ideals come to bear during a heated large group discussion over gender issues, the conference managers know the lid is off the jar and from this point on the Macatawa area people own the search.*

The first evening closes... The search conference managers, impressed by the boost of energy during the first evening session, hear participants saying as they leave the room, "The gender discussion was great and long overdue!"

The next morning and more exploration of the environment... The next morning the group advances by exploring the direct effects that changes in their immediate environment have on them. Increased awareness of regional identity, land use pressures, employment-based changes, school to work transitions, competition, cultural shifts and unfunded mandates are a few of the identified direct stressors on the community. This direct environmental impact scan coupled with last night's analysis of the changes in the world at large helps the group see and understand the correlation between the outside world and the future direction of their community. All these meaningful and sometimes painful deliberations have implications for and bear fruit during the planning of the most desirable future of the Macatawa area.

Learning about the system — Now it is time to move within the boundaries of the system and to appreciate its history and assess its present functioning (following this, the challenge of creating the most desirable future for the Macatawa area begins).

Our history... The entire group pushes and pulls chairs closer to the center of the room for they know they don't want to miss any of the stories

that make this community what it is today. One of the community elders begins: "I believe the foundation of who we are today was laid way back when the Dutch Reverend Van Raalte and the first settlers struck down on the shores of Lake Michigan. They had, through their oppression in Europe, strong feelings about religious freedom, hard and honest work, good education and fine relationship between owners and workers."

Others continue as time and space barriers dissolve:

"...the quarreling between the two Dutch settler towns and the fire in downtown Holland in 1871."

"The building of the civic center some 50 years ago brought people socially together."

"The evolving of the farming and fruit belt introduced the migrant Hispanic workers to the area, which eventually led to more ethnic diversity."

"In the late 1950s thirteen individual school systems joined to become a separate district."

"The massive industry growth over the last twenty years: Haworth and Herman Miller for example."

"The Hispanic and Laotian festivals, we are now celebrating many cultures."

"The massive growth on the north side of the city of Holland — Malls, the public parks and beaches, railroad, ships and hotels to attract people to the area."

"The formation of the MACC as a formalized cooperative effort"

"And don't forget: We owe our name to the respected Chief Macatawa from the Ottawa tribe."

"This is a very moving experience, I've learned more about the importance of our own history in this past hour than in the last forty years."

How are we doing today? As they re-enter the great room after lunch, three flip charts face them — labeled, respectively: KEEP, CREATE, DROP. The conference managers can barely keep up the writing as people assess their present state of affairs and call out, KEEP:

"The stop signs at 17th street..."

"Local control over industry..."

"Tax abatement for business attraction..."

And DROP

"Duplication of services in township fire and police departments..."

"Tax abatements..."

"A country (or a community for that matter) that has lost its sense of its own past, has no understanding of its present, and no direction for its future." — Sir Winston Churchill

"The 'If you're not Dutch, you're not much' attitude."

The disparities between some municipalities were also noted. Holland has the most people and the highest public service demands, while some townships have dramatically higher average incomes. That is the dubious equation of urban blight evident in so many larger cities — Chicago and Detroit — one that the Macatawa area wants to avoid at all costs.

The next list outperforms the other two by far, it reads CREATE:

"Consistency in land development..."

"An effective area wide public transportation system..."

"A way to force businesses to address child care for their employees..."

"Area wide infrastructure..."

"A computer free-net..."

"Cable programming..."

"A response to increased youth violence and gang issues..."

"Enhanced mechanisms for volunteerism in community..."

"A Spanish page in the local newspaper..."

"More equitable funding among/across municipalities, cities and townships."

Creating our desirable future — After a recap of the work they have already done, Nancy Cebula, one of the conference managers, puts the search community on task with this instruction: "In no more than five statements clearly describe the most desirable future of the Macatawa area in 1999".

Participants gather in small groups to review the critical data on the walls, to dream large, be practical, think originally and present to the community their view on the most desirable future. After the small groups report out their future visions, a few people begin cutting and pasting to integrate the thirty some statements into a common list.

The entire community is now engaged in a discussion of what statements can or cannot be merged, which ones definitely stand alone, thus making absolutely clear what are the different points of view on the future of Macatawa. When this affinity process is completed, the final list contains 13 different statements.

The small groups again retreat to define three criteria to prioritize the list and rank the top five. This helps to identify where the community is willing to put its energy, on what it truly wants to work for into the future. Arduous debate follows when groups report out their criteria and rankings. The search managers start a process to reach agreement on what the community will work and action plan for. Debate, discussion and finally agreement brings their future to light:

- Ethnic diversity must be celebrated rather than simply tolerated or observed...
- Equal access to good quality healthcare and education must be part of the Macatawa region's vision of the future...
- Social services must be well coordinated and aimed at keeping family relationships healthy and prevent further deterioration...
- Crime prevention and law enforcement is a priority...
- Ensuring the future of the natural environment — water, air and soil.

Finally, the Macatawa search community comes to closure and announces:

"We, as a community, are committed to improving the quality of life in the Greater Macatawa Area through creative, cooperative, and comprehensive work in the following areas:

Economic development

Lifelong learning

Environment

Personal safety

Healthcare

Residential life

Land use and transportation

Social services"

*"By the end of the decade we'll have our first man on the moon."
— John F. Kennedy*

Planning how to get there — The search conference is as much about strategy as it is about making democratic choices. It aims beyond just being visionary to make the desirable future happen. After people have self-selected the area in which they are most interested in working, Bob Rehm, another of the conference managers, prepares the participants for the hard work of pushing dreams into reality.



Frank Heckman is recognized as one of the leaders in the application of the Search Conference and Participative Design methods in the US — he was the first to do a participative redesign workshop in the US. Heckman and his network partners have successfully applied these methodologies in a variety of environments/communities, corporations, state and federal government agencies, educational institutions, and regional groups. He has a degree in Sports and Education from the Hogeschool in Amsterdam, and a masters in organization development from Loyola University in Chicago.

He says to the group: “Before we throw ourselves into action planning, I want you to first clearly describe what it is you are going to work for in terms of outcomes. Secondly, I want you to identify at least one major constraint and develop a strategy to either overcome or get around that constraint.”

“Let me clarify this point on strategy,” says Rehm: “The search conference adopts the strategy of indirect approach as developed in the “Art of War” by Sun Tzu and exemplified in the ancient Chinese game Go. It means the art and science of maneuvering. The message is: “Do not waste costly resources fighting battles, prevent war.” The action groups are now prepared to not put all their eggs in one basket, but rather develop an array of practical strategies and actions most likely to stand the test of time and uncertainty.

The plan — The camera of the local cable station zooms in as the land use group reports out on how they will develop a coordinated and comprehensive land use strategy incorporating infrastructure systems inclusive of all the governmental units in the Macatawa area. In great detail they explain what it is they’re going after, who will be involved, who will be responsible and by when. The community has some questions for clarification and provides feedback. They all applaud the fruits of intense and hard work. The camera swings on to the next group.

Back to the world

“The Macatawa Area Coordinating Council is willing to provide this search community all the support and resources that we have at our disposal, we are not here to receive the results of this conference, they are yours,” says Sue Higgins, conference participant and director of MACC. She continues her commentary by saying, “It is the community’s responsibility to control and coordinate their own work as they set out to attain their future goals. As a bottoms-up support system the MACC has avoided the trap of creating another bureaucracy. Volunteers from each *Action Priority Group* form a coordinating group. They will act as a clearing house, to ease the access to the different action groups, to disperse information on progress, to respond to specific needs, et cetera.”

Suddenly we are at the end of the first search conference. One participant sums it up well as he speaks into the camera: “It gave me great joy to be part of this because I’ve been involved with so many organizations and committees that have no idea and don’t even care about what is going on in the community — they have no compassion and sensitivity. I’m proud to have been part of this search conference.”

Recent updates on the second search conference...

The new Community Access and Technology Action Group

Community wide cable access — This group is working toward convincing the two locally operating cable companies to link up so the entire system can be used for area wide access. The cable companies have told the group that it will cost \$10,000 to link up. Recently, the County Commission and Holland Community Hospital have taken a strong interest in the project, so funding is no longer anticipated to be a problem. Once the connection is made, the project will serve as a demonstration first, then move into permanent status.

A computer Free-Net — Rich vander Broek’s baby, the Free-Net was up and running on August 1, 1995. The system is now in need of community information for world wide web pages. Finances are going well:

- MCI may contribute \$50,000...
- The group has sent in an \$80,000 grant proposal to the Federal government...
- To date they have already received a \$17,000 grant from Holland Community Foundation and nearly \$60,000 from individual supporters.

The Herrick Public Library will be conducting Free-Net learning sessions in the future. As of September 20, 1995 the Free-Net is growing rapidly with over 850 registered users. It’s acquiring more manpower to run it. The Free-Net is willing to serve as a demonstration site for corporations deciding to get their own place on the internet.

Some closing thoughts on the search and direct democracy

In stark contrast to how most of our organizations and (political) institutions are operating, the Macatawa search community, even with its ups and downs, continues to function as an open, adaptive system, which has a clear understanding that issues are not resolved in isolation. They have truly become champions and catalysts for change, bringing numerous parties together to help them shift gears as soon as the apparent *big picture* emerges for them. Through their own search experience action group members have modeled for the rest of the community that all people are natural learners, and demonstrated the power of collective learning and planning.

While many in this nation cry out that they have been disempowered by their government or that democracy is a poor way to make decisions, the people in the Macatawa area are, perhaps without even being aware of it, mocking the naysayers by successfully practicing direct participative democracy while working to create their most desirable future. ♦

Author's note: A special note of thanks to Bob Rehm and Nancy Cebula who were my co-conspirators at the 1994 Macatawa search, and to Fred and Merrelyn Emery whose long and arduous work and research accounts for much of the success of the Macatawa search.



Frank Heckman

Thinking Differently to Work Differently