Making Your Job Easier:
Using Whole-System Approaches to Involve the Community in Sustainable Planning and Development
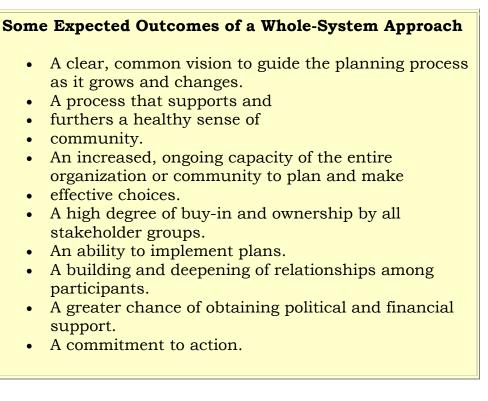
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As public servants, local government managers often face extreme—and conflicting—expectations from political leaders and their constituencies, staff members, unions, private and public interest groups, individual citizens, neighborhood organizations, 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, in which 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, use techniques that have proven successful in moving complex groups through visioning, planning, rapid change, and implementation while making allies of the conflicting voices and interests that managers deal with every day. These techniques, also known as "large- or whole-group interventions," have been used successfully in many sectors, including communities, nonprofits, businesses, and others.

(To simplify matters, this article uses the terms "community" and "organization"; however, the principles and techniques apply to all kinds of groups: businesses, government agencies, social groups, families, nonprofit or religious organizations, and communities in which people come together for organized activity.)

Whole-system approaches offer processes for engaging the myriad voices and interests shouting, and needing, to be heard. These procedures 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 overview of two 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 has been from a hierarchical understanding to a view of the organization or community as a whole—a collaborative and interdependent unit. The shift has resulted from observations that engagement, rather than a command-and-control approach, greatly increases the likelihood of accomplishing desired results. This effect has been observed in many areas of organization development, including visioning, strategic planning, design, redesign, and implementation.

The shift of perspective toward whole organizations (or whole systems) has enabled the development of tools that engage all stakeholders in devising 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, the negative reactions that are often triggered by top-down decision making are minimized.

System: A Network of Relationships
The word "system" refers to a "complex network of relationships." The term describes the everyday world in

which we 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 put it, "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, however, increases our ability to influence our lives and organizations in new, powerful, and productive ways.

A handful of successful methods have been developed for engaging the complex relationships that characterize organizations. These approaches have achieved widespread application and reached their 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.

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

Stakeholder or Representative?
A stakeholder is not a representative. A representative is beholden to a constituency and cannot act alone, while 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, whereas a representative can act only as the group directs. The system knows who its stakeholders are.

Why a Whole-System Approach?

Classically, organization development has been seen as a process of problem solving or of conflict management. Problems and conflicts will always arise and, appropriately, demand attention. When thinking is limited to problem solving, however, 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 even 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 a government setting, for example, a whole-system approach would involve the public from the beginning, along with planners, politicians, and others affecting or affected by the issue. This involvement would then be continued throughout the life of the project. In a 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 in order to attain the desired goal.

How the Process Works in Local Government

A whole-system approach starts with a planning team of six to 25 representative stakeholders. A stakeholder is a community member 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 to stop it, as well as everyone whose lives will be influenced by it. Stakeholders comprise 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 series of focused and highly structured activities.

Information gets into the room through the participation of stakeholders in real-world experience, not of 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 should have a voice at the conference through a stakeholder participant. People of all ranks and influence levels sit down at tables to work with each other on an equal, face-to-face basis.

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, they might encompass union representatives, community members, and janitors, as well as parents, teachers, students, and administrators.

A Typical Public Process

A typical conventional approach to public involvement is a typical whole-systems approach. Often, the traditional process falls apart before Step 5, or even before Step 4. Plans may be completed or partially completed, then sit on shelves for years.

Step 1. Initiation. Although most planners are conscientious about wanting to incorporate public opinion, it is hard to obtain effective input. Important data often are missing. The lead agency may conduct town-hall meetings, scoping processes, or focus groups. Such activities, however, 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. First draft of 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 visible to the public, it is hard for people to know if they have been heard. "Invisible" processes, when carried out by public employees or consultants, are highly vulnerable to the 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 collecting public feedback on draft documents. Often, however, these processes focus on public fears, concerns,

and feelings of being left out (in short, on the 20 percent of things people disagree about). The public has only the word of planners that their own earlier comments were considered at all. Even when responses to public comments are published, this process takes time and doesn't provide an opportunity for in-depth discussion.

Step 4. Final plan. As with the draft stage, the final-plan phase often requires the 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, often is 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 that feels a greater ownership of other ideas and concerns. Because commitment has not been obtained through the earlier stages of the process, the result may become highly vulnerable to political manipulation. When the plan has been approved, it may be changed for political reasons in ways that undermine its integrity. Sometimes, even when a plan is not controversial and has received full approval, it sits on a shelf for years because no commitment to implementation exists.

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

In contrast, the Future Search procedure 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, increasing the likelihood of its receiving official approval as an integrated whole with public support.

The Example of Future Search
A whole-system approach 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, uses an integrated method that doesn't require complex data analysis, and generally results in a high degree of buy-in and commitment to change and implementation. The main three stages of the Future Search process are the planning team, the Future Search conference, and the follow-up.

Planning team. The sponsoring agency or group assembles a planning team, which will be a microcosm of the larger complex of stakeholder voices slated to participate in the Future Search conference. The team usually includes six to 15 individuals, and its work 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 the team's work progresses.

Team members have 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 out of the conference.

The first task accomplishes two things. First, it helps to clarify the goal of the procedure in a way that will focus participation to gain the best support for the desired outcome. Second, the team's efforts to understand and articulate the goal help the team to determine which 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 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, and 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, to make sure that all necessary voices are present, a planning team may want to open the conference to other members of the community 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 commodious enough to allow smaller groups to accomplish their tasks. Windows are necessary, so participants can see the outside world. Supplies like flip charts, colored markers, and other such items should be available. Support for follow-through also is important so that the action teams that come out of the conference will have the resources to help them get started and stay connected as they work toward their individual goals.

When the work of the planning team has been completed, and when commitments from stakeholders have been obtained, a Future Search conference is held.

Conference. During this three-day conference, stakeholders will work in groups of eight to 10 people, sometimes with others from their stakeholder group and sometimes in mixed groups with people from other stakeholder categories. Groups are given "doable" tasks that can be accomplished without outside facilitation. Conference facilitators may offer suggestions about process, but each group decides how it will accomplish its assigned tasks. People work side by side, sometimes with colleagues and sometimes with people they don't know or even with whom they may have conflicted in the past. Reports from these groups are brought back to the whole group and taken into account.

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

During the conference, participants work together to:

- Discover the small group's shared history—personal, organizational, and global. The result is posted on timelines and analyzed by small groups that report back to the large group.
- Draw up and discuss a shared "picture of the present."
- Envision a number of possible future scenarios.
- 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 measures or activities.

Follow-up. On the final day of the conference, stakeholders form action teams to implement the areas of common ground identified. 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 follow-up meetings, and measures are identified for keeping the various teams and the general public informed of the activities of the action teams.

When to Use a Whole-System Approach	When Not to Use a Whole-System Approach
When you have an important issue or opportunity that requires the collaboration of	When you already are committed to a solution.

people with different points of view. When the situation is complex or polarized. When traditional methods are not working or are taking too much time. When you want to improve communication and collaboration among people with many points of view. When you are willing to support full participation by all stakeholder groups.	When you don't want to invite people with whom you disagree to participate in the process. When you cannot put in the attention and effort necessary for full planning and implementation of the process. When you are not willing to support full participation by all stakeholder groups.

Conclusion

This article has presented an overview of how whole-system approaches work and how they may be applied to the work of city or county 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.

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 procedure 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.

In addition to practical advantages, whole-system approaches afford 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

phoenixes out of communities that have come together to use these tools to build a common dream.

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For more information, visit this Web site: http://www.futuresearch.net.

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Three Whole-System Approaches: An Overview

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

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

- It is structured.
- It is fairly easy to implement without extensive experience.
- It fosters 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 generate a powerful synergy for community building and for action toward a vision.
- It can handle groups of 50 to 500 people.

Real-Time Strategic Change is a collection of large-group tools that can be applied in various ways. In particular, it is useful when large numbers of people need to be engaged and when buy-in or modification is needed for already existing plans.

- It is flexible.
- It often is used in a consultative mode to advise on already existing plans or plans made by a separate planning body.
- It can engage large groups (even more than 1,000).
- It requires a fairly large 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 furnishes a framework within which they can do this.

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

Open Space, in the author's experience, is most useful for groups that already have a common focus and some experience with process. It is used quite often as a follow-up activity to another large-group process or as a part of other work.