

FUTURE FORUMS PLAYBOOK

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Background

History

Future Forums were initially developed in 2015 by Clinton Brown for The Bakery coworking facility in Sioux Falls, SD, to host complex multi-side discussions with many participants. Melissa Goodwin, a technology innovator in Sioux Falls, advised him.

In 2017, he added Open Space Technology formats to the Future Forums and began hosting them with Jordan Deffenbaugh throughout Sioux Falls and the surrounding region.

Since its beginning, Future Forums has hosted community conversations about everything from transportation to local food production.

Clint and Jordan brought this new hybrid format to the BAM Foundation in 2020.

What is Open Space Technology?

Open Space Technology (OST) is a facilitation technique that enables a self-organizing group to address complex issues, explore ideas, and foster innovation. Developed by organizational consultant Harrison Owen in the 1980s, OST is particularly effective when dealing with diverse and dynamic topics where multiple perspectives are valuable.

Key features of a Future Forum

Self-Organization: FF meetings are characterized by a lack of a formal agenda. Instead, participants create the agenda themselves at the beginning of the event. They propose topics or issues they are passionate about or interested in discussing.

Future Forum: The meeting space is open, both physically and intellectually. Participants are free to move between different discussions, engaging in the topics most interesting. This fluidity encourages a dynamic exchange of ideas.

Facilitator's Role: The facilitator's role in an FF meeting is minimal. Their main responsibility is introducing the process, explaining the principles, and then stepping back to allow participants to take charge. The facilitator might provide guidance, but the energy and direction of the discussions come from the participants.

"Law of Two Feet": Participants are encouraged to use their "two feet" to move between discussions. If they find themselves in a conversation that isn't meaningful or relevant to them, they are free to leave and join another discussion.

Documentation: While there may not be a predefined agenda, participants are encouraged to document the discussions and outcomes. This documentation can take various forms, such as notes, drawings, or other creative outputs. It helps capture the collective knowledge generated during the event.

Final Gathering: Towards the end of the meeting, there is a final gathering where participants share insights, key learnings, and potential action items. This is an essential part of bringing diverse ideas and discussions together.

Future Forums are for conferences, workshops, and organizational retreats where there is a need to tap into a group's collective intelligence. It is suitable for addressing complex issues, fostering collaboration, and promoting innovation by allowing participants to explore topics that matter most to them. The method is based on the belief that those who care about a particular issue are best suited to address it.

What are Future Forums best used for?

Future Forums (FF) are best used for addressing complex issues, fostering collaboration, and promoting innovation in situations where:

Diverse Perspectives are Valuable: FF is effective when dealing with topics requiring input from diverse participants. The method allows people with different backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives to collaborate and contribute to the discussion.

Complex Problems Exist: It is well-suited for addressing complex, multifaceted problems that may need clearer or more straightforward solutions. FF's open and self-organizing nature encourages participants to explore different aspects of an issue and collaborate on finding creative solutions.

Need for Rapid Innovation: In situations where quick and innovative solutions are essential, FF provides a platform for generating ideas and insights quickly. The self-directed nature of the process allows participants to focus on the issues that matter most to them.

Desire for High Engagement: FF is designed to maximize participant engagement. Allowing individuals to choose and participate in discussions that align with their interests and expertise fosters a sense of ownership and commitment to the outcomes.

Building Community and Relationships: When building or strengthening relationships within a group is needed, FF provides a space for meaningful interactions. Participants have the opportunity to connect with others who share similar interests or concerns.

Exploration of Emerging Topics: FF is well-suited for exploring emerging or unfamiliar topics where traditional meeting structures may not be as effective. It encourages participants to explore new ideas and potential solutions collaboratively.

Organizational Change and Development: In the context of organizational change or development, FF can be used to engage employees in discussions about the future direction of the organization, foster a culture of innovation, and facilitate buy-in from participants.

Knowledge Sharing and Learning: When there is a need to share knowledge and experiences within a group, FF provides a platform for participants to discuss

and learn from each other. The open format encourages the exchange of insights and best practices.

Overall, Future Forums is a versatile approach that empowers participants to take ownership of the conversation, make meaningful contributions, and collectively address complex challenges. It is particularly beneficial when the traditional, top-down meeting structure may not be as effective in harnessing a group's collective intelligence.

When are Future Forums the best meeting format to use?

Future Forums (FF) are considered the best meeting format to use in several scenarios, mainly when the following conditions are present:

Complex and Uncertain Issues: FF is most effective when dealing with complex, uncertain, or multifaceted issues that may not have clear solutions. It allows participants to explore diverse perspectives and generate creative responses to challenges.

Diverse Stakeholders: When a group of participants with diverse backgrounds, experiences, and expertise needs to come together to address a common issue, FF provides an inclusive platform. It encourages collaboration and draws on the collective intelligence of the entire group.

Need for Innovation and Creativity: If the goal is to foster innovation, creativity, and the generation of new ideas, FF is well-suited. The self-organizing nature of the process allows participants to focus on topics that inspire them and contribute to out-of-the-box thinking.

High Levels of Engagement Desired: FF is ideal when high levels of participant engagement are desired. Allowing individuals to choose the discussions that align with their interests, it encourages a sense of ownership and commitment, leading to more engaged and invested participants.

Time Constraints: FF can be efficient when time is limited, and there is a need to cover a broad range of topics or issues. The lack of a predefined agenda and the ability for multiple discussions to co-occur make it possible to explore a variety of subjects in a relatively short timeframe.

Desire for Inclusivity and Empowerment: If the objective is to create an inclusive environment that empowers participants to take responsibility for the meeting outcomes, FF is an excellent choice. It allows individuals to self-select into discussions where they can contribute meaningfully.

Emergent or Unpredictable Topics: When dealing with emergent or unpredictable topics that may evolve during the course of the meeting, FF's adaptability is valuable. Participants can respond to emerging issues in real-time, making it suitable for dynamic and evolving situations.

Community Building and Relationship Building: FF effectively builds a sense of community and strengthens relationships among participants. It provides

opportunities for networking, collaboration, and the sharing of experiences and insights.

Organizational Change Initiatives: In the context of organizational change, FF can be a powerful tool for engaging employees in conversations about the organization's future, fostering a culture of innovation, and promoting employee buy-in.

Knowledge Sharing and Learning Events: When the goal is to facilitate knowledge sharing and learning among participants, FF allows for exchanging insights and best practices. Participants can discuss topics that align with their interests and expertise, promoting mutual learning.

In summary, Future Forums are the best meeting format when dealing with complex issues, diverse groups, a desire for innovation and creativity, high levels of participant engagement, time constraints, and the need for inclusivity and empowerment. Its adaptability and participant-driven approach make it well-suited for dynamic and evolving situations.

What outcomes can I expect from a Future Forum?

A Future Forum (FF) meeting is designed to be dynamic and participant-driven, leading to a variety of outcomes that contribute to the exploration, discussion, and resolution of complex issues. While the specific outcomes can vary based on the nature of the meeting and the topics discussed, here are common outcomes you can expect:

Rich and Diverse Discussions: Participants engage in rich, diverse discussions that reflect their varied perspectives and expertise. The open format allows for a broad range of topics to be explored simultaneously.

Innovative Solutions and Ideas: The self-organizing nature of FF fosters creativity and innovation. Participants often generate many ideas and potential solutions to the challenges presented, drawing on the group's collective intelligence.

Enhanced Collaboration: FF encourages participant collaboration. As individuals move between discussions, they share insights and perspectives, fostering a sense of teamwork and mutual understanding.

Increased Participant Engagement: Participants actively engage in discussions that align with their interests and expertise. This high level of engagement contributes to a sense of ownership and commitment to the outcomes of the meeting.

Actionable Plans and Initiatives: The discussions often lead to the development of actionable plans, initiatives, or projects. Participants may identify concrete steps that can be taken to address the issues at hand.

Networking and Relationship Building: FF provides ample networking and relationship-building opportunities. Participants connect with others with similar interests, forming valuable professional relationships extending beyond the meeting.

Documentation of Insights: Participants document their discussions, key insights, and outcomes. This documentation serves as a valuable record of the collective knowledge generated during the meeting and can be used for future reference.

Identified Priorities and Focus Areas: Through the discussions and interactions, participants may identify priorities and focus areas that require further attention or resources. This helps in clarifying areas of emphasis for ongoing efforts.

Increased Organizational Learning: The open and collaborative nature of FF promotes organizational learning. Participants share experiences, best practices, and lessons learned, contributing to the overall knowledge base of the group.

Empowered and Inspired Participants: Participants often leave the meeting feeling empowered, inspired, and motivated to take action. The sense of having actively contributed to the discussions and outcomes can lead to a heightened sense of purpose.

Adaptability to Emerging Issues: FF allows for adaptability to emerging issues. Participants can respond to changing circumstances or unexpected challenges in real-time, ensuring that discussions remain relevant and timely.

Positive Organizational Culture: Successful FF meetings contribute to developing a positive organizational culture characterized by openness, collaboration, and a willingness to explore new ideas and approaches.

It's important to note that the outcomes of an FF meeting are not predetermined, as the process relies on the self-organization of participants. The success of the meeting is often measured by the extent to which participants feel they have addressed the issues that matter to them and have contributed meaningfully to the group's collective goals.

Read Before Hosting

How does a Future Forum meeting work?

A Future Forum (FF) meeting is designed to be a dynamic, participant-driven, and self-organizing event that allows a group of people to address complex issues, share insights, and explore solutions collaboratively. The process is guided by a few key principles and a general structure:

Setting the Stage:

Welcome and Introduction: The facilitator welcomes participants, explains the purpose of the meeting, and introduces the principles of Future Forums.

Formation of a Circle: Participants are typically seated in a circle, fostering an open and inclusive environment.

Explanation of Principles:

Four Principles and "The Law of Two Feet":

1. **Whoever Comes Are the Right People:** Emphasizes that the people who choose to attend are needed for the discussions.
2. **Whatever Happens Is the Only Thing That Could Have:** Encourages acceptance of the outcomes from the discussions.
3. **Whenever It Starts Is the Right Time:** Emphasizes that creativity and innovation can happen anytime during the meeting.
4. **When It's Over, It's Over:** Acknowledges that discussions naturally come to a close, and there is no need to prolong them unnecessarily.

The Law of Two Feet: Encourages participants to take responsibility for their own learning and engagement. Participants are free to move to another discussion if a discussion isn't providing value.

Creation of the Agenda (The Marketplace):

Open Invitation: Participants are invited to propose discussion topics or issues they are passionate about. These are written on a board or flip chart, creating the "Marketplace."

Scheduling: Participants self-select into the discussions that interest them, determining the time and location for each discussion group.

Breakout Sessions:

Discussion Groups: Participants attend the discussions they are interested in. Volunteers facilitate these groups, but the emphasis is on self-organization.

Note-taking: Participants are encouraged to document key insights, ideas, and outcomes from their discussions.

The Law of Two Feet in Action:

Movement: Participants are free to move between different discussions at any time, following their interests and adapting to the dynamics of the meeting.

Closing Circle:

Final Gathering: Participants gather in a closing circle toward the end of the meeting. Each group briefly shares key insights and outcomes from their discussions.

Documentation: Participants may document their discussions and outcomes, contributing to a collective record of the meeting.

Follow-Up:

Action Items: Any identified action items or next steps are discussed, and individuals or groups may commit to taking specific actions.

Reflection: Participants may reflect on their experience and consider how the insights gained can be applied in their work or community.

The success of a Future Forum meeting depends on participants' active engagement and contributions. The facilitator's role is typically minimal, with the emphasis placed on the self-organizing capacity of the group. The flexible and adaptive nature of FF allows for creativity and innovation to emerge organically during the meeting.

What does a Future Forum look like?

A meeting room prepared for FF has a circle of chairs in the middle and letters or numbers around the room to indicate meeting locations. This blank wall will become the agenda and a news wall for recording and posting the results of the dialogue sessions.

Essentially, a Future Forum meeting proceeds along the following process:

1. The group convenes in a circle and is welcomed by the sponsor. The facilitator provides an overview of the process and explains how it works.
2. The facilitator invites people with issues of concern to come into the circle, write the issue on a piece of quarter-size flip chart paper, and announce it to the group. These people are "conveners."
3. The convener places their paper on the wall and chooses a time and a place to meet. This process continues until there are no more agenda items.
4. The group then breaks up and heads to the agenda wall, now covered with various sessions. Participants take note of the time and place for sessions they want to be involved in.
5. Dialogue sessions convene for the balance of the meeting. Recorders determined by each group capture the important points and post the reports on the news wall. All of these reports will be rolled into one document by the end of the meeting.
6. Following a closing or a break, the group might move into convergence, a process that takes the issues discussed and attaches action plans to them to "get them out of the room."
7. The group then finishes the meeting with a closing circle where people are invited to share comments, insights, and commitments arising from the process.

Room Setup

Open Questions

4-6 Flip charts spread around the space on the perimeter. Each one has one question it is about the topic for the day. See sample questions.

Each flip chart should have sticky notes and markers near or below it for participants to use.

Supplies:

- 4-6 large flip charts
- Markers
- Sticky notes

Opening Circle

Make a large circle with folding chairs, allowing for at least one seat per participant and two open seats. If no chairs are available, establish an area where a standing circle can happen.

Supplies:

- Facilitator Guide

Community Bulletin Board

Provide ample 5x8 note cards for participants to write their agenda items on. Include markers and additional masking tape if note cards are not self-adhesive.

Supplies:

- 5x8 note cards
- Markers

Marketplace

Using masking tape make one large grid with 6 columns and 2 rows. Each cell should be at least 12x12 inches.

Supplies:

- Masking tape

Breakout sessions

Set up one breakout session area for each column on your grid wall. These breakout areas need a notepad and pen for the Recorder.

Supplies:

- Large Note pad
- Markers
- Convener Guide
- Recorder Guide

Examples of community questions:

What hurdles do you see regarding the future of _____?

What opportunities do you see regarding the future of _____?

What is NOT being discussed regarding _____?

What factors have led to the current state of _____?

What variable could impact the future of _____?

What do you hope happens with _____ in the next 20 years?

Example schedule

09:00 am	Open the space for engagement with Community Questions and coffee
10:00 am	Opening Circle
10:20 am	Community Bulletin Board
10:40 am	Marketplace
10:50 am	Breakout 1
11:20 am	Breakout 2
11:50 am	Closing Circle
12:00pm	Lunch and Community Questions

If you would like a full day event either repeat the above schedule with the second Opening Circle at 1 pm or double the time for breakouts and/or add post-lunch breakouts. We do not recommend exceeding 4 total hours of Future Forum minus coffee and lunch times.

Roles

“The Facilitator” Guide

Before scheduled start time:

“Welcome to the Future Forum. Feel free to engage with any of the community questions we have posted around the edge of the room. Feel free to discuss the questions, answer the questions, or ask additional questions. You can do this any time today and as many times as you like.”

At the start time:

“Welcome. Our theme for this gathering is _____. In the next 90 minutes,, we are going to develop our best thoughts around the issues and opportunities associated with our theme.

As we start, I want you to notice the blank wall. That is our agenda. Just out of curiosity, how many times have you ever been to a meeting where the agenda was a completely blank wall?”

Pause for time to notice with Marketplace.

“To get `from here to there,’ we will use two very simple mechanisms — the Community Bulletin Board and the Village Market Place. In a few moments, I will ask you to identify any issue or opportunity you see around our theme, give it a short title, and write that down on the paper provided. Then, stand up before the group, say what your issue is, and post the paper on the wall. Make sure that you have some real passion for this issue and that it is not just a good idea for somebody else to do. You will be expected to take personal responsibility for the discussion. That means saying where and when the group will meet and convening the group. You may offer as many issues as you like, and if you do not see your issue on the wall at the end of the day, there is exactly one person to complain to. Yourself.”

“Once all the issues are up, we will then open the Village Market Place, and everybody will be invited to come to the wall and sign up for as few or as many of the groups as they desire. From there on out, you are in charge.

“Even though Future Forums are truly open, there are some principles and one law that we need to keep in mind.

The Four Principles are:

1. *Whoever Comes Are the Right People: Emphasizes that the people who choose to attend are the ones needed for the discussions.*
2. *Whatever Happens Is the Only Thing That Could Have: Encourages acceptance of the outcomes that emerge from the discussions.*
3. *Whenever It Starts Is the Right Time: Emphasizes that creativity and innovation can happen at any time during the meeting.*
4. *When It's Over, It's Over: Acknowledges that discussions naturally come to a close, and there is no need to prolong them unnecessarily.*

And the Law is what we call the Law of Two Feet. *Everybody has them. Take responsibility for your own learning and engagement. If a discussion isn't providing value, you are free to move to another discussion."*

“The Convener” Guide

“Welcome to my breakout out. Before we begin here are some simple ground rules that should make this fruitful for everyone.

- 1. I commit to actively listening to others without interrupting.*
- 2. I will avoid forming responses while others are speaking; instead, I will focus on understanding their perspective.*
- 3. I will share thoughts and opinions based on my personal experiences.*
- 4. I will use "I" statements to express your views without assuming or generalizing about others.*
- 5. I acknowledge and respect the diversity of opinions, backgrounds, and experiences within the group.*
- 6. I will avoid making assumptions or judgments based on stereotypes.*

I need some help to do this well. Who willing to keep track of time and who is willing to be The Recorder?

Hand The Recorder their guide.

“To kick this off let’s go around and everyone share one or two sentences as to why you came to this breakout.”

“The Recorder” Guide

As the recorder we encourage you to take notes that gather the essence of the various points of view as well as any specific language that might be helpful to understanding the session. It is ok if your notes are messy or organized so long as they are legible.

Be sure to document key insights, ideas, and outcomes from the discussion.

Ask for clarity if you didn't understand someone or they used unfamiliar vocabulary.

Extra Printables

Breakout session labels

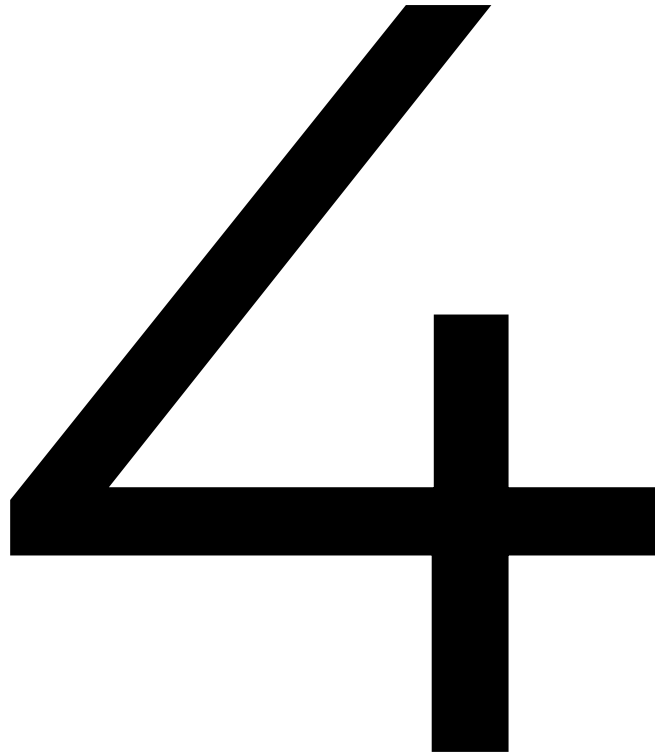
Spot



Spot **2**

Spot 3

Spot



Spot 5

Spot

A large, bold, black number '6' is centered on the page. The number is rendered in a clean, sans-serif font with a thick stroke. The top of the '6' is slightly open, and the bottom curve is smooth and rounded.

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