

# Future Search for Present Change:

*Everybody in the Pool!*

by

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## **The Backdrop**

Bringing about change is not what it used to be. The “good ole’ days” simply required the leader to announce what he or she was doing and “poof!” change was on the way. Not today. The challenges facing today’s organizations are complex in nature. And they are becoming increasingly more complex. Simply changing office chairs requires more than removing the old chairs and replacing them with the new ones.

Committees need to be formed. Surveys must be conducted. Employees must be consulted and their input considered. It’s not simple.

Imagine, then, the challenge of bringing about city-wide change—changes designed to create equity among the city’s 90,000 residents. Imagine bringing about these changes in an inclusive manner—where all the “movers and shakers” are in the room. Imagine conducting this meeting in two days (instead of the recommended three days) and imagine including about 120 participants in the room versus the recommended 80 or fewer participants.

If you can imagine those challenges (and others too numerous to mention), you have a cursory view of the challenges that my consulting partner and I confronted in creating a two-day inclusive process to create strategic initiatives for a city’s future.

This city, Albany, GA, is three hours south of Atlanta and has a history of racial challenges. Prior to this work, the city had created a motto of, “The good life city,” which was met with mixed reviews. Whites loved it; blacks thought it was a joke—since their lives were anything but “good.” This city, 50% white and 50% black, needed to find a way to bring its residents together and create dialogue among those persons sufficiently influential to help usher in a new reality for Albany.

## **The Almost-Perfect Technology**

As my consulting partner, Dr. Michael Rogers, and I examined possible tools to support the dialogue, learning, and planning we wanted to create, we explored a tool by the name of Future Search Conference with great intensity. This tool, developed by Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff<sup>1</sup>, has been used extensively in a variety of settings. Communities have used the tool; schools have used it; and I have used it in a number of consulting engagements.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.futuresearch.net/method/whatis/index.cfm>

The Future Search Conference has an engaging fundamental premise: if you would bring about change in a large system, it is important that the members of that system (or their representatives) coalesce with regard to the past, the present, and the future of that system. I had previously used this approach in several settings while employed at Sprint. The results were very significant from a buy-in and ownership perspective and in the settings where we focused the use of this human technology, we found significant long-term benefits as well.

None of those engagements, however, were similar to what we were facing: limited time (only two days for the session as opposed to the recommended three days), significantly larger number of participants than recommended (at 120, the participant number was fifty percent greater than the recommended maximum of 80), historical conflict (racial and ideological) among the participants, and an extremely limited budget. Conversations with Weisbord suggested that this effort would not likely succeed. There were far too many “cons” on the list and not nearly the number of “pros” that he and his colleague, Janoff, would have recommended.

Nevertheless, One Albany, a city-wide organization designed to improve the quality of life in the city for *all* of the city’s residents, was committed to making a difference in this city of historical polarization. The members of the organization demonstrated their individual and collective commitment to the success of the venture. One team member was successful in obtaining her employer’s commitment to the effort by allowing her to spend half of her time engaged in the success of the effort. This commitment was far better than money and was a major contributor to the project’s success.

## **Getting Ready**

Given the limited budget available, the work undertaken had to be done with a high degree of forethought, coordination, and project planning. A local project manager was hired to ensure that all of the needed work “on-the-ground” could be managed effectively. This proved to be one of the most crucial tasks to the effort’s overall success. The project manager was able to interact with all of the local individuals including those who were invited to participate, the media, as well as the local providers of services (caterers, facility managers, office supply resources).

Members of One Albany divided themselves among the various constituents who would be invited. Because this was a city-wide event, designed to engage all points of leadership in the city, high-level representatives were sought from:

- The office of the mayor
- The police chief
- The fire chief
- The superintendent of schools
- Key politicians (senators, representatives)

- Heads of major businesses in town
- Civic leadership
- Church and religious group leadership
- Local radio, television, and newspaper representatives
- Up-and-coming youth leaders
- Representatives from higher education agencies present
- Representatives from local military installations

Local media was actively engaged from the beginning. It was helpful that the editor and publisher of the local newspaper were members of One Albany. They were able to leverage the “power of the pen” to keep the public informed of the work anticipated and to encourage active participation on the part of those in leadership in the Albany area.

Members of One Albany worked diligently to keep these individuals informed, to confirm their attendance, and to answer any questions that these individuals might have. An interesting unanticipated outcome of the group’s efforts was the number of phone calls received from persons wanting to invite themselves to the event. Some were approved while others were respectfully declined. Even with those who were respectfully declined, the number of attendees pushed beyond the desired limit of 120—resulting in over 140 persons in attendance.

The location for this event was also strategically chosen. Because the community had been significantly racially charged, the location for the event had to be one where all racial groups would be able to work comfortably. The two local colleges: one white, and one black, were immediately dismissed. After some consideration, the local technical institute was chosen as the site. In many ways, it embodied the “coming together” desired in this event. It was an attractive, recently-constructed facility had had been created as a result of the community’s coming together to provide learning and skill-building opportunities (leading to employment) for all of its citizens. And it was strategically located between what was seen as the “black” and “white” areas of town.

Members of One Albany had been trained and coached regarding their roles in supporting this event. Each possessed a skeletal script, providing an overview of what would be happening at each point of the two-day event. This, it was believed, would help to provide immediate answers to the question, “What are we doing?” “Why are we doing this?” and “What’s next?”

## **Introducing the Work**

Several individuals, recognized for their leadership, were chosen to quickly welcome those present. These welcomes were designed to be brief, engaging, and high-energy, thereby setting the stage for what was to follow. The last individual welcoming attendees introduced me, providing a bit of my background. I introduced

my colleague and collaborator, Dr. Rogers, who was well-known in the community and well-received by all groups.

The central question to be explored during this event was, “*How do we make Albany the ‘good-life city’ for all of its residents?*”

Participants were grouped in table settings with 10 to 12 participants at each table. The table groups were arranged by design to ensure that there would be ample engagement across groups at strategic points, yet also creating same-discipline groups for other points of the days’ activities.

The group quickly set ground rules for the work together and was given an overview of the two-day event. These ground rules, we emphasized, were critical to the accomplishment of our desired outcomes. Despite this, most of those present were not convinced of our ability to achieve such an ambitious agenda in the limited time available. Frankly, we were not convinced either, but we were not willing to reveal our own skepticism at that point. Instead, we soldiered on, speaking confidently as we went.

Creativity was encouraged from the outset and was well-reflected in the various ways groups chose to introduce themselves. The energy of the room was high already. We knew that this event would be a success.

## **Honoring the Past**

A key focus to the Future Search Conference lies in *honoring*. Individuals are honored; the past, present, and future are honored. Even though points in the past may have been difficult to hear and to share, the table facilitators, and I, as the process consultant, worked diligently to create an atmosphere where honor was present. Whether the story was a positive one or a tragic one, we worked to create an atmosphere where we recognized that these stories created the foundation, the base, the ground from which our present and future emerge.

Groups focused on various aspects of the past: the past as it related to education, employment, housing, civic and community engagement, and several other areas central to creating “the good life.” Table groups were divided among both time periods and areas of focus. The table groups’ work was displayed on large sheets of butcher paper, creating a timeline dating back as far as the group’s knowledge of the community’s history would allow.

Participants were then encouraged to take a museum walk—both among the various tables as well as to examine the wall of history. They were asked to identify the themes that emerged from the data captured. Consensus was created within the group with regard to the themes represented in this part of the Conference and became the basis for the work to be achieved at the next stage.

## **Affirming the Present**

The themes from the past created a challenging question for Conference participants: to what degree are these past themes alive and well for this city in the present? Rich dialogue followed the introduction of this question. Although a significant amount of time had been set aside for this dialogue, participants begged for additional time—recognizing that expanding the time boundary might result in the day expanding beyond its announced 5:00 deadline.

Despite this threat, the groups insisted on the value of the dialogue and information being shared. It occurred to us, as facilitators, that this may have been the first (and only) time dialogue of this nature had been engaged. In retrospect, we should have allowed more time for this event. In reality, it worked out well since the participants were able to request (and receive) the time needed to hear from each other and to practice the “Listen, listen, listen” ground rule identified earlier in the day.

This listening dialogue was transformational in and of itself, as individuals heard stories previously unavailable to them. Stories of loss, of unaddressed frustration, of failed efforts, and of continued hope, despite previous setbacks. Friendships were forged out of this dialogue that have continued—as participants were able to hear and be heard, and to walk a mile (or two) in each other’s shoes.

The last event of the day consisted of groups sharing the information exchanged in their groups. This provided a brief overview of what had occurred in the groups’ closed sessions. It also further served to create a more inclusive environment—so that the information shared was not only the property of the group sharing it.

Once again, themes from the present were identified and captured. These themes represented the issues that still existed in this community that prevented it from becoming “the good life city” now, and, without intervention, could continue to hinder the future.

Participants were encouraged to consider the day’s work as they went their respective directions for the evening. Some chose to go out to drinks or dinner and continue the dialogue begun, creating even more opportunities to deepen understanding of what had been said, why, and what might be done about it in the future.

## **Visioning the Future**

The morning of the second day began with a question Thoreau reportedly asked his friends upon seeing them after a long absence: “What is clearer to you now than it was the last time we met?” Participants pondered their individual reflections as well as the dialogue that had occurred at the end of the evening’s session the night before.

Responses to the question were rich, varied, and never-ending—creating yet another situation requiring the facilitators' intervention (and the participants' chorus of "awwww...."). Yet in order to achieve the outcomes needed in the time available, the group had to move forward.

Ground Rules were reviewed just prior to the groups taking on their first significant tasks of the morning: visioning Albany's future as "the good-life city." In these work sessions, participants were asked to create their own depiction of what the future would look like as Albany became "the good-life city" as advertised. Participants were asked to create their own representations of the future using theatre, drama, art, drama, or any other type of media. The only requirement was that the focus had to be clear and that all members of the group had to be engaged in the group's presentation.

The presentations were funny, they were challenging, and they were unique. The majority of the "good-life" issues were addressed, with participating capturing a variety of points of view related to the areas of concern.

As had been the practice at the end of each of these work sessions, participants identified the themes seen and heard in each of the presentations. At the end of this session, however, groups were asked to dig deeper into the themes to identify the most important actions essential for Albany reaching "the good-life city" status.

In these groups, which were still mixed in terms of organizational affiliation, participants also identified what they believed were the priorities for the areas of action proposed. These recommendations would be passed on to the individuals taking responsibility for the actions proposed.

## **Planning for Success**

This final work phase was conducted in work-alike groups, so that those who were engaged in that area of discipline on a more full-time basis. Since these individuals "own" the disciplines under discussion (and, as a result, would be much more likely to bring about needed changes expeditiously.

As might be anticipated, some degree of resistance could be seen as the owners of various groups explained why they could not complete some of the actions identified. The resistance was not to the degree expected, however, which seemed to suggest that individuals' involvement with cross-functional peers opened eyes and ears to new ways of thinking about the individual's work.

Each group presented their own action plans, responding to the statement, "Here's how we are going to create "the good life city" in education, business, churches, etc. Specific tasks, dates, and accountabilities were identified.

## ***Closing and Postscript***

As the group moved the two-day event to a close, a number of commitments were made. Individuals committed to having follow-up sessions with other participants as a means of staying in touch, remaining committed to the actions identified, and advancing “the good-life city” cause. For many years these groups have met, bringing about continued change, cross-pollination, and the building of quality relationships.

Even though the economy has challenged Albany as it has all cities (one of the city’s large plants was forced to close, leaving a number of Albanians unemployed), the city remains committed to creating the good life. Churches, a mainstay in the Albany community, have opened their traditional boundaries and have created stronger, more open relationships with other churches—even those with different faith positions than those of their new colleagues.

One of the most important differences, and a recognized key to the creation of the good life city, are the differences in the quality of education experienced by students from different parts of the city. Gaps between groups are less and the overall level of education has improved for all. The quality of educational facilities, long a point of contention among leaders in lower-economic areas of the city, were dealt with quickly, as was the difference in the quality of educational delivery.

Contracts are being distributed more equitably among small business owners and there is a greater sense of goodwill among those in the city. The sense of disparity among the city’s residents is less. Even the two colleges, previously polarized around race, are identifying places where partnership and joint programming have opened up newer areas of program focus and knowledge acquisition.

It is fitting, then, that the closing event of the Conference was a spontaneously delivered vocal solo by an extremely talented participant. “Up Where We Belong,” was his choice. It seemed highly appropriate.

## **Summary**

Although several areas where results have been experienced were identified, it is important to note that many other areas also realized relevant changes that are improving life in Albany, GA.

This technology, although imperfectly presented, resulted in the creation of changes that have made a difference in the lives of countless individuals in Albany. The changes serve to reinforce the fundamental premise of the creators of the Future Search Conference, which states that well-meaning people, brought together with a common purpose, can do great things.



## Lessons Learned

The implementation of the Future Search Conference left all who worked with it with a series of insights that were useful not only to this project, but to other large-systems projects as well. These included:

1. ***A significant part of change is about creating a new reality.*** It is interesting to me, in retrospect, how initially daunted Dr. Rogers and I were when we determined that we could not deliver the Conference in the recommended three days. It was as if we had violated a fundamental law of the universe. Yet, as we moved forward, we were more and more convinced that this process could be completed in the time frame allowed. The success of this venture was indicative of the fact change creates new realities and there are often multiple realities that are created along the way.
2. ***Defining and retaining clarity of the outcome solves many problems.*** As the time for the Conference drew closer, the number of persons wanting to be involved was rapidly increasing. Countless individuals called, wanting to be a part of what we were doing. We began to ask two questions in order to determine whether the individual's participation was appropriate: *What is your background and what do you bring to the conference? What do you want to take away?* The individual's responses to these two questions helped us determine whether their participation in the Conference would be useful or a deterrent to the outcomes desired.
3. ***There is no substitute for partnership.*** Although we stumbled upon the recognition of this truth, it was imbedded in our initial undertakings, although not explicitly so. Because Dr. Rogers and I had worked together on numerous occasions, we assumed our typical roles relative to the project: I took the more up-front/out-front role while Dr. Rogers took a more behind-the-scenes role. This was especially valuable given the fact that I was not located in Albany and Dr. Rogers was. His presence on-the-ground enabled the type of ongoing communication and interaction that my presence hundreds of miles away could never have provided.
4. ***Partnership requires expansion.*** Dr. Rogers and I, alone, were not able to pull together all that was required for our success. Initially, this seemed to be the assumption of many: that the consultant (the PAID consultant) would do all the necessary preparation and the committee and the community would be able to arrive on the appropriate day and time and engage. Dr. Rogers and I worked diligently to dispel this false assumption. From the outset, individuals were engaged to the degree of their tolerance. Many stepped up beyond initial expectations, while others (as could be expected) fell short of what we had hoped. Their lack of follow-through did not create a challenge for Dr. Rogers and me, instead we were able to engage the "partners" at multiple levels to determine how the lack of follow-through should be handled.

5. ***You can always use more partners.*** Expanding our “partnership” to include all of those engaged in the Future Search Conference served to shift the responsibility for the immediate and ongoing success from the small group of catalysts who brought the event together. Rather than the group of twenty or so initial leaders taking responsibility, the group of over 120 people were engaged as partners in the overall success. Their engagement brought others into the picture in ways we could have never imagined.
6. ***Frequent reiteration of goals and outcomes increases the likelihood of achievement.*** Our ability to achieve the goals set out was significantly aided by regular review of the goal. Large groups often can take on lives of their own and strong members have been known to hijack group outcomes to achieve their individual agendas. The presence of the ground rules, solid facilitation, and skillful leaders at each group’s table minimized this occurrence.
7. ***Ongoing communication is more than essential.*** Because of my history with Dr. Rogers, we have cultivated the ability to communicate on an ongoing basis, using whatever devices (cell phone, text, fax, email) are available to us. Maintaining communication as a highly-held value enabled us to give and receive timely information essential for timely action.

### *About the Author*



Dr. Ollie Malone is President and Principal Consultant of Olive Tree Associates, a Kansas City-based organizational consulting firm that he founded in 1993, after having worked as an executive in for-profit and non-profit organizations. His professional experience includes executive assignments with Sprint, The Mead Corporation, and Pennzoil-Quaker State.

Since founding Olive Tree Associates, Dr. Malone has been privileged to work as a consultant and coach with a diverse client base including executives in American Century Investors, American Express, Boeing, Shell, State Farm Insurance, and the United States Secret Service.

Dr. Malone is author of *101 Leadership Actions for More Effective Presentations*, *101 Leadership Actions for Performance Management*, *101 Leadership Actions for Creating and Managing Virtual Teams*, and *101 Leadership Actions for Managing Change in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. He has also been published in *Research in Psychological Type*, *Journal of Lifelong Learning*, and *Journal of Staffing and Recruiting*.