

*(Chapter from Deep Lessons on Collaboration)*

**Changing Attitudes and Breaking Stereotypes:  
Mobilizing Action in Education**

By Nancy Aronson

**CHALLENGE:** How a collaborative effort helped turn around a failing vocational-technical school

**Introduction**

When a new executive director took over the North Montgomery County Area Vo-Tech School north of Philadelphia in 1993, he found an organization facing serious problems. The year before, the five local school districts—which sent students to this Vo-Tech school and underwrote it financially—had wanted to close the school. In addition to being held in low regard by other educators, the school suffered from common negative stereotypes associated with vocational-technical education:

- The school was a dumping ground for problem students or low achievers;
- Vocational education was for non-academic students;
- Some parents who attended the Vo-Tech School in the '70s remember it having a drug culture—a stigma that still held almost 30 years later; and,
- Industry viewed the school as out of touch with local labor needs.

The staff was talented, but morale was low, and they had little hope for the future. If an organization could be said to have low self-esteem, this one had it.

**Fast Forward: 2002**

By the beginning of the 2002-2003 school year the image of the school had improved, and the situation was dramatically different. The school evolved from a traditional vo-tech to a technical career center. A new name for the school, North Montco Technical Career Center, reflected both the changes and the school's new image. The school had a renewed sense of vitality and possibility. Enrollment went from 420 in 1992 to 1,300 just ten years later, and there was a waiting list, too. Gains were made in the areas of academic achievement and high expectations for students. The educational and technical opportunities for students were expanded. Teachers were exhibiting tremendous initiative in both their own professional growth, as well as in continually developing and refining high-quality courses for students.

Math and reading achievement scores, as measured by standardized achievement scores on statewide tests, increased significantly for students taught reading and math skills within the context of their technical training. Specifically, the average scores for these students were up 200 points on these tests vs. other technical students who were taught math and reading in their home schools—traditional comprehensive high schools.

Technical students were taking more challenging and rigorous academic courses. For example, in the past, machine-shop students were not required to take specific, higher academic courses and

would take general math. Today, students who want to be machinists take geometry, trigonometry, and calculus. The school has established pathways with rigorous academic courses for all program areas.

The school is distinguished by the ability of students to take either a technical or academic path. The school formalized over 40 articulation agreements with two-year and four-year colleges across the state. This means that these colleges give advanced credit for coursework taken at the technical school to students who elect to continue their studies at the post-secondary level. This eliminates redundant coursework and enables students to take more advanced or elective courses in college. Engineering Technology students could receive up to 15 college credits for fundamental technology classes taken in high school when they matriculate into a community college technology program.

High standards have also been infused into the technical aspects of the school. The school has access to state-of-the-art equipment and provides high-quality training and hands-on experiences for students.

Teachers have been very active in advancing the programs and offerings for students. For example, teachers in the Power and Transportation Cluster worked to get their programs nationally certified through Automotive Service Excellence (ASE). This is the same certification found in the “real world.” Perhaps the most dramatic display of teacher leadership occurred when teachers organized themselves to apply for and receive International Standards Operation (ISO) certification. This certification is a well-known and well-respected status marker in the national and international community. ISO certification signals that this organization “actually does what it purports to do.”

### **Factors for Success**

These are just a few examples of substantive changes made at this school. What factors contributed to this success?

The new executive director led the school in initially taking small steps and then “opened” up the organization to new levels of collaboration with others. He believed that this openness would lead to new possibilities and encourage other stakeholders to take initiative on behalf of the school. As energy and optimism grew, ideas were put into action. In describing the journey, a number of factors will be highlighted. The first has to do with the attributes of the executive director.

#### ***A Realistic and Optimistic Leader***

The executive director deeply believed that most of the staff was talented and committed. He also knew the school had a serious image problem. He understood the complexity of having a board made up of representatives from the five sending school districts. He was also committed to the importance of technical education and the opportunities it could provide students on a regional basis. He held both a tough-minded view of the current reality and a sense of possibility. He knew that rebuilding trust with the sending schools and the community was essential. Most of the staff understood that the school’s future was in question, and they were willing to do some things differently.

### ***Small Steps Begin to Build Momentum***

Youth Apprenticeships were created to augment in-class learning with relevant on-the-job experiences. These well-received programs were important first steps in the school's evolution into a contemporary, viable technical career center. A name change, to the North Montgomery County Technical Career Center (NMTCC or the Career Center), marked this aspiration and sent a signal that business would not be continuing in the usual ways. The stage was set for the next pivotal event: mandated strategic planning.

### ***Strategic Planning—The School Leaps Forward***

In 1996, the executive director, his assistant director, and a team of teachers met to discuss how the school should approach state-mandated strategic planning. The consultants encouraged them to be *strategic* about strategic planning. The group determined that they wanted to do more than just fulfill the requirements; they wanted this planning process to be a pivotal experience in the life of the school. Positive changes had begun with the Youth Apprenticeship program, and the timing was right. They believed there was now enough hope and interest in the school—enough initial momentum—to ask people to commit their time and energy to creating a better future.

### ***Making Mandates Meaningful***

A Future Search was chosen as the primary approach to strategic planning. A Future Search is a 16- to 20-hour meeting held over three days with 64 to 100 people, representing the whole system. Its basic principles include opening up the system, particularly bringing all voices into the room to be part of the planning. This was essential to the executive director. This highly engaging, participative process yields a shared vision; common-ground goals; and, in this case, possibilities for action. It is built upon the following principles:

- *Get the whole system in the room.* The “whole system” means diverse internal stakeholders (such as teachers and administrators) and external stakeholders (such as sending school administrators and teachers, parents, business partners, students)—anyone with information, authority, resources, expertise and a stake in the future of the organization. Having the whole system in the room helps people make decisions on behalf of the whole instead of narrow interests. It also enhances the action possibilities and increases the potential of the system.
- *Explore the whole before focusing on fixing any part.* When people share what they know, all gain an understanding of the whole that none had coming in. Actions are taken within a shared frame of reference.
- *Keep the future and common ground front and center.* Acknowledge the past, acknowledge the present, and focus on the future. Problems and conflicts become information to share, not action items. The agenda is a search for shared goals and mutually supported plans to achieve them.
- *Invite self-management and responsibility for action.* Groups can often do much more than is asked of them. Active engagement is encouraged. Each time a leader or consultant does the work of the group, it slows down ownership and responsibility for everyone else.

## Live your Future Now

In addition to producing concrete outcomes, the principles and characteristics of a Future Search modeled what this organization wanted to accomplish in *relationship* to its larger community. It allowed the school to immediately open up the system, engage people in meaningful dialogue, and change the negative impressions of the school in real time as people worked together on important tasks related to the school's future. From the planning of the Future Search conference to post-conference activities, strong signals were sent that this was a new day.

### Planning the Future Search Conference

A Steering Group was formed to help shape the conference. Although a Future Search conference has particular tasks—exploring the past, assessing the present, creating desired future scenarios, discovering common ground, and action planning—the role of the Steering Group was critical in:

- Clarifying the purpose of the conference (beyond meeting a state mandate);
- Inviting the right mix of people to achieve this purpose; and,
- Tailoring the activities to meet the specific needs of the school.

The 12 people on the Steering Group were a mix of the school's internal and external stakeholders. Right from the start, representatives from the sending schools, potential business partners, parents, and students were sitting with faculty and administration making collaborative decisions. This group developed a theme for the conference, *Innovative Approaches to Unlocking the Future*, and articulated its purposes. This theme was chosen very carefully. The Steering Group wanted to invite people to dream and *really* think outside of the box. They also wanted to communicate that this was about creating the future of the school, not looking to the past to fix old mistakes. The energy was forward moving. The three purposes the Steering Group articulated for the conference were:

- Set the directions for the future of North Montco Technical Career Center as part of the strategic planning process;
- Acquire and share information through the interaction of representatives of nine stakeholder groups; and,
- Expand and strengthen relationships among NMTCC, its sending schools, local businesses, and community members.

The Steering Group took great care in determining the right mix of people to invite to the conference. They wanted people with information, influence, and resources. They wanted a mix that would provide a full picture of the past and current reality of vocational education in the county plus accelerate the action possibilities for the school. A key member of the Steering Group was an executive from a large company, a parent of an honors student, and a deep believer in technical education. Through his international contacts, he invited a partner from a technical school in Germany, a country that is a world leader in apprenticeship programs, to attend the Future Search.

The members of the Steering Committee took two important steps in securing conference participation. They made personal contacts to encourage attendance and they insisted that

invitees attend all three days. The activities and decisions of the Steering Committee sent a strong message to the network of stakeholders about the importance of this meeting.

### **The Future Search is a Pivotal Event**

The Future Search, although only a three-day meeting, was a pivotal event in the life of the school. The conference yielded seven strategic goals for the school:

1. *Career Education*: To utilize all resources to achieve ongoing career education from kindergarten through adulthood.
2. *Curriculum*: To design an educational program of high standards compatible with changing needs of students and employers, involving full use of all available resources.
3. *Facility*: To maximize all available resources to meet clients' needs.
4. *Global Interconnections*: To bring the world together through cultural, technological, and business exchange, i.e. global learning.
5. *Individual Educational Needs*: To meet individual educational needs by using all learning options.
6. *Partnerships*: To strengthen partnerships with post-secondary education, parents, students, business/industry, government, community agencies, and home schools in order to enhance training for all students.
7. *Technology*: To develop a process that anticipates change while staying current through creative use of technology.

The goals were relevant to the school and also were a key component of the plan submitted to the PA Department of Education. NMTCC effectively managed the often-competing interests of organizational relevance and state or federal government compliance. Opening up the system and getting the relevant stakeholders together to discuss the future of vocational-technical education in the region had a major impact on the system. It created a climate of possibility and led to many concrete programs.

During the conference, the faculty became energized as they listened to participants from business talk about *what ifs*. “*What if* we came to the school site and partnered with faculty to do training?” “*What if* we brought students to our work sites and gave them experience on leading-edge equipment that would be too expensive for the school to own.” The *what if*'s offered exciting possibilities and communicated an interest in the school. As one participant described, “The energy was magic.” Many of these *what if*'s became reality. The partnerships formed and the relationships built paid dividends for many years to come. For example:

- When a major automotive equipment manufacturer consigned \$150,000 worth of its products to the school's automotive lab, students had the opportunity to be trained on the same equipment found in modern automotive-dealership service departments. The manufacturer benefited, too, because they were able to bring potential buyers to the school where the equipment was in use. This type of business-education partnership goes far beyond the more typical set-up of businesses giving schools used or slightly outdated equipment. This is a mutual, win-win partnership.
- In partnership with major pharmaceutical firms, a biotechnology lab was established in the school to serve both high school students and adults. Imagine students receiving training alongside their industry counterparts!

Parents communicated a very strong message that they wanted their children to have the choice to pursue a *technical* path or an *academic* path. The school listened. The dual importance of technical skills and academics has become a signature of the school.

Prior to the conference, teachers talked about having too many things on their plates. Does this sound familiar? An additional by-product of the Future Search was a shift in how teachers viewed current initiatives and new activities. Although their work load remained the same, by seeing the bigger picture, experiencing the larger context, and hearing from other stakeholders, the teachers could make connections and better understand how all the pieces fit together. There was a palpable emotional shift in how teachers viewed their work and how much energy they expended to make new things happen.

### **Maintaining Momentum**

After the Future Search, the school did a number of things to sustain the energy and momentum.

- Ad hoc teams replaced standing committees. As priorities and issues arose around a goal area, ad hoc teams with appropriate stakeholders were formed, the priority or issue was addressed, and the group was disbanded when the work was completed. This may sound routine, however in education (and other arenas) you can get “standing committee-itis.” Planning fatigue can set in or people can begin to confuse planning with taking action.
- As these ad hoc teams were formed, the question was continually asked, “Who needs to be in the room?” This supported the principle of planning *with* others, not *for* others. This principle accelerates implementation.
- A public review meeting was held 24 months after the Future Search. Participants were invited back to share successes and challenges and to chart progress. New ideas and possibilities were also discussed.

### **Lessons Learned**

#### ***A Few People Can Make a Big Difference***

A few deeply committed people can create opportunities for others to engage and make meaningful contributions. For example, one of the parents wanted his son, an honors student at the high school, to be able to go to this school. He believed that technical schools could be highly valued, superior places for learning. Along with the executive director, he was a driving force behind the conference. He was an active member of the Steering Committee where he used his considerable influence to bring others to the table, including a colleague from Germany.

#### ***Courageous Leadership***

Bringing the whole system together to shape the future requires a willingness to lead without having all the answers. Leaders expend a good deal of capital bringing people together in this way, particularly if this kind of whole-system work goes against the prevailing cultural norms of the organization or the field. For example, education is often considered an expert-driven field. Leaders are expected to have the answer, and they often employ strategies that emphasize acceptance of predetermined outcomes and overcoming resistance to change. Collaboration and

shared decision-making takes courage on the part of leaders. It also contributes to deeper ownership on the part of others and breakthroughs in what can happen. The new executive director, Mike Erwin, was just the type of catalytic, courageous leader the organization needed. He brought an entrepreneurial spirit and deep commitment to opening up the system. His leadership, combined with a strategic, systematic collaborative process, got the system on a new road, and the school had the assets—committed, talented teachers—to sustain it.

### ***Critical Issues Become System Opportunities***

The issues facing North Montco Tech were critical, and the level of dissatisfaction with the school was cause for great concern. The future of the school was at risk, but this fact alone was not enough to propel the school toward the needed transformational changes. A planning process that *acknowledges* the past and present and focuses on the *future* allowed the system to create and redirect the energy constructively.

In this case, the Future Search was able to build on the positive momentum begun with the Youth Apprenticeship Programs and leverage it exponentially. The school not only complied with the state-mandated strategic planning process; it used it as an opportunity to do something meaningful in the life of the organization.

### ***Planning for Desired Future Relationships***

As part of the strategic planning effort, the school wanted to shift their relationships with external stakeholders. It wanted to open the system up to more collaboration and deeper partnerships. The school started modeling this stance from the beginning. A diverse Steering Group made up of internal and external stakeholders shaped the Future Search conference by articulating the purpose and inviting participants. They worked with the facilitators to tailor conference activities so they would be meaningful to *all* the different stakeholder groups.

If one of the desired outcomes is increased partnership, get the partners in the room thinking with you. This allows planning *with*, not *for* other people. At this conference, it wasn't just faculty discussing what they would want business and industry partners to do for them; the partners and potential partners were at the table. The planning processes that organizations or communities choose are fateful. If increased collaboration is an aspiration, choose a process that models that.

During the action-planning phase of the conference, participants identified initiatives or programs they wanted to launch and had an opportunity to begin making plans with other like-minded people. It was not a planning-for-planning's-sake process. Once again, it modeled planning with others, not for others. The system continued to link planning and action with its use of ad hoc teams addressing priority issues as they arose. "Following the energy" leads to results.

### ***A Story of Hope***

The story of North Montgomery County Technical Career Center inspires hope on two levels. One is that an organization is actually able to transform its image in the marketplace and community. The fact that the school was able to reverse a downward spiral makes it possible for other organizations facing similar challenges to do the same. The school also inspires hope for education. Its programs offer viable, relevant, engaging educational opportunities for students. Depending on their aspirations, students are ready for work and ready for college. This can serve

as a model for other schools interested in engaging all types of learners and preparing them for the world of work or the world of higher education.

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### **Resources**

Weisbord, M. and Janoff, S. *Future Search: An Action Guide to Finding Common Ground in Organizations and Communities (Second Edition)*. Berrett-Kohler, San Francisco, 2000.

[www.futuresearch.net](http://www.futuresearch.net)