

FUTURE-BASINGTM EXPLAINED

Revision 2, November 2003

**First revised from an original paper
written in July 1991.**

**I have returned Future-basingTM to its original
name. It was re-named Future-mapping
in 1992, but since my recent discovery that
an American consultancy has Future Mapping[®]
as a registered trade mark, I have decided to
return to its original description
which is unique**

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FUTURE-BASING™

Future-basing™ is a powerful process for creating vision, deciding how to achieve it and generating a motivation to act. Because it engages the ways the brain gets to know what we want, it can work for everyone, is sensitive to organisation culture and style and helps people to notice immediate opportunities to act. It is uniquely suited to creating a shared vision amongst both small and big groups of people.

It can range from being highly creative and generative to being detailed tightly structured and specific. Future-basing™ is also supremely flexible, and works equally well for short, medium and long term thinking and planning. Short term can be as short as a couple of hours and long term can mean many years. Applications have ranged from contemplating the future of the International Red Cross Movement 13 years ahead, to agreeing the outcome of a meeting as it begins; from an individual achieving his ideal life in four years, to a richly diverse community agreeing the shape of its own regeneration. It helps creative thinking and the sharing of ideas and builds a strong sense of common purpose amongst those that do it together (ie teams, working groups, multi-agency partnerships etc).

SO WHAT IS FUTURE-BASING™?

An example from most people's experience will illustrate. In recalling an event or a time in your life when you experienced success, you can probably recall the moment when you first realised you had achieved it. As you remember the feelings you had of satisfaction, elation, pleasure, or maybe just relief, remember also what you or others said about your success. Perhaps that little voice in your head congratulated you, or yelled how it had always known you could do it. What did you see around you? What were the visible sign of your achievement? The more you think back, the more you will realise that you can describe your success in some detail.

You will also be aware that, looking back from your success, you can remember the milestone events, turning points and perhaps times when things seemed impossible. Problems were overcome, and new things learned. Even difficult people or relationships were changed, thus moving things toward your final outcome. This process of looking back from success is illustrated by the simple steps model in Fig. 1.

Future-basing™ works by sliding this thinking process forward into the future, as in Fig 2.

Fig. 1. **Looking back from existing success**

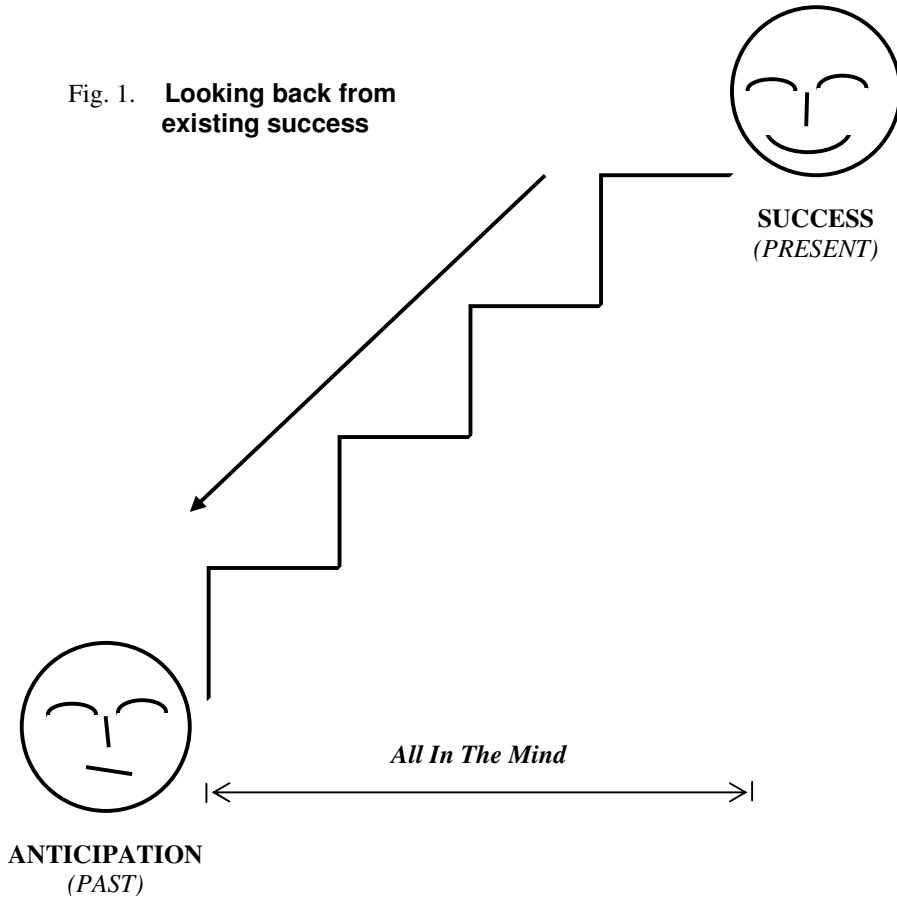
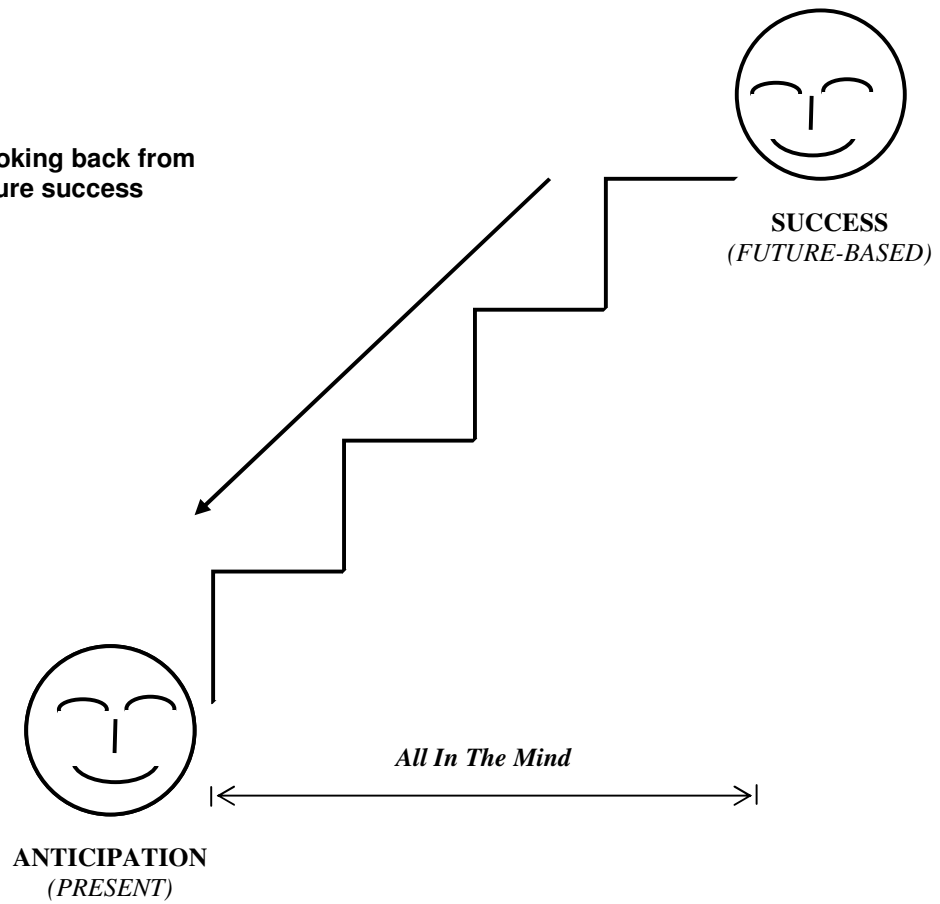


Fig. 2. **Looking back from future success**



Future-basing™ works by basing yourself in the future at the hour or date of your ideal outcome. This successful outcome, described in detail comprises the vision of the future. Looking back from the Future-base allows similar milestones and turning points to be identified as in reviewing a truly remembered success.

Apart from the similarity in Figs 1 and 2 of starting with perceptions of success and looking back there is another key factor to note. Both in the remembered state and the Future-basing™ state, the steps to success, the starting point and the successful outcome are taking place entirely in the mind. Both processes are imaginary with no tangible elements at all. It is important to recognise this, especially when comparing Future-basing™ to more conventional approaches to thinking ahead. Our thought processes can, and do, operate in any direction, forward or back.

HOW DOES FUTURE-BASING™ WORK?

There are four distinct stages in making decisions using Future-basing™.

1. Building a compelling vision of ideal outcomes as if they have already been achieved.
2. Working backwards to identify milestone dates and events, turning points and problems overcome on the way.
3. Building in detail between these major events (eg new things learned, skills acquired, systems or procedures changed).
4. Using the outputs of stages 2 and 3 as an activities list, and applying project planning or scheduling processes to identify resources needed, to distribute or decide roles and responsibilities, and to decide what needs to be done in detail.

KEY POINTS AT STAGES 1 – 3

At Stage 1, always fix a date or time as your Future-base. For example, if you are decision-making for three years ahead, then pick the date on which your vision has been achieved, and post this up in full view eg, **“Today is April 1st 2006”**.

If it is the outcome of a meeting you are setting, you would write the finishing time thus: **“It is now 4.30”**.

Choosing appropriate broad headings or descriptors for your success is also important at this point. If you were to ask, "What are we successful at?" then for a business, headings may include such domains as New Investments; Market Share; Customer Perceptions; Profitability etc. If you are Future-basing™ your personal life and career development, typical headings may then include Income; Health; Job Type; Qualifications; Home/House; Lifestyle, etc. The important point is that such headings or criteria are those that you would normally use to describe what you mean by success in your chosen context.

Under each of these high level, broad-brush headings, you then list your specific achievements. The above headings and their respective achievements need to be full, sensory descriptions of what you really want. Notice the common tendency, especially in work groups, to use relatively neutral, objective language, and resist this temptation. Full, pictorial, vivid descriptions with strong imagery are much more powerful and motivating. It is also essential to override a tendency to describe what you think is possible, and instead, to picture with enthusiasm what you would create if you had a magic wand.

The third key point during stage one is to talk about your success in the present tense, and in the personal sense, e.g. "I," "we," "us," "our team," to create an authentic sense of ownership. In effect, you are behaving as if your success has already been achieved. For some people this is the most difficult part. They will tend to slip into saying "We will be doing this, "or" that will have happened". If this is checked by others when working in a group or team and the discipline maintained of saying "We are doing this" or "that has happened", then the results are much more effective.

The key to making the vision more compelling is to add to your descriptions of success information that is visual, auditory and tactile or emotional. What are the visual signs of success under each heading? What evidence is there to be seen? How do you and others talk about your success? What does it sound like having achieved your goals? And how does it feel, both physically and emotionally? What is the sweet smell of success? I often ask groups of people to run their internal videotape as they read through the written achievements, living the visionary results in their mind's eye. Finally, be sure that each achievement listed can be influenced or directly brought about by your own actions. Achievements that would depend entirely on someone else's decisions or actions with no influence from you can hardly be yours! So think big, and be sure that your influence is in there somewhere.

At Stage 2 you are looking back from your achievements, still "based in the future", and identifying the major steps that got you here. One of two ways to do this is to take each distinct achievement or heading and describe your (imagined) progress with each at a fixed time or date in the "past" before your Future-base. For example, if thinking some years ahead and say Future-based in April 2009, you may ask the question "What was happening to all these things one year ago in April 2008? or "Where were we up to six months ago in October 2008?". The intervals you choose may fit your normal planning cycles, or your estimates of when major events or turning points "took place" in your progress to success. If it is a meeting you are Future-basing™, the questions will be more like "What had we agreed about this by 2.30?" This is a time-related way to look back.

An alternative event or action-based way to look back is to take each achievement in turn, and to ask the question, "What was the key action or event that, if it had not taken place, this achievement would have been impossible?" The "remembered" timing of each of these key actions or events is mapped out on a progress or bar chart as in Fig. 3 below. The output of Stage 2 is therefore a "critical path" of key events. Stage 3 consists of

positives allows you to identify existing resources and positive attitudes before looking at how certain things will be changed.

This part of the process is very much akin to the idea of analysing the current situation and comparing it with the future vision or desired state to assess the “gap.”

It is worth noting, however, that when Future-basing™ in Stages 1 and 2, a great deal will have been said indirectly or pre-supposed about the current state of affairs, especially regarding what needs to be changed or about problems to be solved. One difference is that rather than stating what is wrong, Future-basing™ specifies the ideal outcome. This pre-supposes a capacity to achieve it, whilst encouraging positive thinking. In addition, experience has shown that the actions we need to take to get what we DO want are almost always very different from those needed to avoid what we DON'T want.

Should the activities lists developed in Stages 1–3 be long and complex as organisational changes sometimes are, project management techniques may be applied to Stage 4. The earlier stages will have supplied a form of what project managers call the Work Breakdown Structure (WBS) as the headings and achievements were listed. Stage 2 supplies an activities listing, partial network analysis and partial scheduling. Stage 4 is where these are tightened up, with detailed risk analysis, quality assurance planning, budgeting and progress control processes agreed and put in place.

When it comes to reviewing or evaluating progress, because we experience our world through the senses, the Future-basing™ descriptions either stating or implying the see, hear, feel evidences of success make it easy to detect and to measure progress or actual achievement. If what is happening matches or approximates to the sensory evidence created at Stages 1 or 2, we are able to assess progress or completion by direct comparison.

BENEFITS OF FUTURE-BASING™ OVER MORE CONVENTIONAL VISION CRAFTING PROCESSES

Future-basing™ need not replace other forms of thinking ahead, but rather adds to them through the application of Stages 1 – 3 detailed above.

It does however, bring with it a number of distinct advantages overcoming many of the usual blockages that we suffer when needing to think and plan ahead:

1. It is solution-centred, generating accurate specification of desired outcomes rather than problems. Most of us are more motivated by thoughts of achievement rather than of difficulties.
2. It is success-centred, side-stepping common feelings such as fear of failure and seeing only hurdles that need to be overcome. It begins by generating a sense of achievement.
3. It is universal, being well suited to virtually any need to plan or make decisions about the future from just hours to years ahead.
4. Future-basing™ releases creativity, especially when several people work on it together. The very process of imagining achievements neutralizes the kind of negative thinking that tends normally to interfere.
5. It builds compelling visions due to the quantity and nature of descriptive information generated. The seeing, hearing and feeling dimensions and descriptive language are the most powerful part of this.
6. It lends itself to involving people and motivating them to act. Future-basing™ can be cascaded across and through an organisation, enabling groups, teams and individuals to develop their own part of the vision and implementation plan. A strong sense of common purpose develops in Future-basing™ groups, partly because individuals tend to visualize ideal relationships and mutual support as parameters of success. As they describe these relationships and feelings together in the present tense, individuals come to realise they are already rehearsing what they want, and finding the experience pleasant and rewarding.
7. It helps people spot opportunities to take action, often almost immediately. This tends to happen at the point where individuals or groups begin to accept specific roles and responsibilities. Having Future-based ideal outcomes and considered first steps, it often becomes clear that there is nothing preventing immediate action and people become motivated to achieve early results.

8. Future-basing™ can be very broad and general and many groups and individuals have found that completion of Stage 1 is sufficient. If followed through to completion of Stage 4 with a wide range of detailed information in Stages 1 – 3, then Future-basing™ can be used meticulously to support complex decisions.
9. It is easy and quick to update. During any phase of implementation, stages 1 – 3 can be reviewed in the light of new experiences or unexpected developments. In fact, one way of following through implementation of the various steps to success is to Future-base next steps as specific projects are completed or turning points reached. This is one way in which actual experience and results guide progress in bringing about change.
10. The Future-basing™ process is relatively easy to learn, and is not reliant upon jargon or technical planning expertise. Apart from its name, there is no specialised language needed in Future-basing™. When developing a Future-based vision, people will normally reflect personal and organisational values and beliefs in their impression of success. This is one way in which the process remains both organisationally and culturally acceptable.

SO WHY DOES FUTURE-BASING™ WORK?

It works because it depends on the way our brain works in our day-to-day lives to organise our experience and make sense of the world around us.

Consider, for example, the following questions :-

How do you know when you really want something?...or even,

How do you know what to want?

Some people will say it begins with a feeling. For others, they see themselves achieving or having it and perhaps hear that little voice in their head saying how good it will be.

Think for a moment of an ambition you have or had, or a time when you really set your heart on something. How exactly did you first perceive it? Notice any images, sounds or feelings that occur to you.

These are the signals we generate to guide us to getting what we want. They could be described as compelling visions. The images, feelings and sounds keep us on track and fuel our desire to succeed.

This is the process of Stage 1 in Future-basing™, and the reason why adding visual, hearing and feeling evidence is so important.

Imagining and sensing successful achievement in this way brings with it feelings of resourcefulness, and such feelings you will recognise as the underpinning of optimism. They also generate creative behaviour. In a resourceful state, obstacles become challenges rather than difficulties and our ability to find solutions is enhanced.

An interesting phenomenon occurs when we create a vision in this way. We become tuned to opportunities to achieve it. The process that takes place is rather like when you first notice a particular model of car you would like to have. Perhaps it is the shape or even a specific colour that attracts you. Sometimes you may like it because you do not see many of them on the road, because it is new or unusual. You want to be different. It is in the days and weeks following this that you begin to see them everywhere. This is because you have “tuned” your senses to something you were unaware of until now.

The more sensory information you build into your vision of the future, the stronger the tuning effect will be. In Future-basing™ terms, perhaps a product idea or a chance to invest which would normally be overlooked or ignored will become significant. And the most pleasing point is that you do not have to remember to notice these opportunities. The process is automatic and unconscious. Certain things or actions will appear to be a “good idea”, and you may or may not notice at the time that this thing or action will take you one step nearer to your vision.

One further valuable side-effect that occurs through these two processes of visioning a particular outcome and becoming tuned to it is that people often become aware that there is nothing preventing them from achieving it right now. This is one way in which items or actions planned for will appear to happen almost spontaneously. People have begun to notice opportunities to take action immediately.

Barriers Overcome

Steps to success are remembered very differently from steps to perceived failure. This is because we remember different elements of our history according to whether we achieved or failed. When we remember steps to success, we remember HOW we took them, often with pride at how clever we were to influence events or other people. When we fail, we tend to remember WHY; why it was not possible, or so and so's motives for blocking us; because we misjudged, or there was not enough money available at the right time. It is interesting to note that when we try to plan ahead conventionally, we tend to consider why an idea or decision will or will not work. When we write reports to justify our plans, there is a tendency to explain the benefits of doing this or that ie. why it should be done. This matches the way we think about steps to failure and although no direct link has been established between these two modes of thought, the fact that a sense of risk and fear of failure are common companions of the latter is curious. Views on how, rather than why things will happen are much more useful when we want to implement our plans.

Looking back to the steps model in Figs 1 and 2, it will become evident that, looking down a flight of steps from the top reveals the platforms or steps that were reached on the way up. Looking up from the bottom, you are faced only with a view of the risers; obstacles to progress.

One of the biggest blockages to planning and implementation concerns lack of agreement from people involved or affected. In our experience, people have been drawn together very strongly through Future-basing™ ideal working relationships. It seems that most of us have an underlying (or overarching) desire for well-being in all we do. Future-basing™ at Stage 1 lifts people right out of their day-to-day behaviours and encourages them to state their ideals openly. Discovering that on this “higher plane” they have so much in common allows people to agree more easily.

It is worth considering the potential power of this in negotiation. This was realised in Montreux, Switzerland in 1997 when an Advisory Commission of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, after several years of attempting and failing to reach agreement on an issue, used Future-basing™ to create what is now known in the Movement as "The Seville Agreement." The issue they had struggled with regarded protocols for handing over operational leadership, resources and control from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), to the resident National Society and delegates of the International Federation of Societies (IFRC) in certain post-conflict situations. In these situations, there had often been rivalry rather than co-operation. The agreement was ratified at the Red Cross General Assembly, held in Seville in November 1997, hence its title.

CONCLUSIONS

There can be very little that is thought of or created that is brand new. The processes and underlying assumptions of Future-basing™ are no exception. Indeed one of its strengths is that the cognitive mechanisms that it depends on are part of everyone’s repertoire, even if we are often unaware that we are using them. What is different about Future-basing™ is the way in which the use of those mechanisms is organised for the purpose of decision-making about what we want to lie ahead.

It seems strange to be revising these conclusions rather more than ten years after the original paper, where in 1991, I wrote:

" Future-basing™ as a discrete process is in its infancy. Ideas about its form have been developing for some four years now, and I first used it in its present sequence of steps in the autumn of 1989. It has been used in a wide variety of situations and sectors, and experience both with clients and in workshops is that each time, results have been remarkable or unexpected for those involved. Further experience and research will confirm, or not, the power and value of Future-basing™ in deciding what to do next. It is, however, vitally important to keep this value in perspective. Future-basing™ is a

creative and structured approach to strategic thinking and action planning. We must remember though that until that first action is taken and a result obtained, all of this is still no more than imagination."

People have taken action and achieved at times, quite remarkable results. Not only have individuals reported to me that their lives have been enhanced, but many teams and groups have created outcomes that had eluded them before they worked with Future-basing™. Its universality, which I could only speculate upon in 1991, has been evidenced by the sheer variety of uses it continues to be put to. Just a small list of examples appears below. In my own experience, one pattern of results has taken prominence, and for me is the most satisfying of all. Future-basing™ continues to bring people together in many environments, helping them to find a sense of energy and common purpose in what they do that seems to be consistent with their preparedness to try this way of thinking and imagining a "brighter future" for themselves and others.

WAYS PEOPLE HAVE USED FUTURE-BASING™

- Personal development and career planning
- Individuals improving their life and lifestyle
- Negotiating agreements e.g. International Red Cross mentioned above
- Creating a sense of excitement and cohesiveness in the management team of a college of further education faced with its first ever need to produce a 3 year plan
- Building close working relationships between clients & contractors, e.g. oil exploration company
- Evaluating corporate training, e.g. civil service organisation
- Vision building to lead and manage change, e.g. a metals extraction and chemicals manufacturer
- Vision building for inspiration, e.g. an international charity
- Healing internal conflict between high level health teams in an international non-governmental organisation (NGO)
- Bringing together project teams involved in a world wide integrated computer systems project in a United Nations organisation
- Building a vision with a multi-cultural community in its bid for funding to regenerate its living environment
- Helping to heal conflict and restore mutual respect between work colleagues
- Helping to inspire school teams having to work their way out of Special Measures following poor results from OfSTED inspections
- Designing a year-long procedure for scheduling and conducting personal development interviews in a complex food manufacturing environment
- Taking the "sting" out of what would have been an acrimonious meeting of colleagues in a small business training company
- Joining forces and becoming more business-like to maintain and improve their service, e.g. environmental & outdoor education centres in a large education authority
- Creating a vision, and business planning in a small commercial training company
- Bringing together close friends and family each year on New Year's Eve to imagine their ideal New Year

FUTURE-BASING™ – FURTHER READING

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