Future~Present

Idea In Short

When a team is stuck in the problems of today, imagine looking back from a future it wants to create. Future~Present uses a playful interview between people acting as future elders and curious younger generations. The elders tell how the group moved from difficulty to success, naming early steps, sources of hope, and unexpected support. Participants then capture the conditions and actions that made the imagined future possible. Use a future horizon that fits the work and describe concrete achievements before the interviews begin. Close by selecting a small present-day move that could start building toward that future. Use participant questions to guide what the group explores next.

Planning conversations can become so focused on current obstacles that participants stop imagining what success could look like. Future~Present invites a group to look back from a future it wants to create and tell the story of how it got there. Participants work in small groups, with some acting as elders who remember the difficult past and others as younger people who ask curious questions. The stories surface early steps, sources of hope, and unexpected support. The practice reflects the Liberating Structures principle “Engage in Seriously Playful Curiosity.”

Imagine a future with detail

The host opens with a specific description of a future achievement. The future might be 15 to 30 years away, as in the source design, or a closer horizon suited to the group’s work. The more concrete the achievement, the easier it is for participants to imagine what changed. “We solved our challenge” gives little to build on; “people in every region can access the service without waiting weeks” offers a clearer setting for the story.

The group forms small teams of four or five. Two participants play elders who lived through the transition; the others play younger people who are curious about how it happened. The youths interview the elders about what the situation was like, what gave them hope, which

first steps they took, how they built momentum, and who appeared unexpectedly to help. The elders improvise together, using “yes, and” to extend the story rather than contradict or shut it down.

Work backward through the story

The interview is more than a creative exercise. Questions about the early steps help participants connect the future to actions available in the present. If the future became possible because the group built trust across regions, participants can ask what relationship would need attention now. If it emerged after people tested a new service in a small setting, the group can consider what a first experiment might look like. Backcasting shifts attention from predicting events to identifying conditions and actions that could help create the desired outcome.

The host should make clear that participants are imagining, not reporting historical facts. A convincing story does not guarantee that the future will occur. It can, however, help a group identify possibilities it had not considered. Participants should capture the changes, supports, and patterns that made success plausible in their story. In plenary, they can compare these highlights and look for themes that deserve further exploration.

Take the roles seriously

The elder and youth roles create distance from current disagreements. Participants can speak more freely because they are building a shared story rather than defending a present plan. The youths should show active curiosity and ask follow-up questions. The elders should listen to each other and build on the story. The host can help groups that struggle by repeating the imagined future achievements and reminding them to speak from that future viewpoint.

This imaginative distance has limits. A group should not use the exercise to avoid urgent risks or dismiss evidence about constraints. The story is a source of possibilities, not a business case. If a participant names a barrier that could make the future impossible, record it as a question for later analysis. The team may pair Future~Present with Critical Uncertainties to explore alternative conditions or with 15% Solutions to choose a first action.

Gather the ingredients of success

After the interviews, participants return to plenary and share what helped the future emerge. The group can record small actions, systems of support, relationships, and changes in routine that appeared in several stories. It should distinguish between a desired outcome and the enabling conditions. For example, a future with faster service may depend on an integrated data system, local authority to resolve exceptions, and a method for learning from customer feedback.

The standard activity takes about 25 minutes: an introduction, ten minutes of campfire storytelling, and ten minutes to collect story highlights. It can be run online with breakout groups. The host should keep the opening concise and allow enough time for the story to unfold. A short reflection afterward can ask which elements seem possible to start now and which depend on future decisions or resources.

Future~Present is useful at the beginning of strategic planning, when a group feels stuck, or when leaders want to identify early investments that could shape a longer-term outcome. It complements forecasting by asking a different question: what can we do now that might make a desirable future more likely? Research on backcasting and future-oriented planning describes its use in sustainability and policy work. The International Institute for Sustainable Development explains backcasting, and the UK Government Office for Science provides futures tools for policy and strategy. 1, 2, 3

Begin in the present

The group should close by identifying one move it can make now. It might test a small practice, invite a partner into a conversation, or gather evidence needed for a larger choice. Assign an owner and a review date so the action does not remain inside the story. The group can also name what it needs to learn before taking a larger step.

Future~Present gives a team permission to imagine, then asks it to return to the present with a clearer sense of possibility. The stories can reveal paths that are difficult to see when discussion is limited to current constraints. When participants capture the conditions behind the imagined success and choose an early action, the exercise connects a desired future with work that can begin now.

- 1Backcasting for sustainability
- 2Futures and foresight

- 3The art of the long view

Summary

Future~Present helps a group work backward from a compelling future to the choices that could make it real. The elder-and-youth interview creates room for participants to imagine obstacles overcome, early moves, and sources of momentum. The exercise is not a forecast; it is a way to generate possibilities and identify action in the present. Hosts should make the future specific enough to picture and capture the practices that support it. A useful close turns one insight into an early experiment or relationship to build. Revisit those actions as the group learns what the future requires. Revisit the conversation as the work changes and new evidence becomes available.