

## Is it Time to Upgrade to Your Futures Thinking?

By Deborah Jenks



Does the world feel chaotic and unpredictable? Are the future scenarios that are playing in your head predominately negative? Are you an organizational leader who feels trapped in your past and present? Perhaps you are too busy fighting fires in the present to even consider the future. Then you are a candidate to upgrade your mindset to include strategic foresight in your organizational strategy. Sometimes this takes a shift in your mindset. Arthur C. Clarke stated, "The only way to discover the limits of the possible is to go beyond them into the impossible."<sup>i</sup> The purpose of strategic foresight is to encourage you to envision alternate, sometimes seemingly impossible, futures and then build a strategy to get

there from your present.

I recently facilitated a group of senior managers in the federal government to examine possible future scenarios that might happen in the next 3-5 years. Although their organization had been significantly affected by 9/11 and they had recently attended a Gartner seminar presenting tactical and strategic possibilities, the majority of the group found it difficult to imagine or consider possible future scenarios. Based on this sample, I realized that a few people use foresight naturally if given the opportunity. Others pessimistically view strategic foresight as a waste of time. For the majority of managers, it is extremely difficult to rise above their current operations mindset. Therefore challenging leaders to not only see the need for and take the time to develop their ability to re-perceive reality is extremely important. Are you stuck in your current mindset or are you able to re-perceive your future?

### Defining Strategic Foresight

What is strategic foresight? Nick March defines strategic foresight as *backcasting*.<sup>ii</sup> This is seeing where your organization is in the future and then planning back to your present location, rather than

starting from your present and moving forward. This requires a new perspective of the future, without being limited by your knowledge of what works or does not work in the present. The 2006 movie *Déjà Vu* illustrates the principle.<sup>iii</sup> The Denzel Washington character envisions a different future than he experienced. He returns to the past forearmed with a possible future and thus creates a new future – namely saving the life of the woman he loves. Instead of just coping with the current reality of the present, he (and you) can work toward creating a different future reality. It takes effort and it takes hope that things can change.

Strategic Planning developed in the 1930's is a very different model. This was a time-consuming process performed by the elite in an organization. According to Peter Senge, it did not address dynamic complexity where cause and effect are subtle and the effects of intervention may not be realized for years.<sup>iv</sup> Since strategic foresight is a paradigm of thinking rather than a function, it can be exercised by workers throughout an organization. They continually improve the strategy at their level as possible future scenarios are incorporated into their work. Gary Hamel adds that new innovations must be watched and incorporated into the strategy or an organization will fall behind. He writes that "Strategy has to be subversive. If it is not challenging internal company rules or industry rules, then it is not strategy."<sup>v</sup> For Hamel complacency and cynicism are the greatest enemies to strategy.

## **Six Barriers to Foresight**

Richard Slaughter expands these enemies to six impediments or barriers to implementing foresight in an organization.<sup>vi</sup> It is necessary to address them or your organization will not have buy-in to new concepts or scenarios of the future.

### *1. The practice of future discounting*

Future discounting is practiced by those who have a low regard for something or someone (i.e. future generations) in the future. Often people have this mindset without realizing it. They believe that the future is too remote to do anything about or it can be safely ignored.

### *2. The empiricist fallacy*

The empiricist believes that value is found only in those things that can be measured or quantitatively defined. The future by its very nature defies this view, so it is often dismissed. People with this view consider the past and present as the only "real" sources of information.

### *3. A sense of disempowerment*

“Many people feel that the problems are too great and individuals are too insignificant to have any real impact.”<sup>vii</sup> This is often caused by people feeling they have no control of future events and giving up hope.

#### 4. *The idea that time and space perspectives are fixed*

Many humans are interested only in the present or immediate future. Quantum physics is proving that a particle can be in two places at the same time.<sup>viii</sup> This stretches our understanding of time and space like the movie *Déjà Vu*.

#### 5. *Fear of foresight*

Foresight can be used to improve the future or it can be used badly and wrongly to exploit it. The values and motivation of an individual will often determine the outcome. Some people are afraid to make a decision because they believe a partial understanding of the future might cause them to go in the wrong direction and end up paralyzed.

#### 6. *The cost of foresight*

Some organizations consider that scanning the future for possible wildcards or events that might change the future is a waste of time and money.

### **How do you Upgrade?**

My five year old laptop for work recently experienced severe hiccups from Outlook becoming unusable to my user profile disappearing. If you think about cathedrals or our nation's water resources, five years isn't old. But in today's rapidly changing computer technology, it is old. The question becomes how do I upgrade? Do I start with a brand new machine with a fresh Operating System (OS) and transfer my data over? Does my slow machine get wiped clean and the OS and data reapplied? Or do I continue to struggle with a malfunctioning machine? Until recently my company opted for the latter. Since strategic foresight includes systems thinking, we will use this as an analogy for foresight in a company. Struggling with a malfunctioning machine is how most organizations operate strategic foresight. They refuse to expand their future horizons, often because it will cost money and time to upgrade and they don't see the long-term benefit to the organization. Some organizations may work with old business models while applying upgraded applications learned at industry conferences as a half hearted attempt to improve the future. But often the needed solution is to start fresh with a new machine or vision of the future. Then many of the problems (viruses) or outdated solutions (hardware) that subtly affected the system are left behind.

How can you upgrade your thinking about the future?

**Become a Beta.** Gary Hamel and CK Prahalad categorize organizations and people as either an alpha or a beta.<sup>ix</sup> The alphas are the high-profile market leaders. The betas are small groups of determined people who will reshape their industry, redefine the rules, and lead into the future. According to Marsh these are the individuals and organizations that create “thought leadership.” President Kennedy envisioned the US putting the first man on the moon and told NASA to just do it. While many experts said it was impossible, it was achieved in 8 years.<sup>x</sup> Would it have happened without the mandate? Probably not! A beta sees the possibilities of the future and works to make it happen. This demands we learn at a faster rate than the change around us.

**Think creatively about the future.** Michael Milkado, a creativity consultant investigated genius and came up with eight ways to increase creativity.<sup>xi</sup> Look at a problem in many different ways so as to change your perspective. Use visual methods, like diagrams, to clarify your thoughts. Realize that if you produce thousands of ideas some are going to be worth patenting. Combine things in new ways so seemingly unseen relationships become visible. Apply principles from disparate disciplines together to discover new possibilities thereby creating quantum leaps. Turn your thoughts inside out by using paradoxes that juxtapose seemingly opposites. Aristotle believed that people who thought in metaphors had special gifts to perceive patterns or relationships between what appeared unrelated to others. Finally, when a chance discovery happens take full advantage of it in the moment so it is not forgotten.

**Explore futurist tools.** Tools to explore the future can be as simple as using the creative ideas above to record ideas in a journal or make lists of possibilities. Idea mapping is a visual handwritten tool to expand your thinking. Wendy Schultz identifies emerging issues analysis, impact analysis, incasting, visioning, and backcasting as futures tools.<sup>xii</sup> Some companies like Royal Dutch Shell Group use sophisticated scenario processes to “perceive complex realities and to shape the future, not only within, but beyond the corporation itself.”<sup>xiii</sup> This methodology helps managers to react almost immediately to new realities unfolding.

**Redefine leadership.** Joseph Jaworski states that “Leadership is about creating, day by day, a domain in which we and those around us continually deepen our understanding of reality and are able to participate in shaping the future. This, then, is the deeper territory of leadership – collectively ‘listening’ to what is wanting to emerge in the work, and then having the courage to do what is required.”<sup>xiv</sup>

Are you willing to shift your paradigm of the future? Then begin to see relationships and interconnectedness where you didn’t before. Articulate your vision so others can join in the possible

futures you see. Finally, actively work to bring that vision to reality while adjusting it as new events and innovations affect it.

**About the author:**

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**References:**

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- <sup>vii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>viii</sup> Mark Buchanan, “Many Worlds: See me Here, See me There,” *Nature*, 448, no. 7149 (5 July 2007) : 15-17.
- <sup>ix</sup> Marsh, 10.
- <sup>x</sup> Edward Cornish, *Futuring, The Exploration of the Future* (Bethesda: World Future Society, 2004), 5.
- <sup>xi</sup> Ibid., 123.
- <sup>xii</sup> Schulz, Wendy. “Defining Futures Fluency” in *Futures Fluency: Explorations in Leadership, Vision, and Creativity*.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Joseph Jaworski, *Synchronicity, The Inner Path of Leadership* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc, 1998), 148.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Ibid., 182.

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