## FEATURE

# Change your story, change the future

*For some three decades, Prof Sohail Inayatullah, a futurist, has transformed organisations and people's lives by changing the way they think. He is the chair of Futures Studies for Unesco and spearheads research in Malaysia, Taiwan and Australia and advises governments on futures thinking. Sohail, who is a co-founder and director of the Australia-based educational think-tank metafuture.org, speaks to* **Rash Behari Bhattacharjee** *about the power of "imagining the unthinkable and dreaming the impossible".*

When we think about the future, some trends can seem grim or frightening. The dark side of human progress may even look inescapable.

Consider these scenarios:

- Half of the world's urban population will be living in poverty by 2020, a study on rural-urban migration shows.
- Technological disruption is creating a future without jobs for the world.

For Sohail Inayatullah, however, the lens of futures studies shows these dilemmas to be rich in possibilities rather than doom.

At an urban development summit where Sohail's envisioning process was used, one large international bank that financed Asian cities faced the question: why is there congestion?

"Look at Asian cities — they're terrifying places. They're polluted and congested. People can't walk anywhere," Sohail told the bankers.

An executive explained: "Our KPI is number of kilometres paved. That's our measure of success."

The world-view behind this urban system is car-centric, the inner story: "I love my car," Sohail noted.

So, what's a better way to finance the future?

That calls for a change of metaphor — from "I love my car" to "I love my community".

The new world-view, in Sohail's language, envisions a harmonious trilateral relation involving "people with nature with the built environment".

This means putting in disincentives for those who just want to build without concern for nature. It also entails only financing projects which create connection in community.

The bankers saw the light. "For 30 years, we've been financing projects without caring about the community," they acknowledged.

Capturing the inner dialogue, Sohail posited that Asians felt poor, so having a car meant you're important.

In the new paradigm, it's not the car that's important, but the ability to move about quickly.

The bankers worked out a new KPI: "Financing that creates connection and community."

### Simple tools to get future–ready

It's remarkable how quickly the outlook can change from gloomy to optimistic once people are introduced to the processes of futures thinking.

Sohail uses a "6 Pillars Futures Process" to shift people from their current *modus operandi* to a desired future (see "Six Pillars Model summarised")

"They're all very easy," Sohail tells *Options*, expressing cheerful confidence about the tools. "I run them with five-year-olds and at the CEO level."

The first is the Futures Triangle, which is framed by the questions: "Where do I want to go?", "What's pushing me?" and "What's stopping me?"

For example, the push could come from an ageing society and the advent of artificial intelligence. The brakes may include mindsets.

"Then, you clarify where you wish to go. That makes a triangle," he explains.

The next tool is the S-Curve.

Most businesses focus on the present, which Sohail labels as a Level 1 state. Good businesses go to Level 2, where they look at trends. The best ones do Level 3 analysis, which identify "emerging issues and weak signals".

"These refer to developments on which there are low levels of information but are potentially high impact," Sohail states.

To illustrate, he refers to scenarios arising from the Fourth Industrial Revolution that show where the world is heading.

Among these bellwether developments are the invention of artificial cow's milk — the product of yeast that is genetically-engineered to yield milk proteins — and experiments with in vitro meat — the culturing of muscle tissue in a nutrient medium. Once the stuff of science fiction, they are now the subject matter of scientific papers and the quest of venture capitalists.

Instead of the manufacturing revolution, every home becomes its own manufacturing centre, for example, making 3D-printed pizzas.

"We're moving from energy producer to energy facilitator, from coal to solar," says Sohail, expanding on the theme.

"Those are changes that aren't normal today, but in 10 years, could get dominant," he predicts.

## Causal Layered Analysis

This is a method for opening up space around past and present situations for alternative futures to be developed. It consists of four levels:

**Litany:** Concerns quantitative trends, problems and events. Situations are believed, rarely questioned. Often results in feelings of helplessness, apathy or calls to action ("Do something!").

**Social causes:** Quantitative data is analysed using economic, cultural, political and historical factors. Technical explanations and academic analyses are given. The data is often questioned, but not the paradigm in which the issue is framed.

**Discourse/ Worldview:** The task is to find deeper social, linguistic and cultural structures in order to revision the problem. Based on the varied discourses, discrete alternative scenarios can be derived here.

**Myth/ Metaphor:** These are the deep stories, collective archetypes, the unconscious, of often emotive, dimensions of the problem or paradox. The language used is less specific, more concerned with evoking visual images, with touching the heart instead of reading the head.

CLA expands the range and richness of scenarios, promotes inclusiveness of views, fosters poetic/artistic expression in futures thinking, moves discussion beyond the superficial and obvious to the deeper and marginal dimensions and allows for a range of transformative actions.

*– Adapted from Metafuture.org*

# Six Pillars Model summarised



- **Mapping the Present and the Future** — through methods and tools such as the Futures Triangle and the Futures Landscape.

PULL OF THE FUTURE

PLAUSIBLE FUTURE

PUSH OF THE PRESENT

WEIGHT OF HISTORY
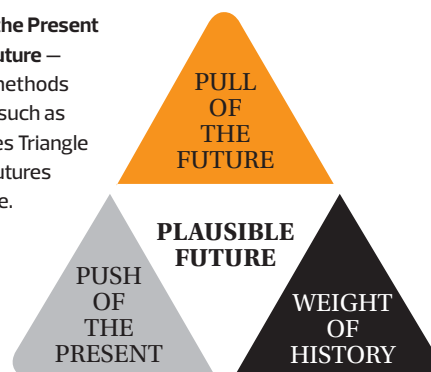
- **Anticipating the Future** — through methods such as Emerging Issues Analysis and the Futures Wheel.
- **Timing the Future** — understanding the grand patterns of Change, Macrohistory and Macrofutures.
- **Deepening the Future** — through methods such as Causal Layered Analysis and Multiple Selves Theory.

- **Creating Alternatives to the Present** — through methods such as Scenarios and Nuts and Bolts.
- **Transforming the Present and Creating the Future** — through Visioning, Backcasting, Anticipatory Action Learning and the Transcend Conflict Resolution method.

*– Adapted from Metafuture.org*

HARIS HASSAN/THE EDGE

I want people in my company who are destroying the past to create the future."

That left the CEO befuddled.

The chairperson said: "It's going to be difficult, but I'm convinced that if we stay as we are today, we're drowning."

This is where the third tool, Causal Layered Analysis, comes in.

For that firm, the metaphor was "We're drowning"; the litany was "Our profits are going down".

A better metaphor could be "Surfing the waves", where the measurement is not profits per se, but new, innovative projects.

A different metaphor could be, "In 10 years —sailing towards the moon". That could mean a number of innovations that lead to new products that are profitable.

In a word, CLA prompts a four-step process: "Find the current metaphor; then find a new one; link it to the measurement of success; and do this over Horizons".

Horizons is the fourth tool, and for businesses, this is the big hurdle, says Sohail.

"Horizon 1 is when we say: 'I'm too busy. Why should I invest?' Or meditate, or exercise," he says.

That begs the question: "When won't we be too busy?"

"In this state, we have designed our life so that these new ideas are not of value," observes Sohail.

Looking ahead, Horizon 3 is the Impossible Future.

"We get dramatic changes, such as in the company, education system or health system. The future is too far," he says.

Stepping back to Horizon 2, this is where people face uncertainty, anxiety and scenarios.

"This is the space of change," Sohail states.

The next step is to identify three or four areas for change and work on them.

## From "Pummelled by the present" to "Soaring like eagles"

On occasion, the visioning exercise blossoms into a vast enterprise that moves forward an entire segment of the people.

This happened with a South African organisation that was responsible for creating employment for young men — a tough challenge by any measure.

The CEO's metaphor was "Pummelled by the present".

"Every day, I feel there's a hammer that hits me on the head," he confided to Sohail. "By Friday, I never know if the cheque from the government is in." Not knowing if he would have to fire his 40 employees at the end of each week was harrowing, the CEO explained.

"But we're here to make a difference," the CEO said, and worked with Sohail to develop a new vision for the programme.

Then at 6pm, the CEO stood up and said he had to go for a client meeting.

That set the stage for a reckoning.

"So you are pummelled by the present," Sohail said, bouncing back the CEO's predicament at him. "Your story has defined your strategy which ensures failure."

There was a long silence while their eyes met, Sohail recounts.

Then the CEO got on the phone and cancelled the meeting.

Working through futures thinking, the new metaphor the group created was "A flock of eagles".

"What would that mean for a business person?" Sohail asked, to make the link with a key stakeholder group.

"We're not just going to find young people jobs," the CEO said, "we'll hold a national jobs summit."

That meant getting all the stakeholders involved to generate 100,000 jobs. The group also would seek US$1 million from an aid agency, he said.

"We're going back to our core life purpose," the CEO declared.

Sohail reports that he had received an email from the group. The job summit was coming up, they said, and the nation's top leaders were involved in the programme.

Every six months, Sohail calls the group, which says it has found its direction again.

"Sometimes the learning process works, sometimes people run away scared," says Sohail philosophically.

## The Malaysian story: Change the metaphor

Tapped for his thoughts about Malaysia's challenges, Sohail takes a moment to clarify that he does not prescribe solutions but gives stakeholders a process to work with for creating a desired future.

That said, he points out that the old model for Malaysia's growth was based on a single bottom line worldview.

"The goal was Vision 2020 [and] behind that was one way to measure reality, which is basically gross domestic product. You need that to go from poor to now wealthy," he says.

After reaching that goal, taking a leaf from behaviourist Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the focus moves beyond mere survival to higher yearnings

such as the need for expression.

So what are some new measures to use for Malaysia's future?

Sohail talks about a fourth bottom line beyond the commonly quoted "People, Planet and Prosperity" mantra that has become the vogue among corporates.

Purpose or spirituality adds a vital dimension to a group's mission, from his perspective.

"The research is clear: organisations that are spiritual-focused and purposeful enjoy higher productivity. This is also true for individuals," Sohail states.

He acknowledges that meditation as a business tool may sound strange in a corporate environment.

Sohail points out that the world is dramatically changing, with some six or seven major disruptors under way. Among them are the advent of artificial intelligence and robotics, the rise of 'ChIndia' and decline of the US, and the impacts of climate change.

"Time is now galloping, it's not stable. That's when we need to slow down," he argues.

Ironically, says Sohail, when we slow down inside, we make quicker progress towards our goals.

"Part of Malaysia's dilemma is that

> ## In futures studies, we call that a used future — it's a future that worked in one period, but doesn't work now — Sohail

what worked before was brilliant, but it will no longer work. Its systems are designed for yesterday," he states.

"In this age, are Malaysian universities meant to be factories?" he asks.

"In futures studies, we call that a used future — it's a future that worked in one period, but doesn't work now," he says.

In his experience advising Malaysian institutions, key executives get excited by the new ideas that emerge from futures thinking and get things moving in that direction. Then they are moved elsewhere.

"My metaphor for the country used to be, 'Malaysia has a few good trees, let's nurture them'. Then, they are transplanted. Trees here run away," he jokes.

"Now, I want to create a 'Forest of foresight'. That means, it doesn't matter which one of the trees continues. The forest sustains innovation," says the futurist. **E**

This leads to the question, "What are the big disruptors in five to 10 years that I need to take seriously?"

## The weirdo on the board

Nevertheless, too much data, especially about the future, can cause anxiety for people who are trying to deal with change, Sohail says in a paper on transforming organisations.

"When such ideas are presented at board meetings, most people say, 'That's interesting, but I can't act on it. Because if I do, I'll be seen as the weirdo in the board'."

"I always look for them," he tells *Options*. "They are the ones who ask me: 'I have a sense something is happening. I don't know what it is. Please help me conceptualise it'".

At one big firm, when the chairperson laid out a vision for the future, the CEO asked, "What about our main product line? This gets rid of it."

The chairperson replied, "Are you going to defend the past or create the future? Make your decision right now."

Rash Behari Bhattacharjee is associate editor at *The Edge*