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## fo r e f r o n t :

*tips and pitfalls  
of the futures  
studies trade*  
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*This essay outlines some of the crucial points to be taken into consideration by futurists-in-training in order to avoid the many mistakes which can be easily made. These comprise right timing, real participation, scenarios, developing a preferred vision of the future, using metaphors, using mixed approaches, depth, the surprise future and implementation. The role of the futurist is long term pedagogy, finding solutions for current problems by challenging administrative structures and asking individuals to rethink how and why they do certain things. The reality of practice and idealism of vision is what will create an alternative future.*

At a recent two-day workshop organized by the Futures Forum for Australian organizations (which included representatives from the department of defence, taxation, non-governmental organizations, small businesses and corporate planners), I was asked in the concluding section what were the imperatives of futures studies. For the newcomer to the area, what were some of the crucial points the futurist-in-training needs to be thinking about? And what are the pitfalls, the mistakes that are easily made?

This essay is my answer to that question. It is based on 20 years of futures research and consulting in a variety of organizations around the world. While other futurists may have additional points – their list of priorities – my sense is that there would be general agreement on many if not most of these points.

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## Timing

First, timing. Learning patience. Futures-oriented projects, organizational change intervention and visioning take time to materialize. One cannot expect foundational or even tangential social change to happen overnight. While our advice is listened to it is not always in the time frame we expect or hope.

Let me give a paradigmatic example. Seven years ago I gave a speech to Zippys corporation, a fast-food chain in Hawaii. Zippys had achieved excellent growth by focusing on the local market – Hawaii's unique multicultural mix of Hawaiian, Japanese, Chinese and Filipino culture. This generally meant along that with traditional McDonald's type food, there were teriyaki burgers, bento boxes, saimin and other local favourites. These dishes however were often high in fat and cholesterol, certainly not the healthiest food in the world. I suggested that the local population was ready to enter a more healthy diet regime. Already one local doctor had developed a low-fat diet for Hawaii's native population. This was meant to counter their current high rates of heart attack and cancer and return to pre-colonization diets, which were generally fish and taro based (and not french fries, diet coke and apple pie-led). I suggested that Zippys develop a tofu burger. My advice did not go over very well. Indeed, I soon found out that the real purpose of the meeting was not to scan the environment – in search of trends and business opportunities for the future – but to address pressing human resource problems in the corporation (which turned out be about who was sleeping with whom, local *v* foreign culture). While futures was the text, the subtext of deciding who would run the business once the founders retired was a far more pressing issue.

I do not know how the conflict was resolved, however, Zippys now serves up a tofu burger. I saw the early indicators and deduced that there was a market shift, however, it took top management years to add a new product. Indeed, they may have been right, 1992 may have been too early for vegetarian food at fast-food outlets. Still, I remain convinced if they had started much earlier, they could have played an important role in not only creating a new product but helping transform Hawaii's diet, in being slightly ahead of their time, in not just responding to the market but leading it as well.

Along with patience, thus, is right timing.

A foresight programme is likely to take-off when a new leader or administrator takes control of a government department, corporation, and non-governmental organization. He or she is likely to be in search of new directions, of organizational transformation, as well as of coming to terms, framing or reframing, with the organization's root identity and mission.

Recently, I conducted a half-day long visioning workshop at Heart Politics in New Zealand. There was elation amongst social movement members after the recent victory of the Green Party. The future, once merely idealistic dreams, had now become an arena of action. With a certain level of political power captured, the question became now what to do with political power? How could their alternative ideological focus be implemented to make sure morale was not lost? They understood that they had a temporal window to influence New Zealand politics and that they need to be explicit about their vision of the future, and not just focus on the details of policy analysis.

## Participation

Second, is real participation. For scenario planning to be truly effective, not only must all stakeholders be involved, but also those engaged in the process must create the scenarios. In the 1980s when I worked for the court system, I developed an elegant strategic plan. It identified the issues, the scenarios, the visions, however since it was developed by and written in the planning office, there was no buy-in. Judges, criminals, attorneys and citizen groups did not write the scenarios and thus cared little about implementing the strategic concerns. At worse, the plan was merely the fictions of a futurist; at best, the plan was increased workload for various divisions. Indeed, after one planning meeting, the local administrator refused to type up the butcher-paper bullet points. He cared neither for the process or the results. The plan, I believe, is still in his office waiting for his secretary to type it up.

Recently in a project for the International Catholic Migration Commission, the scenarios – with the help of myself as the futurist, a professional facilitator and a local manager – were written by actual case workers. Flying in for meetings from the hot spots around the world – Rwanda, Bosnia, and Kosovo – they had first hand experience of what future lay ahead for refugees. Our goal was to use the richness of their personal experiences to develop scenarios. Surprisingly, futures turned out to be a relief for them. They intuitively understood that global policy needed to change and band-aid approaches to refugee crisis would not, could not, work.

While it would have been better to have had refugees in the scenario writing team, this turned out to be too difficult (and they rightly did not want token guilt assuaging representation either).

## Scenarios

Third are scenarios. They are important for a variety of reasons. First, they provide an early warning mechanism for dramatic changes, second, they help clarify alternatives, and third, they contour the unknown and help manage complexity.

In a project in Taiwan, two preferred scenarios emerged. The first was quite predictable. Taiwan would continue to globalize, small business would remain dominant and hard work would eventually allow Taiwanese to travel more and become far more cosmopolitan, slowly moving up the ladder from manufacturing to knowledge/leisure economy. A second scenario was concerned not with working harder but with the immediate quality of life. Globalization was far less important than relationship. Instead of the city, it was the farm that was more attractive. For government policy planners used to a fixed dominant image of the future (as with most Asian nations), this surprising alternative is an important early indicator that values in Taiwan are about to change. What this means for new products, leisure, and the economy in general are quite profound.

Other alternatives that emerged included:

- Tragic Taiwan – take-over by China (or other disasters);
- Taiwan.com – Taiwan transforming from a manufacturing economy and becoming an active and innovative role in the new economy; and
- Tou Hua Yuan – a utopia from ancient Chinese literature (green, organic, democratic).

Most organizations hire futurists or engage in a futures project so as to get the right answer. They want a single point prediction. While this can be useful – especially when one is right – it also can mask alternative futures, real opportunities, and other roads that can be travelled. In one project for a Credit Union league – a cooperative banking system – we found that they had a clear strategy. It was to catch up with the banks, enter high finance and generally look more toward the US market. However, after developing scenarios, they saw two other alternatives. The first was using their multicultural Hawaii heritage to find new partners in South-east Asia and East Asia (particularly China) and second to remember their roots. Entering high finance may actually alienate their traditional customer base as they had become involved in the credit union movement because of the values of cooperation and sharing, values that grew out of Hawaii's isolation and difficult times during the depression and second world war. Thus, two alternative scenarios emerged. First was an Asian strategy and second was a return to roots strategy. The first was followed and the success was limited partly

because of the timing issue. China was opening up but the infrastructure was not quite there yet. The second strategy appears to have been more valuable as Hawaii's economy has virtually been in a nine-year recession.

## Vision

However, while scenarios provide alternatives, they do not make the future more cohesive. They open up choices but do not pull organizations and civilizations forward. Developing a preferred vision of the future is a far more important method for this. The preferred vision acts as a strange attractor, providing the glue that creates community. The vision is essentially about root values in the context of changing times. It must enable and ennoble, be both detailed and universal. In a meeting of quite disparate individuals and associations in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia by focusing less on historical conflicts, differences of opinion but rather on what individuals authentically desired for the future a remarkable shared vision was articulated. Of course, not each individual was committed to the entire package but generally there was agreement. This group consisted of Muslim technocrats, Islamic scholars, government bureaucrats, and academics from the Islamic International University. Their vision of the future was titled Ummah 2020 and consisted of four main points:

- A cooperative economic system as an alternative to capitalism;
- gender participation;
- self-reliant electronically linked communities; and
- a unified global polity.

## Metaphors

However, a vision cannot be expressed in strategic language. Using metaphors, is perhaps the best way to enter alternative future realities. They work at a gut level and can capture complexity more easily than other descriptions of the world. While quantitative forecasting is useful to discern likely possibilities based on current trends – for example, in demographics – it does not offer any insight into what population changes mean to different groups. Using poetic language, metaphor gives us insight; it indicates what is most important. For example, is an expanding population a decisive variable in understanding the future because we fear there are more of them than us ie the image of fortress keeping the barbarians out? Or because we fear Nature is losing her balance?

Often unconscious, an organization's (or individual's or nation's) root metaphor can both provide new opportunities as well as limit what is believed to be possible. IBM saw this switching from a company that sold computers to a company that provided solutions.

While senior leaders usually appreciate metaphors, technicians find little value to them. This is partly because metaphors are big-picture stories as partly because they are invisible. Metaphors can help us understand deep differences between cultures and civilizations as well. Generally, the American metaphor for the future is that of a luxury liner on the high seas (ocean and space) with unbounded opportunities. While there may be first, second and third classes on the liners, everyone is on board, indeed, getting people on board the American dream and way of life is the key. However, at one workshop in Islamabad, Pakistan this metaphor was considered strange. A woman wearing a *dapata* over her head asked why would anyone desire such a future. In contrast she offered the Islamic vision - that of bowing down in prayer and facing Mecca. Unity and discipline were far more important. We should thus not be surprised that negotiations between these two civilizations are often fruitless. Whatever is being said at the rational level matters little when the unconscious has already made differing assumptions. More recently, a Pakistani commentator has offered that it is not facing Mecca that is the real metaphor, rather it is that of the jail. The issue in Pakistan is twofold:

- to become the warden and if that is impossible;
- to make sure life in prison is tolerable. With the prison as the organizing metaphor, we understand better why feudalism has been impossible to shake off in Pakistan.

When working with organizations, using the wrong metaphor can be disastrous. At a workshop on the futures of South-East Asia in Penang, Malaysia, participants found the programme of little interest. Forecasting methods such as trend analysis, what-if questions and cross-impact analysis did not fire any participant's imagination. However, when we changed the tone of the discussion to future generations - that is, what choices we are making today that foreclose our children and grandchildren's futures - they came to life. It was the future as defined by the family that was far more appropriate for the attending Malays. Moreover, when we asked them to use their own language as a resource for understanding the future, they did not stop talking. They offered proverbs that illustrated Malay life and better understood futures when they saw that proverbs such as: 'Plant maize while waiting for the paddy to be harvested', was about future orientation. The meeting went on way

into the night and finally at 11 pm we begged them to let us retire to our hotel rooms.

Alternatively, at a futures workshop in Sydney, an Australian businessman did not find metaphors at all useful. His concern was what should he do Monday morning. Insight was interesting but he needed to make money and manage employees. While we could have inquired into what his metaphor for life, business, time was, instead we realized that he was not ready for this type of analysis. He wanted to know what trends would impact his business and what he should do about them. The key then is finding the right language to communicate effectively. Metaphor should not discount more concrete data offerings.

## Eclecticism

Next, futures should be eclectic, mixing quantitative, qualitative, short range and long range, predictive and critical approaches. When I worked with the Hawaii Judiciary in the 1980s, our futures programme had three components. The first component consisted of emerging issues analysis - low probability, high impact events and trends - such as the rights of robots, Hawaii secession, brain drugs for prisons. The second component consisted of quantitative trend analysis. Reports that were featured included the impact of the growth of attorneys on caseload and the impact of alternative dispute resolution on the court system. The third component consisted of scenarios and preferred visions (developed through a participatory foresight conference). It was a comprehensive futures programme. The type of research that was done changed over time as the court's leadership changed and new social problems emerged. We understood that different administrators preferred different types of data on the future. Some desired to be challenged; others wanted policy-relevant information, and others just wanted it to appear that they were sponsoring cutting-edge research. Had we focused only on one type of approach, the programme would not have lasted as long as it did (some 12 years) and funded so generously.

## Depth

However, eclecticism should be about depth not just breadth. This means going from single point forecasting (getting it right) to scenario planning (contouring the unknown) to institutional foresight (creating learning processes) to anticipatory action learning (creatively meeting challenges together). It also means moving from the litany of the future (the most visible trend, technological or demographic forecasts) to the

social and economic level (short term causes, policy analysis) to worldview (shared and not so shared paradigms of the organization) to myth and metaphor (the deeper stories). Questions, while beginning at the first level, cannot end there; they must explore each level. Thus the issue cannot be only how to prepare managers for uncertain times but to ask how might disintermediation eliminate the manager?

And, focusing only on what is not easily visible (the story) to the detriment of the litany is equally problematic since buy-in of forecasts and futures could be lost. For the manager, even if the new economy eliminates much of their work, for many the old economy still exists and they need information on the trends that will impact their business and life.

The long-term goal is to expand buy-in of futures tools and concepts, to create a policy community wherein futures can be rationally and not-so-rationally discussed. This means information has to be multi-levelled and communicatively appropriate for the audience.

## Surprise

While business-as-usual is often the best forecast, there are times in an organization's future where there is surprise, discontinuity. Being prepared for surprise can be done best by searching for the future on the margins. Not from the centre of power but from those in the periphery. For Islamic historian, Ibn Khaldun, it was the Bedouins, who existed outside of official power that created the new society. They had little to lose, were not vested in the reigning system and had developed unity through the struggle of living on the margin. The question is: who are the Bedouins today? Are you?

The unofficial future or the surprise future, is harder to see since we are successful in our own reality. Our excellence, writes Homer, is our fatal flaw. But not only do we need to think differently, we need to be different.

Part of this search for surprise means using more than our intellectual faculties to forecast. This does not mean a turn to the irrational; rather, it is a move to the postrational. Ways of knowing that are inclusive of intellect, intuition, authority, sense-inference as well as love, relationship and extrasensory perception. Imagine how strange an organization would be if they only used intuition and gut feeling without recourse to data. Yet most organizations are exactly the reverse. They only use data and make decisions based on strategic intellects, not aware of the boundedness of their knowings, of the paradigms that restrict them.

## Implementation

Last is implementation, where the rubber and sky meet. Once a vision is agreed upon, the future forecasted, what then? How to use futures to change the organization? Where best to place futures research within an organization.

Implementation is of course better when there is deep participation and when there is authentic leadership. If either one is missing that organizational transformation is unlikely.

However, after a visioning workshop or a scenario planning session or project, the best way to avoid getting bogged down in politics straight away is to conduct a pilot study, perhaps focused on a particular scenario, or a project derived from a preferred vision. Doing everything, that is, all the suggestions and recommendations raised won't work since the leader will only see the economic and political costs entailed with organizational transformation. They will then sabotage the recommendations by either overly praising it or burying it. Instead, the best tack is to choose something specific that has emerged from the scenarios and visions or the depth analysis and follow that through.

At the same time, it is crucial to remember that the project does not end with one scenario workshop, that futures-orientation is a constant process, central to creating a learning organization. The future must be periodically questioned.

This can best done by a comprehensive futures programme. Data would emerge from environmental scans (journals, the Net, expert interviews) and be fed into research reports. Research reports could influence and create a policy community.

In both cases, it would be crucial that the futurist report directly to a senior manager. This is so as managers lower down in the administrative chain have shorter time horizons and exist to ensure that current projects succeed. They are not there to experiment with new projects or to question the organization's mission, product or structure.

However, even with direct reporting, a futures project – whether a pilot project or a more comprehensive futures programme – is likely to be a target for the budget office. But playing hard politics is not the solution; indeed, it is imperative that the futurist stays out of the politics of the present except in terms of helping clarify the implications of the politics being practised. He or she needs to play more the court jester than the aspiring king or queen. The role of the futurist is: long term pedagogy, finding solutions for current problems by challenging administrative structures and asking individuals to rethink not only how but why they do certain things. Getting bogged down in office politics jeopardizes this role.

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At the same time, linking with the CEO at the expense of one's neighbours can prove disastrous. At Southern Cross University in Australia, the lecturer in futures studies, while having support from the vice-chancellor, had few friends among staff. When it was time to extend his contract, for a variety of complex reasons it was refused. While the VC did not want to see him and the programme leave, he could not intervene in division politics and policies.

Thus, soft politics is another matter. Soft politics is about questioning the norms of the organization (and offering alternative norms). Soft politics is about suggesting alternative organizational structures. Soft politics is finding solutions to questions not asked, and asking questions of the obvious.

Soft politics is being part of a process that creates a future-oriented learning organization. Soft politics, ultimately, is about getting beyond politics and being authentic. For futures to make a difference to any organization, ultimately, the futurist has to live the future he or she envisions.

The reality of practice and idealism of vision is what will create an alternative future.