

The Power of the Long-Term Perspective

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For decades, futurists have talked about the long-term future, specifically about anticipating, preparing, and planning for that future. Why? What is the value? What are the benefits? Other than curiosity, why should anyone be concerned about the long-term future?

In fact, there are real, concrete benefits. Moreover, the value concept is simple: If you understand that changes are coming, you can be better prepared to deal with those changes. Possibly more important, if you understand where you want to be in the future—your destination—that knowledge may help you achieve that future, that vision. Thinking about the future and thinking from the future create a valuable perspective—the long-term perspective.

The long-term perspective provides power to individuals and organizations: power over individuals' lives, power over the fortunes and prospects of organizations, and power to change the future. One example of the power of the long-term perspective is brought out by research into the desirable attributes of leadership, conducted by Kouzes and Posner (2002). The authors state that “forward thinking” is one of the most desired attributes of leaders, second only to honesty.

How would you define “long-term perspective”? Start with “long term.” Futurists generally agree that “long term” is a minimum of 10

years, and Gordon (2010) suggests 10 to 25 years. “Perspective” has a number of definitions, but it generally relates to how an object or situation is viewed, from what distance, and from which angle. In discussing the future, three views come quickly to mind:

1. A view from the present (standing in the present) looking into the future.

2. A view from the future (standing in the future) that looks into the surrounding future and back to the present.

3. An overview that takes in the past, present, and future, which implies looking from a distance to see the whole picture.

Where are you standing when you view the future? Perspective depends on your viewpoint, in the present or in the future. Militaries throughout history have recognized the value of the higher ground, because the high ground offers a better view of the surrounding area. That perspective provides an advantage that represents power.

Once we recognize the importance or value of a long-term perspective in our lives, careers, and businesses, the question becomes, “How does one acquire a long-term perspective?”

The quick answer is to learn the methods used by futurists, but that brings us back to “How?” How can you learn the methods that futurists employ? There are two common and effective ways to learn the methods of foresight and futures studies:

- 1. Enroll in a graduate program in foresight and futures studies.** A master’s degree from one of at least two dozen universities worldwide offering such programs qualifies you to become a professional futurist. This typically takes two years and some investment in tuition, books, etc. If you want a career in foresight and futures studies, this is the first choice. You can also continue on for a PhD or a DBA (doctor of business administration). Several schools offer online and distance education, so students can participate in classes and complete assignments from anywhere in the world.

- 2. Learn to understand foresight concepts, methods, and tools**

on a nonprofessional track. This provides sufficient knowledge to apply these tools and methods in your personal life or to work in teams or committees developing scenarios or strategic plans for an organization. This also provides helpful knowledge to executives, human resources personnel, and others who are hiring or contracting with professional futurists.

The first option is self-explanatory, so the rest of this essay will focus on the second option: acquiring a long-term perspective through “nonprofessional-track” learning. This would include self-learning, coaching, classes (community college classes, in-house training through human resources, etc.), workshops by futurists, and other approaches. Over time, the availability of all these learning tools will probably grow, and learning about long-term perspectives will become more widely available to the general public and to corporate employees.

A very effective approach for learning foresight that is broadly available and easily accessible now is individual or personal futuring. Several futurists have written about the benefits and value to individuals of understanding the future, and Edward Cornish of the World Future Society has been one of the leaders in advocating for personal futures. His Book *Futuring* (2004) is aimed at individuals and provides a history of futuring along with an explanation of methods. Cornish encourages individuals to think about the future.

Some of the earlier writers about foresight, including Bertrand de Jouvenel (1967) and Robert Jungk (Jungk and Mullert 1987) appear to have expected and intended foresight to be available to the general public from the very beginning of futurist thinking. George Morrissey wrote *Creating Your Own Future* (1992), which applied strategic-planning methods to individual lives in a step-by-step format, but did not include methods or tools for considering plausible or possible futures. Dave Ellis (1998) also wrote a book titled *Creating Your Future*, offering advice on how individuals can prepare for the future. There are many books available about how to change your life or pre-

pare for the future, but not many that are specifically based on the methods of foresight and futures studies.

How can you learn futures methods in practical detail? The system suggested here is based entirely on the methods and tools used by professional futurists, but scaled down to fit the needs of individuals: personal futures. One advantage of this system is that, since it is based on scaled-down methods used by professionals, those methods can be learned at the smallest, simplest level, then scaled up for use at any level. For example, you can learn how to develop scenarios for yourself or your family, exploring 10 years into the future. Once you understand the concepts of scenario development, you can apply that knowledge at any level—e.g., personal, small business, medium organization, or very large organization.

This learning process can be accomplished in a number of ways. Individuals may buy or download books and materials and learn on their own time and at their own speed. They may attend workshops, which provide a disciplined setting and shorten the time required to complete the development of a complete plan. Organizations may find value in providing training at various levels for people in their organizations, possibly as part of leadership training.

It is important not to overestimate your capabilities after learning about the future on a personal level. You won't be qualified to lead the development of scenarios or strategic planning at the corporate level, but you *will* be qualified to participate effectively. If you are placed on a planning team, you will understand the process and the concepts, so you won't have to learn on the job or risk valuable resources to inexperience. Although it is valuable to understand the methods and the processes and how the system works, the important value at this point is the development of a long-term perspective.

Obviously, there are multiple benefits here. You will be able to develop a personal plan for the next 10 years, create a family plan, and develop a career plan while learning a system of futuring methods. All this will happen while you're acquiring a long-term per-

spective, because learning and using the methods will convey that perspective. The critical point is that the methods are the same at all levels, because they are scalable. Application of these methods may vary with the size of the organization, but the methods remain the same.

CONCEPTS

The field of foresight and futures studies is built on a foundation of concepts and principles that is described in detail in Wendell Bell's *Foundations of Futures Studies* (1997). Bell lists nine key assumptions and three general assumptions for futurists. For simplicity of understanding, this paper will focus on three generally accepted concepts about the future:

1. The future is not predetermined. In the 1950s and 1960s, think tanks and academics developed theories about anticipating the future. What was it that the think tanks found that the wizards and fortune tellers of earlier centuries had not? The answer seems so simple. The fortune tellers had focused on *the* future, assuming there was only one fixed or preordained future. The twentieth-century thinkers changed that main assumption. They were convinced that the future is *not* predetermined, and that realization altered everything about the way we see the future. Now, it became obvious that, if the future is not fixed or predetermined, then more than one future must be available (Wheelwright 2010).

2. We cannot know the future. However, there is a great deal that we can know about the future if we take the time to think about it. An example I frequently use with audiences illustrates this: I ask listeners to think about their age now and what their age will be 10 years from now. Then I point out that, if they have children who are under 10 years of age now, those children will be teenagers 10 years from now. If their children are teens now, they will be in their 20s in another 10 years. Those in their 20s will be completing their education, starting careers, leaving the family home, and considering mar-

riage and children. The point here is that there is a lot we can know about the future, even if we cannot see the details.

3. The future can be influenced by the actions of individuals or organizations in the present. If you make an appointment to see a dentist, plan to meet a friend for coffee, make airline reservations or other commitments, you have changed your future. Everyone makes plans and commitments that affect or change their short-term future, usually every day. If it is possible to change or influence your future in the short term, then it should be possible to change or influence your long-term future as well.

Large organizations worldwide have been working successfully with the future for decades, and I studied their methods at the University of Houston–Clear Lake program in Studies of the Future. Convinced of the value of futures methods, but not content with the complexity required for their use, I went on to do dissertation research, focusing on the practicability of scaling futures methods down from very large to very small—one individual. After receiving a PhD for my research and dissertation (Wheelwright 2006), I conducted workshops, mini-workshops, and presentations, testing these concepts of personal futures. The response was gratifying.

It was in conversations at a conference of the Academy of Human Resource Development that I realized that the scalability of futures methods worked both ways. What I had scaled down in my research would also scale up. The importance of that realization took hold slowly, but I soon realized the value. The Personal Futures system could be a learning system. Individuals could learn futures methods on a small scale, in their personal lives, and then apply that knowledge at any level. Scalability works.

But returning to the question of how an individual can learn to use futures methods at a personal or individual level: Frankly, the choices are limited, because not many people have taken an interest in developing materials. There are a great number of self-help books available, but I am not aware of any writing beyond my own that fo-

cuses specifically on futures methods. So the references here will be largely to my own writings. First is an article from *The Futurist* (2006), “Your Personal Future, A Step-by-Step Guide.” Next came *The Personal Futures Workbook*, now in its fourth edition (2011). The workbook is available as a free download at <http://www.personalfutures.net>. *It’s Your Future... Make It a Good One!* was published in paperback and e-book editions in 2010.

My articles and books follow a simple, three-step approach to learning about the future:

1. Research: Understand the present and the forces that are now at work.
2. Explore the future with scenarios.
3. Create a vision, strategies, and a plan for the long-term future.

Each step includes tools and methods developed and used effectively by futurists that are taught in universities worldwide. The three steps combine to form a logical system that is commonly practiced in large organizations. For example, step one includes (with general-public friendly names) cycle analysis (life stages), stakeholder analysis (people in your future), trend analysis (personal domains), trend extrapolation (projecting into the future), horizon scanning (scanning your horizons), the two-axis matrix (a favorite tool of futurists), value analysis (personal values), SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats), and the Futures Wheel.

Written here, that sounds pretty formidable to offer the general public, yet e-mails tell me that Personal Futures is being taught to secondary-school students, and, in at least one case, eighth graders. At the same time, the book and the workbook are being used as texts in community colleges and in graduate courses in a number of universities.

The three steps mentioned above are largely self-explanatory.

Step one shows readers/learners how to understand where they are in their life at present, recognize the quality level of their life from birth to present, then project their personal trend lines into the future.

There is an exploration of personal values, a recognition of probable and plausible future life events, and a look at readers' strengths and weaknesses. At the end of the section, readers have gathered considerable information about the past, present, and plausible futures in six areas of life—enough information to create useful scenarios.

Step two is an exploration of the future using the scenario method. Four basic scenario types are described, based on the information collected in step one. A baseline scenario is developed and provides the data for the following scenarios, which demonstrate how the effects of driving forces—positive, negative, or transformational—can change the nature of each scenario. Again, readers/learners are led through the process in small steps and will have a good understanding of the scenario-building process after building scenarios on a small (personal or family) scale.

Step three is basic strategic planning, but with a strong emphasis on the long-term perspective and the vision of the future. Here, the vision is treated as a destination in the future. An analogy that most people identify with is planning a family vacation. The first decision in planning a vacation is the destination. Until you know where you are going, you can't make strategies (travel arrangements) or plans. In life and in business, once the destination is known, strategies and plans naturally follow.

In the process, readers/learners will learn not only visioning, but also how to develop strategies to achieve that vision, as well as strategies to deal with anticipated high-impact events. Readers/learners will also create an action plan (with backcasting), test the plan with vulnerability and gap analysis, develop a contingency plan, and arrange for monitoring the plan and making changes when appropriate or necessary. Again, visioning and strategic planning are learned on a simple, personal basis, but the methods and tools are the same as for an organization of any size.

That, very briefly, describes the learning process for understanding futuring methods, and for acquiring a long-term perspective.

HOW CAN YOU LEARN THE PERSONAL FUTURING SYSTEM?

My experience suggests that workshops are very effective, whether offered to the general public, through corporate training, leadership training, or other workshop formats, including the workshops offered by the World Future Society. Workshops are usually at least one day long, and participants work through the whole futuring process, completing the workshop with personal scenarios and a written personal strategic plan for the next 10 years.

Demand has not yet appeared for coaching in personal futuring, but senior people in organizations will probably prefer this as a learning method. Classes at a local community college (Anne Arundel Community College provides a good model) are also effective, and the learning process is spread over a longer period of time so there is more time to give serious consideration to each step in the process. Corporate training will usually adopt one or more of those learning systems.

Another approach is personal learning with a book and a workbook, the same tools used in the workshops and classes. The self-learning approach takes a little more discipline, but is very effective and easily available anywhere.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

- **For individuals and families:** Every individual and family should benefit from understanding how to explore the future and anticipate events that have a high probability of occurring. A long-term perspective changes the way individuals perceive the future and the world around them, and there is often a gain in self-confidence, a sense of power over their own lives.
- **Entrepreneurs and small businesses:** Small business can benefit greatly from developing a long-term perspective and applying futures methods to develop scenarios, vision, strategies, and plans. The methods that have worked so successfully for large organizations should be even more effective for small and me-

dium-size companies because of the lower level of complexity. These entities will probably benefit from exploring both internal and external forces to determine the driving forces that are bringing about change.

- **For organizations:** Leadership training is an obvious area of importance for human resources departments, including both executive coaching and workshops. There may also be interest in educating entire workforces within organizations because of the obvious benefit of having everyone understand the organization's long-term planning and interim goals.

In reality, every individual and every entity can benefit from exploring and understanding the methods that professional futurists practice. Broad understanding of foresight methods by the public is actually a benefit to professional futurists as well, because clients and a public who are well informed will be better prepared to work with futurists and more inclined to retain their services.

The process that futurists use in large organizations to conduct research, develop scenarios, and create strategic plans is quite complex, but part of that complexity is the scale and part is the internal (or political) workings of the organization itself. The personal futuring system eliminates much of that complexity by scaling the futurist's tools and methods down to the individual scale, then arranging those tools and methods into a logical sequence that becomes a usable system for individuals. Personal futuring is simple and effective and works on multiple levels. On an immediate basis, you or any learner can create a valid, usable long-term strategic plan for yourself and your family. That plan can incorporate a plan for your career, or you can create a separate career plan. From that futuring experience, the real takeaway is a long-term perspective. You will find yourself applying futures concepts to your everyday thinking, asking yourself about the long-term impacts of events or decisions. You will incorporate forward thinking into your everyday life. You will have acquired the power of the long-term perspective.

The power of the long-term perspective is a critical attribute of visionary leaders—a critical component of leadership in all its forms. The ability to visualize what may or can exist ten or more years in the future differentiates visionaries from their peers, setting them and their organizations apart from others. But not all visionaries are corporate or industry leaders. Some are simply great parents who see the future potential of their children. Others see their career paths or their own futures through to very late life in ways that benefit themselves and their families. However leadership is applied, either personally or in the world of organizations, long-term perspective makes a difference between leaders.

Sometimes I use my childhood to offer an analogy that helps make a point about learning about the future. One of those analogies is about the game Follow the Leader, where one child is the leader and the others follow the leader in his or her journey and actions. Among my friends, some never knew what to do when it was their turn to lead. Some just ran around the playground (or backyard, park, or even the street) aimlessly while others, when it was their turn to lead, simply repeated whatever the previous leader had done. A small few seemed to have a knack for making their turn as leader unique. They would lead into places the others had never thought about, or create new and unusual tasks or routes to follow. They seemed to be natural leaders. They knew where they were going and what they were going to do. They had a destination in mind, and they led the followers to that destination.

The task of futurists and leaders is to identify a vision, a destination in the future, then lead the way to that destination. That destination or vision represents the power of the long-term perspective.

As organizations and individuals begin to recognize that the methods of foresight and futures studies can be taught and learned on a nonprofessional track, there will be an increasing interest in learning futuring systems. This will become very important to futurists, particularly to professional futurists and educational futurists. If, as it appears, there is a growing need to train leaders and future leaders in a nonprofessional track of futuring, who will provide that

training and where will training be conducted?

If trained futurists fail to fill this need, individuals and organizations without training or experience in foresight will fill the demand. This presents a substantial opportunity and responsibility for professionals and educators in the field of foresight and futures studies. There will be a need for qualified coaching, workshops, and classes as well as the supporting books and classroom materials. Those needs will be opportunities for futurists and futures organizations, but the time to begin preparing is now.

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