

Ten Reasons Why Your Organisation's View of the Future is Wrong

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The most interesting puzzle in our times is that we so willingly sleepwalk through the process of reconstituting the conditions of human existence.

Langdon Winner, The Whale and the Reactor, University of Chicago Press, 1986, p 10

Have you ever wondered why organisations usually 'get the future wrong'; why the term 'futures' has become synonymous with financial derivatives and why your company or organisation has no in-house foresight expertise?

Many of the current methods for introducing futures techniques and thinking into organisations do not work, or do not work very well. A bit of trend analysis is done here. A few scenarios are turned out there. Maybe a few new ideas are introduced to the management team. But not much else. Typically the consultant futurist appears, carries out his/her work and disappears leaving little of substance behind. Until now few organisations have seen the point of creating and sustaining high quality in-house futures expertise. This means that futures work is episodic and of variable quality. A different approach is needed.

In the post September 11 world there is a new awareness that the future can no longer be left to 'take care of itself'. The secret is finally out. To create viable futures (for individuals, organisations, societies and the world) some necessary work must be undertaken in the here-and-now. This puts Futures Studies and Applied Foresight in a new position. Practitioners can go on the offensive. Instead of assuming that organisations large and small have understood the opportunities and challenges of the near-term future, the latter can begin their work by pointing out some of the ways that organisations have currently 'got it wrong'. If the CIA (with one type of highly sophisticated environmental scanning capability central to its operation) can ignore some clear and timely signals about the possibility of airborne terrorism, we can be quite certain that other organisations are also continuing to operate in a state of false security.

So this article considers organisational *incapacity* in the field of strategic foresight. In so doing it draws upon more robust approaches to Futures work than have yet been widely applied. Here are ten reasons why organisations have probably 'got the future wrong'. Collectively they reinforce the suggestion organisations need access to a new generation of Foresight practitioners whose grounding in 'Futures Literacy' is matched only by their ability to deliver effective 'Foresight Strategy'.

1. Short term thinking

As is well known short term thinking has been the default norm in Western societies for a long time. But it is neither helpful nor inevitable. It can be seen as a 'perceptual defect' derived from past habits, cultural conditioning and the current market-oriented economic

ideology. Some earlier non-Western cultures routinely incorporated long term thinking in their counsels, whereas ours does not. We are learning, however, that social provision for longer-term views needs to be reinvented. Short term thinking has come to appear quite normal in organisations run by pragmatic, action-oriented people with their eyes on ‘the bottom line’. Such thinking encourages future discounting and provides an inadequate basis for decision making and strategy.

2. Bounded rationality

It is normal for those working in organisations to focus their attention strongly within the organisation and to ignore much of significance that lies outside. This inward looking focus encourages a kind of systematic blindness to ‘signals of change’ that arise in the external environment. Wider systemic relationships and processes on which the organisation depends are constantly overlooked. While it is true that everyone needs perceptual ‘filters’ to reduce the quantity of information they can deal with, the question of quality remains central. It follows that the selection and use of such ‘filters’ needs to be both conscious and strategic. Bounded rationality means that this seldom happens. Many signals of change are invisible to the untrained eye. Organisations that are blind and deaf to their environment are unlikely to survive unscathed in the turbulent conditions of the early 21st Century.

3. Unexamined presuppositions

It is commonly understood that policies, debates, arguments, strategies can proceed from an initial starting point to a conclusion with impeccable logic. What is not so well understood is that a starting position itself rests on *presuppositions* that are seldom brought to full consciousness, examined and revised. The result is that much apparently rational behaviour is undermined by irrational, unwise and untenable assumptions. For example, the view that ‘growth is good’ has widespread general and tacit acceptance. But the presuppositions underlying it are becoming highly questionable. For example, do we yet understand the difference between useful and non-useful growth? I don't think so. In general, there are too few opportunities within action-oriented organisational cultures to focus clearly on presuppositions and to assess their relevance or viability in these contexts.

4. Overlooking language, culture and traditions

Busy people tend to have a ‘naturalistic’ view of the world. That is, a view that imposes a false concreteness on societies and organisations, taking them as finished and ‘pretty much as they are’. This is known as ‘reification’ or ‘naïve realism’. Both serve to obscure the fact that the social world was made by people, is maintained by people and can be re-made by them. Hence there are always more personal, organisational and social options than are readily perceived. Overlooking this fact constrains the thinking, strategising and work that can be considered. Deeply embedded issues of language, culture and tradition affect the very fabric of the social order but are dismissed as being irrelevant or, worse,

‘academic’. This refusal to think in depth, to recognise and resolve complex issues reveals the naivety of much business and organisational thinking.

5. Overlooking paradigms

Paradigms are coherent patterns of thinking and action that powerfully organise our views of the world, of work, of what we should be doing. Since they are located in the inner world of self-reference and social construction they are invisible to the naked eye. But, like other domains with powerful social consequences (values, laws, scientific principles) they can be very influential. To challenge accepted paradigms is a serious matter that affects peoples’ sense of security and can generate conflict. But we overlook at our peril the ways that they condition our thinking and actions in many subtle ways. For example, if we seriously considered the implications of the consumerist paradigm we would question the legitimacy of marketing, economics, trade and our current approaches to the exploitation of natural resources.

6. The ‘fog’ of conventional thinking

It is something of a paradox that we live in an age of contradictions when what seems ‘true’ is ‘false’ and what is false is widely thought to be true. Affluent populations are no longer in direct touch with the natural world and its uncompromising realities. Furthermore, they are surrounded by ‘unreality industries’ that actively promulgate *false solutions* to perennial human problems. (Why am I here? What should I be doing? Where are we going?) In place of the hard work of facing up to the realities of a world in stress and in peril, current human psychology seems to opt wholesale for strategies of distraction, denial and avoidance. In order to see clearly it is necessary to ‘clear away the fog’ of conventional perception. This is not easily achieved without careful study, critique and reflection. Moreover, such qualities are profoundly undervalued in most areas of commercial and public life.

7. Mainstream economics

Mainstream economics purports to explain and direct economic activity and decisions. It is, however, defective in many respects. For example, it under-values natural wealth and social capital. It reduces complex interactions to merely financial transactions. It actively encourages future discounting. The ‘economic’ realm has expanded in recent decades so that it has come to predominate over the social and natural ones. This imbalance is dysfunctional for the culture as a whole because so much of that which is important to people and the well being of their world falls outside the economic realm. A re-balancing is long overdue. Organisations continue to act as if economic principles were sacred and unquestionable. In fact the reverse is true. The introduction of ‘triple bottom line’ accounting is part of a much wider shift toward a new economics that could, perhaps, be called ‘the economics of permanence’.

8. Limited use of futures methods

When used at all, Futures/Foresight methods tend to be used superficially. It is unusual for people to think beyond standard techniques such as forecasting, trend analysis and scenarios. Hence, corporate strategists and busy executives are still locked into 20th century models and practices. They are unlikely to have observed the growth, development and maturing of the Futures field over the last 20 years or reflected on the implications. So they neither understand the power of Futures literacy nor have they explored layered Futures methods. Hence they do not know how to access the richer and more productive futures options that are available.

9. Tokenistic responses and lack of capacity

As noted, most organisations are past and present oriented. They have not adopted the internal means to create powerfully convincing forward views and to apply the resulting stream of insights within their work or business. Hence they overlook what I call the ‘civilisational challenge’. By this I mean the distinctive pattern of civilisational issues, challenges, threats and opportunities that stand before us. Instead of dealing with this in a clear-eyed and positive way they turn away and try to avoid or minimise change. But such tokenistic responses are counter productive. They exacerbate organisational risks and do nothing to resolve societal risk in general. The point is this: to deal successfully with large scale complex issues requires a sophisticated and extended web of knowledge, highly focused awareness, tolerance of ambiguity and the ability to constantly revise thinking and practice in multiple domains.

10. Foresight strategy depends on futures literacy

Foresight strategy is the real-world application of Futures work in action. As outline above, it has been widely overlooked that actions and strategies in the world of external reality are based on modalities of inner awareness, understanding and capability. All fields of human enquiry and endeavour are, to some extent, comprised of ‘inner’ symbolic domains that play out in various external forms of action. There is a constant dialectic between inner knowledge and outer action. All symbolic domains generally have their own language, knowledge base, standards of practice and so on. Futures Studies and Applied Foresight follow this rule. The use of futures methods alone, without a deep grounding in ‘Futures literacy’, will always produce shallow and dysfunctional results.

Conclusion

It follows from the above that those running organisations are a good deal more comfortable than perhaps they should be. They neither understand the dangers ahead, nor see the very real opportunities inherent within them. They don’t understand the ‘civilisational challenge’ and what it means for everyone and for all organisations across the board. Hence they are currently not investing in the systemic solutions that are plainly available to those with eyes to see them. As a result risk, in general, is becoming uninsurable. Our world is more at risk than anyone admits.

In a paper on sustainability a well-known colleague outlined what he called three generic scenarios for the world system. These were 'breakdown', 'eco fascism', the 'technological singularity', and the 'transition to sustainability'. It seems to me that eco fascism (where governments rigidly enforce environmental rules) is highly unlikely. Similarly the high tech 'singularity' cuts little ice when you recall that it concerns a post-human future in which the machines will ostensibly rule (but why 'they' would 'wish' to do so no one can say). That leaves two major options: breakdown or the transition to sustainability.

This brings us to a very simple and obvious conclusion – so simple and obvious that, like the Emperor's new clothes, everyone who looks can see it, yet no one admits to seeing it. The outlook for humankind is very bleak. We not only have a compromised environment to repair but also overlapping waves of technology rushing toward us that few understand and almost no-one actively wants. We not only face new biological dangers but also the fact that humanity is still in deep conflict. We have known for more than two millennia that 'a house divided against itself cannot stand'. If we could bring these issues to full awareness we could deal with them and metaphorically 'steer' a different course towards positively desired futures. Is this happening in your organisation?

If not then its view of the future is probably completely wrong.