

From Strategic Foresight to Conversations about Alternative and Desired Futures Using Scenarios to Transform the Present

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My reactions to Graham Molitor's article 'Scenarios: Worth the effort?' is one of largely being in agreement with his argument. Indeed I argue that not only has scenario planning shown at times to be of little long term value but it appears that strategic planning is also of little value – indeed, it is estimated that only 5-10% of strategic plans are ever implemented, according to Tom Peters (Napier, Sidle, & Sanaghan, 1997, p.13).

Complexity theorist Ralph Stacey (2001) claims this is because most organizational planning of any sort is done as a social defence against anxiety. This view is supported by Ron Heifetz from Harvard University, John F. Kennedy School, who is a highly respected academic teaching leadership (Heifetz & Laurie, 1988). He claims that most learning occurs when there is a productive level of stress, but people are hesitant to go to that space so end up in work avoidance or trying to fit technical solutions to what is in fact an adaptive challenge. The classic error being treating Adaptive Challenges as if they were Technical Problems, Technical problems (even though they may be complex) can be solved with knowledge and procedures already in hand. *Adaptive challenges* require new learning, innovation, and new patterns of behaviour (Heifetz, 2007).

For me, strategy is what you actually do in the here-and-now as it emerges. It cannot be anything else. The rest, including scenario planning and strategic planning, is just espoused. It is not real; the only real strategy is the strategy of actuality. From this viewpoint it is the thinking and feeling (emotions) that are important, the conversations that are created in the here-and-now.

Many people believe that emotions stand in opposition to rational thought, but scientific evidence suggests the opposite. While emotions can overwhelm your rationality, you cannot be rational without being emotional. Emotions predate thoughts in the evolution of the human species and our personal development.... Emotion can disrupt reasoning in certain circumstances, but without it there is no reasoning at all. Traditional cognitive models don't understand that reduction in emotion may constitute an equally important source of irrational behaviour (Damasio, 1994).

Education is, after all, about enquiry, not performance; but we have seen this largely eroded over the past couple of decades as politicians have 'organizationalised' education so that it has become about performance. Does your program, course, lecture etc make for a good business case? This is bad news.

So from my point of view it is the dialogue, the conversations that emerge through futures thinking that is important, the process to the plan, not the plan itself, as any plan to be effective has to be dynamic in response to the now. Indeed, all planning is about the future so futures thinking tools/methodologies are therefore navigational tools and methodologies largely to help counteract the anxiety and stress disequilibrium (change) evokes. This, I believe, they do very well. Finally, conversations cannot be strategic, as participants will feel they are being controlled; conversations need to be authentic about needs and desires for preferred futures, and not about strategic futures which seeks to enhance one's position by beating the rival.

We saw in 1989 the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the fundamentalist 'Centralized Plan' concept for the global economy and we are currently witnessing the collapse of the global fundamentalist 'Decentralized Market Forces' concept for the global economy. What is evident from the current world financial crisis is that it is no longer sensible to talk about capitalism versus socialism as an either/or debate. It is evident that what is needed now is adjustments to our global business/financial system which involves mutual dialogue that executive futures education can provide. We have witnessed how rampant greedy capitalism from some quarters, particularly the risk management of particular financial-services institutions, has failed us and it is only the financial bale-outs that promise any chance of hope. These financial bale-outs are in fact socialism at its best – elected governments looking after society in its hour of need. So, in a positive vein, perhaps now we can start to rewrite the business models that prove to be dysfunctional, to embrace wellbeing through economic humanism and conscientious consumerism (Burke, 2008).

Like chainsaw Al Dunlap who drove Sunbeam into the ground, some former heroes are now villains including the once celebrated Alan Greenspan who did nothing about low interest rates even though he was made aware that today's consequences were probable if he did nothing. Paul Krugman, the 2008 Nobel economics laureate, is one of many economists who have singled out Greenspan for his mishandling of the financial environment. Greenspan himself blamed his own limited 'worldview'. Futures thinking tools, such as Causal Layered Analysis helps us to address the possibility that our worldview is part of any problem as well as being part of any solution to that problem (Inayatullah, 2004 & 2007).

What Can We Do?

I feel there is almost a sense in many business leaders, albeit unconscious, of 'relief' – its almost audible - with the current economic crisis. By that I mean that many of those in leadership positions can escape from their leadership challenges and revert to so-called 'risk-management' – adopting technical management solutions to avoid the adaptive leadership challenges we desperately need our leaders to engage with. We will witness what I term 'Yuletide Redundancies'¹ as a technical solution, a

step far from what is needed in these times – the culling of loyal conscientious employees, instead of engaging with them to co-evolve the future. They now have so many other factors to blame if things go wrong, not least of which is the global economic 'meltdown' that business leaders can hide effectively from the hard and often dangerous work of effective leadership. What is needed is collective creativity, real leadership, co-creating the new. So, as futurists, how do we go about changing this mindset?

Why We Need Futures Education Now More Than Ever?

What might be the challenges or opportunities for organisations that could evoke a significant mindset change in order to sustain a profitable future and not have a repeat of our current world events? Organisations are increasingly turning to executive futures education to address this question.

At Mt Eliza, we have created an executive education program called 'Futures Thinking and Strategy Development'. This program contains methodologies that can be useful as navigation tools for the anxiety this question provokes leading to innovative strategies that may actually work.

In part we do this by:

1. Providing participants with data that is relevant and identifying potential issues or trends that haven't been considered.
2. Challenging the assumptions that they are currently using and where these may break down.
3. Understanding the underlying metaphors that define the culture of their organisations yet aren't necessarily apparent to the organisation.
4. Developing a strategy and a story or a narrative that incorporates a new way of thinking, of helping the business move to where it needs to be in the future.
5. Leadership that connects to the source of inspiration and will allow new knowledge to emerge
6. Facilitating this new knowledge into action.

The business case for Futures Thinking and Strategy Development is that the futures tools and methodologies not only are challenging conventional business assumptions but they are also challenging the myths and metaphors that created these worldviews in the first place. This allows new thinking, whilst not necessarily an easy experience, to emerge which holds tremendous potential for forward thinking organisations to significantly increase their innovation, through dialogue, to co-evolve a desired emerging future as it occurs in the here-and-now as the 'new' strategy.

In conclusion, scenarios are not about forecasting or even alternatives but about having deeper more effective conversations about world's we wish to create. Futures thinking is about being able to connect to preferred future possibilities while serving that possibility in the now. Otto Scharmer (2007) refers to it as 'Presencing', which is about healing between elements that have been separate. These once separate elements now begin to connect to each other – with leaders seeing that we are part of a larger whole – becoming a social technology of freedom. That's worth the effort.

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Notes

1. 'Yuletide Redundancies' refers to redundancies that usually take place close to the Australian Christmas holidays and before the end of the year. I suspect the reason for the redundancies being made at this time is psychological in that organizations believe that they can start afresh in the New Year with their "problems" solved. My concern is that these redundancies often involve honest conscientious employees who through no fault of their own fall victim to the bad business planning and poor strategic planning that management have carried out and I believe this supports the notion that often scenario and strategic planning are done as social defenses against anxiety as argued in this paper.

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