

Carpe Mañana: How Strong Leadership Can Seize the Future Today

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For many, the future is an inaccessible, crystal-ball-encased realm that only God knows and mystics speculate about. When organizations and their leaders refuse to dialogue about their organization's future, they ensure a limited impact in it (Hybels, 2002). Having an eternal impact requires that leaders *carpe mañana* today. Seizing tomorrow today begins with knowing *what* strategic foresight really is, *why* it's a necessary leadership habit, and *how* to incorporate futuring into one's leadership repertoire.

What is Strategic Foresight?

Strategic foresight, AKA futuring or futures studies (Slaughter, 1995), means looking down the temporal road in an effort to anticipate what is coming and act accordingly to seize opportunities, prepare for inevitabilities and avoid dangers. Futurists seek to know “what can or could be (the possible), what is likely to be (the probable), and what ought to be (the preferable)” (Bell, 1997, p. 73).

No one but God definitively knows the future (Eccl. 8:7; Jer. 29:11). But even though the future cannot be predicted, there is an extent to which it can be designed or invented in the present to bring about desired or needed change (Dahle, 1999, p. 10) and better “translate values into action” (Bell, 1997, p. 97). In the futuring process, teams of leaders and followers construct and explore alternative future scenarios “in order to assist people in choosing and creating their most desirable future” (Bell, 1999, p. 1). This looking ahead, or foresight, is strategic in that it helps leaders and followers choose the best course of action today in preparation for tomorrow (Schwartz, 1996).

In the Bible, God used prophets—not so much to predict the future (although at times that was a major purpose), but to “confront people with alternatives of decisions” (Bell, 1997, p. 103) in the present which would determine their future. If they acted in faithful obedience now, then their future would be marked by the blessings of restoration or reward; however, if they acted in stubborn rebellion now, their future would be filled with the curses of pain and judgment (Dt. 11:26-28; Mal. 2:1-2). God wanted His people to know that if they didn't seize their future through faithful obedience, it would seize them. In that sense, they could *carpe mañana* by means of *carpe diem*.

With all this talk on seizing the future, we must be careful to emphasize that futuring does not neglect the past and present. To the contrary, good foresight also necessitates both hindsight and insight, or what we will call “triple-tense” thinking. Being prospective (looking forward to the future) requires the cultivation of both retrospection (looking backward to reflect on the past) and circumspection (looking around to grasp the present). Before a leader can look ahead, he must understand the past actions of his organization as well as the present existing environment. Discovering where an organization has come from and how it has handled itself in the past, as well as grasping where it is now and what current trends are impacting it, are critical pieces of the puzzle in determining where it will go and how it will act in the future (Schwartz, 1996).

Strategic foresight is like driving a car. The car is where the organization is in the *present*. The road ahead is where the organization is going in the *future*. The *past*, captured by looking briefly in the rearview mirror while progressing forward, is where we've been. Organizations, like cars, drive into the future by looking at the road *ahead*. But just as safe driving requires knowing your current surroundings by looking in your side view mirrors and knowing what is behind you by looking in your rearview mirror, so good leading means looking *around* at your present situation, but also looking *back* at what's behind you.

Figure 1. Driving the Organization into the Future



When this kind of healthy “triple-tense” strategic mindset is adopted, the organization is catapulted into the future. On a catapult, an object rests in an arm which is fixed in the middle of a stabilizing structure. The arm momentarily dips backward to increase tension and maximize leverage for its thrust forward. When the operator releases the tension, the object is launched forward from the structure toward its target. Strategic foresight is the catapult structure mounted in the present which dips its arm back into the past, increasing tension and maximizing leverage, until the leader cuts the rope which releases the tension and launches the organization toward its intended futuristic target.

Figure 2. Catapulting the Organization into the Future



So, what does strategic foresight directly impact? First, exercising strategic foresight can influence a leader to use a more participative *leadership style* (Malphurs, 2003). Executing foresight, or developing a vision of the future, is a “team activity” (Ogilvy, 1999, p. 1) that requires intense participation from those whose future is on the line (Bell, 1997; Schwartz, 1996; Dahle, 1999). Second, foresight impacts *leadership development* which includes a *spiritual formation* component. Teaching emerging leaders the ins and outs of strategic foresight will help them see how present choices have future consequences for good or for ill, how futuring is a life-long process filled with learning and how such learning, just like our future-oriented spiritual growth as followers of Christ, happens best in community with others (Phil 3:13-15; 2 Co 3:18; Heb. 11:1; Pagitt, 2003).

For example, in the Bible, when Paul wanted to develop Christ-followers, his sophisticated strategic foresight even lead him to encourage people with the already-but-not-yet reality of the spiritual reality of glorification—the end result of our sanctification when we will all experience ultimate transformation into Christ’s image in the

future (Rm. 8:30). Even though it hasn't happened yet, Paul uses the very rare "futuristic aorist" tense to explain that we are already "glorified"—meaning even though this is a future event, it is as good as completed in God's mind (Wallace, 1999, p. 563). As a leader, he uses this already-but-not-yet view of the future to build up followers and encourage their continued development.

Third, futuring is critical for *designing flexible organizational structures* that can anticipate necessary changes and influence futuristic decision-making (Galbraith, 2002; Morgan, 1997). Since one common denominator of every church or organization's future is instability in an "environment of permanent white water," wise leaders will architect new organizational forms that leave behind the hierarchical, mechanistic, rigid structures of the past and let that fluidly navigate change while emphasizing decentralization, teamwork and participation (Schwartz, 1996, p. 225). In the future, as now, structure will play a crucial role in organizational effectiveness (Robinson & Smith, 2003).

Fourth, strategic foresight has a direct bearing on a leader's *communication strategy*. This is most clearly seen in the context of vision-casting. A plausible vision demands a more accurate perception of its potential future context (Slaughter, 1995). A leader who passionately sees a more accurate, vivid, challenging picture of the future as it can and must be (i.e., the preferred future), will seek to communicate this picture clearly, creatively and compellingly to his followers (Malphurs, 1997; Hybels, 2002). A vision of the future that is shared and based on shared core values is even more inspiring and powerful (Kouzes & Posner, 1995; Inayatullah, 1999). With a better understanding of what strategic foresight is, let's now turn our attention to why it's needed.

Why Use Strategic Foresight?

The actual practice of futuring has many wonderful purposes and benefits. The five major purposes of strategic foresight are as follows. As you read, ask yourself which points peak your interest or most engage your passions.

Purposes.

First, the overall aim of futures studies is "to maintain or improve human well-being" and, more specifically, organizational success (Bell, 1997, p. 111). Indeed, while organizational changes for the better are noble objectives, pioneering futurists claim strategic forecasting is capable of catalyzing societal change that could improve quality of life on a global scale (Slaughter, 1995; Bell, 1999 & 2004).

Second, futuring is designed to "jolt people out of their [unhealthy] primarily past- and present-time orientations" (Bell, 1997, p. 59). In other words, it promotes a healthy "triple-tense" view of time that helps people reflect on and interpret the past, but not dwell in it, and orient themselves properly to the present thoughtful progression into the future (Schwartz, 1996).

Third, foresight functions to help groups study and identify alternative futures (whether possible, probable or preferable) from which to make better "action-oriented decisions and choices" (Slaughter, 1999, p. 33). This is vital since "purposeful action [i.e., being proactive, not reactive] requires the anticipation of future occurrences" (Bell, 1997, p. 86). Both *knowing* and *doing* are central to high-horsepower organizational leadership and impact.

Fourth, futuring seeks to identify and clarify group values or "ethical foundations" to foresight (Bell, 1997, p. 111). This is a critical leadership activity since values serve as fundamental and often unspoken criteria, "scales" or "steering mechanisms" for judging or evaluating the desirability of alternative futures (Bell, 1997, p. 107; Bell, 2004). It can also distinguish values that are *aspirational* from those that are *actual* which may require staff, strategy, structure or system adjustment if the aspirational values are indeed to become actualized in the future (Malphurs, 1996).

Fifth, strategic foresight serves to direct our attention to and increase our dependence on God who holds us and the future in His hand (Schwarz, 1999; Sweet, 2003). On the one hand, we have the luxury of a sure hope in an eternal, inconceivably joy-filled future with Him, a rare commodity in today's postmodern culture of despair (1 Co. 2:9). On the other hand, even if our future brings pain and trials on this side of heaven, we can confidently declare that "nothing . . . [not even] the future . . . will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rm.8:38). Either way, it's win-win, and God's complete, sovereign control over our tomorrow demands the humility, gratitude, service and obedience of His people today.

Benefits.

Turning from functions (or purposes) to fruits (or benefits), let's observe five primary advantages provided by strategic foresight. First, knowing what an organization will face and want to become in the future will dictate more effective strategies which will dictate more effective structures, systems and forms (Schwartz, 1996; Meadows, 2001). In essence, futuring not only helps leaders know *where* they and their organizations are going, but in doing so, it also helps them know *how* to best arrive at their destination. Looking ahead highlights what might need to be tweaked or terminated, created or constrained, refocused or refined if the ideal is to be attained or disaster to be averted.

Second, futuring allows people to better manage rapid change and not be overwhelmed by it (Dahle, 1999). The problem is that the way most organizations have traditionally dealt with change is that they have *traditionally* dealt with change. In the future, new methods will be required to meet new obstacles or opportunities. Stated negatively, "If you always do what you've always done, then you'll always be where you've always been." Futuring breaks old molds and old spectacles and replaces them with the equipment needed to weather tomorrow's tsunamis.

Third, futuring can create "optimistic images of the future . . . [that] help people master their environment, overcome vulnerability to adversity, and meet their long-range goals" (Bell, 1997, p. 85). Even when faced with a negative forecast of probable dangers or harsh environmental dynamics, knowing your "enemy" through futuring helps people confront denial and deal with fears in healthy, positive ways (Slaughter, 1995).

Fourth, strategic foresight increases strategic thinking which defeats passivity and yields more proactive attitudes and practices (Slaughter, 1995). Intentional, tactical thinking becomes more habitual. A values-driven visionary *orientation* tends to lead to values-driven visionary *operation* resulting in greater follower productivity and performance (Kouzes & Posner, 1995; Kuczmarski & Kuczmarski, 2002).

Fifth, the very process of futuring increases "democratic participation in imaging and designing the future" (Bell, 1997, p. 111) which promotes a highly collaborative culture of teamwork in an organization (Ogilvy, 1999). Most organizational leadership experts agree that such a paradigm shift—from hierarchical to horizontal—will lead to greater effectiveness in the future (Bennis, Spreitzer & Cummings, 2001; Drucker, 2002; Burns, 2003; Hunter, 2001; Schwarz, 1999). The more people are involved in strategic forecasting, the more creativity and diversity are incorporated into the planning, allowing greater participation and ownership for making the dream a reality (Schwartz, 1996, p. 248).

How Do You Use Strategic Foresight?

So, how would a leader incorporate strategic foresight into his leadership repertoire in order to accomplish its potent purposes and enjoy its fantastic benefits? While there are many different tools of futuring—including survey research, gaming, monitoring or environmental scanning, the Delphi method and futures workshops—by far, the most popular way to generate strategic futuristic conversations is *scenario planning* (Slaughter, 1995; Schwartz, 1996).

Building scenarios is a team-based, intensely participatory and collaborative process (Ogilvy, 1999) that starts and ends with identifying and assessing "driving forces" or elements that "influence the outcome of events," "move the plot of a scenario" or "determine a story's outcome" (Schwartz, 1996, p. 101). Once these forces are articulated, they are composed into a few simple, bold stories of alternative futures that allow the group to collectively rehearse the future and reflect on their attitudes toward it (Ilbury & Sunter, 2001).

The stories, which crystallize hopes, expectations, fears and aspirations regarding the future, act like leadership time machines that enable groups to spot positive opportunities and avoid unpleasant surprises as they look ahead far in advance of decisions and "run through the simulated events as if they were already living them" (Schwartz, 1999, p.192). Then, when the drama is actually unfolding, participants are more likely to recognize it as a given scenario and act accordingly, having already considered the ramifications of potential action courses. Since "an effective scenario almost always changes behavior," the real test of a scenario's

effectiveness is whether a leader changed his behavior or that of his organization *because he saw the future differently* (Schwartz, 1996, p. 206).

The primary value of scenarios is threefold. First, they encourage people to *think specifically about the future*—to consider the bigger picture, something today’s leaders many times fail to do (Sweet, 2003), which is why so many find themselves either caught off-guard or handcuffed by unexpected changes (Schwartz, 1996). Scenarios help leaders examine old mindsets and surface assumptions about how we lead organizations in our increasingly postmodern world. They expose possible points of friction or traction (McManus, 2001). They consider possible ways to impregnate our plans with our values (Ogilvy, 1999). Second, scenarios create an *innovation- and creativity-friendly environment* that encourages a “learning-orientation” in people which helps them know enough about underlying forces to make strategically informed decisions when action comes due (Schwartz, 1996, p. 231). Third, scenario building *creates organizational resilience* as people come to continually hold informal, but strategic and carefully thought-out “what-if” conversations about the future (Schwartz, 1996, p. 221).

So, what can you do practically today to ensure a brighter future tomorrow? How can you *carpe diem* in order to *carpe mañana*? Here are three simple suggestions that will help any leader or organization position strategic foresight as a front-burner behavior. First, *assemble a team* of people from your organization made up of supportive and participative leaders from the highest levels who represent a broad range of ministry functions and who bring synergy, creativity and open-minded optimism to the table. Second, *meet regularly* (perhaps one hour every week) with this team to discuss the future (its trends, possibilities, opportunities and threats), dream about realizing your brightest future and pray diligently about how to bring that to pass in God’s strength. Third, *read voraciously* on the future and strategic foresight. Pour through Peter Schwartz’ *The Art of the Long View*, any of Leonard Sweet’s writings on futuring, Zondervan’s “Emergent Church” line of resources that aid in understanding postmodern thought and the emerging church (<http://www.zondervan.com/books/search.asp?Criteria=emergent>) and cutting edge articles from sharp thinkers at *Emergent Village* (http://www.emergentvillage.com/index.cfm?PAGE_ID=53).

Seizing tomorrow today begins with knowing *what* strategic foresight really is, understanding *why* it’s a necessary leadership habit and determining *how* to incorporate it into one’s leadership repertoire. The future doesn’t have to be an inaccessible, crystal ball-encased realm that only God knows or mystics speculate about. When organizations and their leaders prayerfully dialogue about and intentionally investigate potential futures, they ensure an eternal impact—one that can be “immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us” (Eph. 3:20)—one that seizes tomorrow today.

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