

You Have a Choice: Using strategic foresight to lead your organization into the future

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“You have a choice” is a statement many of us have heard. This statement prompts forward thinking about the consequences of a decision. It sounds a warning, not unlike a small-town firehouse of old, blasting a siren to call the firemen to service.

Wise leaders also learn how to hear warning sirens from the environment, giving them an opportunity to act before it is too late. This is called strategic foresight. Foresight allows preemptive employment of resources to mitigate problems on the horizon. It serves as a means to transform hopes for a better future into reality.

Jesus understood that there was a possibility for a better future. He provided a three-future framework (Gary, 2004) for those in his times. In essence, this was a decision-consequence framework. The future could be:

- a conventional future based on the continuation (maintaining the *status quo*) of Roman imperialism; or
- a counter future of Jewish nationalism; or
- a creative future that would make all things new (Gary, 2004).

Like Jesus, leaders from all types of organizations can develop a futures-framework to help guide the organization toward wise decision making, and a wise future.

Five Steps in Developing Foresight

Step 1: Realize that the future can be different than the present or the past

Foresight requires the awareness that the future can be different from the past - in both a spiritual and business sense. For example, when we look at a preferable future in regard to spiritual issues, we can have an expectation that our future society will be more God-oriented and more value will be placed on morals. In a business sense, we can look forward to creating better products and services that will meet the needs of future customers; that we will achieve our goals; improve the overall image of our business; and that we will have better relationships with competitors (Marsh, McAllu & Purcell, 2002).

Leaders should opt for both types of alternative futures. The integration of these two futures - business and spiritual - makes good sense. It increases the chance that current and future efforts in

terms of organizational processes, systems, culture and employee training and development will be acted upon in a God-pleasing way.

Old and New Testament leaders understood this connection between prudent business and the spiritual walk of the leader. They had the hope of what may be accomplished through their faith. They called for obedience to holiness, realizing just what a brighter future the world could have if God's children obeyed His commandments and integrated His principles in conducting everyday business. They had a God-inspired vision and sought to develop the right culture and instruction environments that would be most conducive to achieving their vision.

Step 2: Understand the impact of the past and future on present-day decisions

To understand what the future might look like, leaders need to understand the impact and driving forces of both the past and future on present-day decisions (Slaughter, 2005). More specifically, leaders should make a conscious effort to understand the root causes - the undercurrents - of change.

These drivers include technological innovation, social ideas, political efforts and economic or fiscal policies foreseen down the road (Christensen, 2007). Christian strategic leaders would also want to seek to understand the spiritual influences that drive these forces. This requires not only looking at the psychological and sociological roots of change, but also the spiritual drivers of these roots.

For example, in an age of materialism the leader would consider what is driving this force and would want to understand the current and future implications on the organization if this trend continued. In Mathew 6:24, Jesus says, *"No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money"*. When money is served it is difficult to serve God, and this has implications for the organization. Serving money goes against the way that God created order. The result in the workplace might be stress and burnout. This makes it more difficult for employees to be productive, creative, energetic, and enthusiastic, vital qualities for sustaining an organization operating in turbulent, dynamic, and uncertain environments (Maslach & Leiter, 1997).

Step 3: Possible, probable and preferable futures

From this environmental information, strategic thinkers can "discover, invent, examine and evaluate, and propose possible, probable and preferable futures" (Bell, 2003). In considering each one of these futures, it is likely that the organization can find a way to develop strategies and tactics that will cover the first two futures (possible and probably futures). Only when we have a plan to address the possible and probably futures, is it possible to integrate into the strategic plan for the third, a preferable future, which may or may not look like the first two futures.

Step 4: Assessing gaps between future and current mental scenarios

Having developed a preferable future, the leader is in a better position to determine if there is a gap between future and current mental models (Marsh, 2007, p. 7), values, practices, processes or decision-making models. These gaps are not at all bad as they give people a goal to strive towards. Efforts to meet these goals are not in vain, but serves as a source of creative energy that provides the tension to move the organization toward the vision, according to Peter Senge (1994). In the words of Robert Fritz, "It is not what the vision is, it's what the vision does" that creates the energy for change (quoted in Senge, 1994, p. 153).

For example, a public organization I once worked for believed that they needed to reach more people with their services. However, they had insufficient resources to accomplish this much-needed expansion. As a result of the organization knowing where they needed to go and where they actually were operationally and financially, they were able to brainstorm ideas to make this expansion possible. Over the next year the organization sought accreditation that would help not only reach out to more people, but also provide the funding necessary to pay for the expansion.

Step 5: Closing the gaps between the alternative future and present

In understanding the gaps, leaders can develop a plan to close gaps between the present and alternative future. In doing so, a leader will have accomplished the task of working backward from a desirable alternative future rather than working toward a future (Marsh, 2002, p. 2). The latter approach could result in tunnel vision, limiting the view of the future environment, and thus the opportunity for creating alternative futures. It is at this point of devising and implementing the necessary strategic plans – including goals, objectives, tactics, structures, processes, systems, culture, people requirements in terms of skills and abilities necessary to accomplish the future vision - that the work toward the vision is accomplished.

Using Step 4's example, the public organization I worked for had to:

- develop organizational and program goals and objectives;
- reconsider structures that best facilitated quality, effectiveness, efficiency and satisfaction of services;
- educate and train staff;
- create new systems and processes that would facilitate monitoring progress and the work needed in order to accomplish the vision and mission.

I am Content with the *Status Quo*. Why Would I Want to Change?

The *status quo* leader does not create the necessary environment that brings to life the individual talents and skills of employees. Employees working in this type of environment are not usually creative, innovative, energetic, or enthusiastic about their work.

When leaders present a worthwhile vision formulated by strategic foresight, they put into motion continuous organizational transformation. The leader is moving the organization beyond the *status quo* and into a continuous mode of transformation that is driven by the inherent hope, meaning, inspiration, and motivation created by the organization's vision.

Organizations with such a vision that is proactively acted upon, is likely to have employees who view the vision as a rescue from today's problems and will likely see the organization as a conduit for hope of future renewal (Peters, 2002, p. 25), restoration and change in the society or lives touched by the organization. When the organization makes it clear that its inspiring vision can only be achieved through the skills and abilities of all its employees, employees feel that their work is meaningful. Meaningful work is critical to the well being of the human spirit and mind. Nehemiah's leadership insight and foresight is an excellent example of how foresight motivated people toward fulfilling the vision. Nehemiah's vision of a rebuilt wall to protect, secure and rebuild a godly community regardless of the challenges, rallied the entire community to contributing their skills, talents, and abilities to accomplish the vision (Nehemiah 1-13). Each person could connect their work with the accomplishment of the vision.

The desire for peace, security and meaning-filled work still remain in people's hearts today. The 1980s produced an abundance of material possessions, yet people were looking for a meaningful life (Schwartz, 1996) and purpose-filled work (Vail quoted in Rigoglioso, 1999). When purpose and meaning is shared it becomes a very effective and powerful force for the organization and society. William George, a previous CEO of Medtronic, having recognized the power of foresight and value-driven leadership, led Medtronic to become a successful and reputable global player in the medical device manufacturing industry (Stevens, 1998). Strategic foresight plays a vital role in creating synergistic and energetic environments where people believe their skills and abilities contribute to the overall well-being of the organization and those the organization serves.

Leaders Do have Something to Accomplish!

Strategic foresight is not "pie in the sky" dreaming, but is a valid management tool that can give the organization and its members an opportunity to create and innovate. Nehemiah proved this when the walls of Jerusalem were restored in only 60 days! His vision based on realistic present and future environmental conditions hit a heart-chord with those who *chose* to participate in the vision. He had the foresight to understand the spiritual and divine truths of hope and meaning-filled work, the technological implements to use in reconstruction, the means of financing his vision, the political process of making his vision work and the spiritual understanding of the role of faith in God in accomplishing a goal. Without his leadership that was committed to God's methods of leadership, Nehemiah would not have accomplished this great feat.

In conclusion, Tao Te Ching once said, "Act before there is a problem; Bring order before there is disaster" (Mazaar, 1999). Can leaders afford not to learn the skills of foresight?

About the Author

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