

Certificate in Strategic Foresight

The future

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Introduction

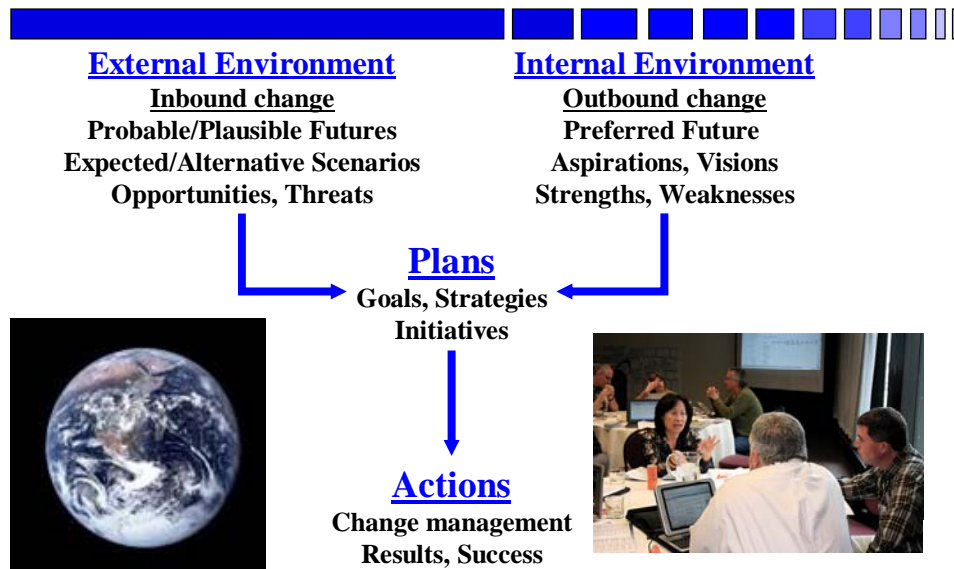
The last unit was about change—how it occurs through the actions of the world and through our own actions. The next two units are about the future, a specific portion of the timeline from the past through the present, and how we are to deal with it.

We deal with the future by doing two things, given the two sources of change discussed in the previous unit – changes coming from the world (inbound) and changes we create ourselves (outbound). The questions then are: “What can we know about the future?” and “What can we do about it?” One task for dealing with the future then is to understand and describe the inbound change, changes in the world and their implications for us. Another task is to influence those changes in order to achieve a better future than would naturally occur. As my colleague Peter Hayward from Melbourne’s Swinburne University of Technology says, “If you do not work for your own preferred future, you will be part of someone else’s.”

The order of these tasks is up to the individual. And both should be active at the same time because they influence each other. Thinkers, like teachers and professors, prefer to study first and decide on what to do later. Action people, like business and political leaders, know right off what they want to accomplish. Thinkers therefore tend to put off decision, and leaders tend to put off thinking.

Dealing with the future, however, requires both, but the order is up to the individual. “Study first, then decide” is fine. “Decide now, then study” is also fine. Even “study and decide at the same time” is OK, though it might be hard to do. The point is that study and decision, thinking and acting, are both essential for successfully dealing with the future. Study alone won’t do it; action alone won’t do it.

Dealing with the Future



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We all know the old phrase, “Look before you leap.” In other words, it’s a good idea to know about the future before trying to change it. That doesn’t mean you have to study the future before deciding what you want to do, however,. It does mean though that you need to *study* the future before you finalize *plans* and definitely before you initiate *actions* to change it.

That sounds obvious, but few people or organizations do it that way. The beginning of a typical planning session begins with, “OK, what do we want to accomplish?” And then “OK, now that we’ve decided that, how are we going to do it?” They rarely stop to look out the window, so to speak, to see what the weather (the world) might be doing. That works a lot of the time or else there would not be so many successful people and enterprises. But it’s risky. It assumes that that they know how the world works and that it that will work that way throughout the time period of the plan.

The first assumption is a pretty good one if the people in the enterprise have talked about the world and have come to an agreement about it works. Most enterprises haven’t done that nearly enough. Therefore, different people probably have different ideas about how it works. Everybody thinks they are talking about the same thing, but they are not. They are using different mental models, if you will. Some of those models are pretty good; some not so. The point is that the lack of a general discussion about how the world works will make it doubly difficult to change it.

The second assumption, that the world won’t change before the planning period is over, is also pretty good if the plan is short-term or if the enterprise’s environment is fairly static. The assumption is not very good, however, for plans with longer time horizons in more turbulent environments. In those cases, the world is bound to change in significant ways—ways that could upset the plan altogether. What is more, significant change can occur suddenly even in apparently benign environments.

This first unit, entitled Anticipating the Future, is about the first task, and the next one, Influencing the Future, will be about the second one. We use the concept of anticipation because it carries the connotation of expectation, of leaning forward, of waiting for something. It's more active than merely describing or understanding the future although it means essentially the same thing. It's how a tennis player waits for the serve; how a child feels on Christmas morning; what a mother does in the last month of her pregnancy. Waiting (and wanting) for the future to come oh so quickly.

And, in the second case, We using the concept of influence rather than control because the world will always have some say in how the future develops. The famous phrase, "The best way to predict the future is to create it" has been variously attributed to Alan Kay, Stephen Covey, Peter Drucker, even Abraham Lincoln. It's a nice phrase, but it's wrong because it assumes that have the power to "create" the future. We do have the power to influence it, but creation is something else. And even with influence, most of us don't have much power to influence the future in the short-run. Only after long and persistent effort directed toward the same goals, applying what little influence we do have to achieve the same goals can we produce measurable results. Even those with power to influence the future quickly, like political leaders, often don't get the results they expected. So much for "creating the future!"