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a regular column
on business futures
by **andy hines***

*the foresight
amphibian in the
corporate world*

In my last column I talked about the difficulties futurists have with the bottom line. This time, I want to explore the reasons why. A primary reason, I'll submit, is that practitioners of foresight are 'different' from the corporate citizens they serve. Take this personally, because that is how it's meant.

Let's think about the types of people who practice foresight and those who become career corporate types.

First, the futurists. Not too many kids say they want to be futurists when they grow up. I, as one of the relatively few people whose entire professional life has been as a futurist, certainly did not. Professional futurism or foresight has not been a very practical career choice or a well-established route to success. Those of us coming into foresight from the corporate ranks were probably always black sheep who, when a position involving foresight arose or was created, danced a jig at finally having a chance for freedom from the corporate straightjacket.

To a person, the practitioners of foresight that I have met are motivated by the love of their work and not practical considerations like money, job security and standing in the community. We love what we do. We are passionate, enthusiastic and, to many, a little bit 'out there'. We are comfortable in the realm of the fuzzy, nebulous, ambiguous world of the future – anathema to most of the rest of our species.

The following are some essential characteristics of our lot, drawn from a nice list put together by the World Future Society some years ago and my own observations: big picture, openness to new experiences, comfortable with ambiguity, 'typical' Myers-Briggs = E/INTP, systems thinkers, sees options/alternatives, not too sure, global outlook, long-term time horizon, ecological orientation, rationality, pragmatism, optimistic, sense of purpose.

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Readers with experience in dealing with the business world are probably chuckling. Could you possibly construct a list more at odds with success in the corporate world? Think of the folks who succeed in the corporation, measure them against this list, and, as the recent depiction of the Apollo 13 story tells us, 'Houston, we have a problem!'

Let me compound this by considering the typical corporate view of the future.

The past is home sweet home: The knee-jerk inclination to approaching problems in the corporate world is to look to the past. How have we done this before? What's the precedent, the case history? The past is where corporate leaders made their careers. It is familiar terrain. The issues, the people, the technologies – a comforting place to look for answers.

The present is putting out fires: Often times, the feeling is just to survive the day, have a drink, and come back for another round tomorrow. As discussed, there is great pressure to deliver the goods immediately, and less patience with longer-term payoffs. This terrain, while uncomfortable or perhaps undesirable, is nonetheless familiar.

The future is uncharted territory: The future is often a scary place for corporate executives. It represents new challenges, new technologies and young, hungry upstart competitors for jobs. It may mean that you'll become obsolete. The payoffs are uncertain. This terrain is not only unfamiliar, but seen as hostile.

And don't be lulled by corporate clients who hire futurists to do studies. Keep in mind that those willing to do this are often not the typical corporate manager. Let's face it, someone who commissions a look to the year 2025, let's say, in today's era of focus on the next quarter is either a visionary or has lost the plot, again depending on how you look at it.

So, what should futurists do? First, learn to be amphibious. You must be able to survive on corporate land even though more comfortable in the sea of foresight. My suggestion is to be upfront about these differences with your audiences. They know you are different from them. A little humour can go a long way here (if that's your style).

The practicalities of this are, where possible, to tailor your messages in terms more palatable to the corporate mainstream – numbers are always comforting. 'Translate' your message into business terms to the fullest extent possible. By all means, avoid the Siren's song of damning 'them' as short-sided, hard-headed, or whatever terms you use when frustrated by their inability to see what is plainly clear to you. Understand that these differences are natural, accept them, and move on.

Recognize that it is probably best that the fuzzy and corporate worlds are distinct. Died-in-the-wool corporate types will probably never be comfortable with the fuzzy, so they should stay in the conventional business where their strengths lie, and vice versa. The key is for the two worlds to be able to communicate enough to draw the best from one another, hence the key role of the 'foresight amphibian'.

Second, assess your own and your corporation's mindset or mental model. If you haven't already, get busy and identify the gaps. This information can help you modify your style and/or the positioning of your work. There could be many different styles of corporate foresight, and your assessment may find that your current approach is misguided. Only you can know what best suits you. But being aware of strengths and weaknesses is the first step to self-improvement. Personally, I have probably taken dozens of personality type/cognitive style kinds of tests and I have found them useful in pointing out areas I need to work on.

For my part at Kellogg's, my assessment was such that credibility has been objective number one. So my style in some respects has been more conservative than I'd like, especially in exposing 'fringe' ideas or tools. Happily, I've been able to loosen up as I get to know people. I have a better idea who can handle what. Part of this 'credibility' means a firm commitment to telling the truth. This approach can get one in trouble but, to me, the cost of the occasional upset is worth the benefit of being able to speak plainly and have my audience know they're not getting a politically or corporately correct version. Adopting this strategy has two direct implications: first, you're very unlikely to have long career inside a single corporation; and second, you must be willing to make a stand if/when the heat is on.

This assessment has influenced how I position my work. I have consistently emphasized that the trends I'm tracking are outside conventional industry categories. While I do pay attention to food trends and the like, I emphasize that my key value-added is in looking at the broader worlds of demography, values, the economy, technology, health, etc. My reasoning is that as a food company, we already know a lot

about food, but we don't know much about the trends in the larger external environment outside the corp. This is how I've positioned my role, as being the person most aware of things 'out there' that are going to impact on us as well as provide us with new opportunities. This positioning also enables me to avoid stepping on a lot of toes, as I'm not directly challenging the core expertise of the company.

Finally, be patient and humble. It takes a while to bridge the gap between the two worlds. Perhaps the true goal of what we do is to build mental models of the future (a tip of the cap to the Global Business Network for their advancing of this concept). And this takes time. And repetition. And it takes humility, because often your ideas will go nowhere until someone else adopts them as their own. If you insist on credit, you're risking invoking the 'not invented here syndrome'. Better to be useful than right, I'd suggest.