

fo r e(s i g h t)

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(s i g h t h i n e)

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

*to managers:
how can foresight
help you?*

Last time I talked about the ways that 'foresight amphibians' could improve their prospects for getting their fuzzy, forward-looking ideas into projects and through organizations. That column, in fact all of hinesight to date, has been written from the viewpoint of foresight practitioners. Readers such as Trevor Williams have suggested that it would be useful to speak directly to managers. I agree. So if you are one of 'them', that is, the manager in the established, non-fuzzy business, this one's for you – directly. (All columns are intended to appeal to anyone interested in foresight. I've simply found it more convenient to consistently speak from the vantage point of the practitioner, since I am one.)

Let's see if we can establish some common ground right up front. Why are you interested in foresight? I really hope your answer is, 'because it can help me solve my business problems or issues'. Loftier goals, such as raising awareness of the future and planning ahead are nice and noble, but my sense is that in today's corporate environment, unless any function can be viewed and assessed in terms of how well it helps solve problems (under which I'm including things such as finding new business opportunities) it is open to the budget-cutter's axe. I'm sure enough of this to suggest that if your interest in foresight is not for solving business issues, you should turn your efforts elsewhere, because your foresight efforts are doomed.

Assuming you're looking for help solving your business problems, let's look at how we can help. First and foremost, we want you, we need you, and quite bluntly, we're dead in the water without you! You, the established business manager who sees merit in foresight and values our work, are truly a precious and rare commodity. Last column, I

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called you the ‘bridge people’ able to bring the fuzzy and the established business worlds together. We are looking for help navigating through the political waters. We aren’t looking for you to convert. We don’t really care if you read *Megatrends*. You don’t need to become a futurist. What we care about, and are impressed with, is that you understand how foresight can make you and your team more effective.

Foresight is truly a team thing that must be bought into as widely as possible. Your foresight practitioner must not be perceived as an Oracle at Delphi imparting wisdom from above to the organization. Let me caution you to avoid the ‘top-floor trap’. Many corporate strategy groups fall into this trap. No one is quite sure what they do, and there is sometimes a question of whether they really exist. These mysterious, snappily-dressed gurus only talk to those at the top, rarely mingling with the organizational masses. Rather, I’m endorsing the Gary Hamel revolutionary, bottom-up approach to strategy, in which the foresight practitioners must roll up their sleeves and get into the thick of it. For foresight to be truly effective, it must be a part of your team’s and the organization’s thinking.

You can really be invaluable in possessing the savvy of knowing where to ground foresight. An easy way to gradually strangle a foresight function is to have it dangling in a no-man’s land where the real power brokers of the organization can safely ignore it. So you must identify colleagues and subordinates who ‘get it’ to one degree or another. The foresight practitioner really needs your help in navigating the political waters, knowing how to approach and how to get the key people in the organization on side. Keep in mind that the foresight amphibian will most likely not be skilled in matters political – it’s rarely a core competence in their skill set. What you need to do is meld the foresight amphibian with team members that are comfortable with the concepts of foresight and know how to make things happen in the organization.

Team selection is vital. I could fill up lots of space with war stories about teams charged with some type of foresight activity that were imploded by a team member or members who sabotaged every attempt to think differently from the ‘company way’. It’s funny that despite all the talk about the need for teams, organizations still seem to be rather lousy at team play. To me, a team represents an optimal blending of expertise. Members bring different but complementary expertise, and have a degree of ‘literacy’ or at least a common denominator level of understanding that allows them to function together smoothly. However, members are often saddled with the unrealistic expectation of becoming skilled in new subject areas. Market researchers are supposed to learn product development skills, and vice versa. What you end up with is amateurs clashing with the experts, bringing to mind the phrase that ‘a little knowledge is a dangerous thing’. Cease and desist with this idea of ‘training’ team members in new functional expertise – I’m certainly not seeking to train a cadre of aspiring futurists in my organization.

We would like you, and the team members you select, to have a degree of futures or foresight literacy, and for us to lead the foresight piece. This assumes you’ve got an ‘us’, a person or two inside your organization who you think of as your foresight amphibian. If you need some help in sniffing them out, refer to the previous *hinesight*. Very likely, however, you might find yourself devoid of this expertise and may have to go out and get yourself a professional. It depends on your situation. My guess is that every organization has a potential foresight amphibian candidate, but very few have trained professionals already on staff. It all comes down to how committed you are. Let me re-emphasize, at the risk of an accusation of being self-serving, the damage an amateur effort can do – a poorly run project or two can turn off the organization from the whole idea of foresight.

Next time, we’ll assume you’ve bought the gospel above and offer some practical suggestions on how to deal with the fuzzy foresight amphibians and some suggestions for raising your level of foresight literacy. Perhaps we’ll have something along the lines of a ‘a consumer’s guide to foresight’.