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si g h i n e ht:

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

how foresight is being positioned inside today's organization

We've talked a lot about the importance of marketing or selling the foresight function inside the organization. This time, let's look and see how our foresight practitioners are actually positioning themselves. I've distilled five categories of 'positionings.'

The inside-outside[r]¹

This role ranges from 'bringing in fresh thinking' for the politely inclined to 'shaking things up' for the more confrontational. The organization senses danger. Most often, some kind of crisis jolts an organization into awareness that they need to do something. Or, it may be that complacency has led to a gradual slippage that has become intolerable. Present thinking and strategy is getting it done. So in come new people and ways of thinking, which often includes new or renewed emphasis on foresight.

The foresight practitioner here is clearly in a 'change agent' role. Most people in the organization probably do not see a problem, and it is our job to raise this awareness. This task requires certainly personality traits in order to survive and be effective. First, the inside-outsider must be provocative and not shrink from conflict. They should like a good fight. Of course, this doesn't mean a deliberate strategy of making enemies, but it means that given a choice between 'the truth' and political expediency, it must be the truth. The good news is that despite being high on many enemies lists, your credibility is established and you have become a trusted source of information. In the organizations

of the future, power increasingly flows to those with knowledge over those with position (I know we're not there yet!).

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The inside-outsider must be mobile and not place a high value on having a long-term career in the organization, because to be most effective he or she must be willing to commit career suicide on a regular basis. The harsh truth is that the initial revolutionaries never succeed in running the new regime they enable. So you must incite the revolution and bring in a successor more suited to running the new system.

The stealth

I know that a lot of us are still 'in the closet'. This may be a very savvy positioning for organizations populated by those who still think that futurists are fortune tellers and make cracks about crystal balls. I know of one colleague who's positioned himself in charge of 'special project'. That covers pretty much anything, eh? Under this rubric, he has been successful, however, in introducing futuristic thinking and projects. If it works...

The stealth positioning may also be sensible to start from if you are unsure of the lay of the land. I have direct experience with this, although my stealth was never very stealthy. It consisted of not calling myself a futurist, rather using the more palatable 'trends manager'. Everybody is familiar with trends, right? As I built my credibility in the organization, I became comfortable using the term futurist to describe myself. In fact, more and more colleagues referred to me that way anyway. Thus, I became a full-fledged inside-outside[r].

The evolved

Many corporate insiders have been dutifully subscribing to futures publications, going to futures conferences and working with consulting futurists for several years now. Increasing numbers of these insiders are now realizing that they are fairly well trained in futures themselves. So they are positioning themselves more or less openly as futurists in their own right.

Naturally, these folks are likely to be high on political savvy based on their roots in the organizational setting. They are sure to be better suited to getting things through the political machines than an inside-outsider. However, this is also the potential weakness of this positioning, that it may be tempting to see the future only through the organizational lens, missing the more 'out-of-the-box' type of thinking characteristic of the more 'pure' futurists. It may be that teaming the evolved with an inside-outsider would be quite a dynamic duo.

The planners

Let's not forget the standard planning role. There are still strategic planning and other planning functions left after the downsizing massacres of the 1980s. While these functions may be holdovers from the past, they nonetheless can be reinvigorated and even reinvented with a fresh injection of foresight.

This positioning should not be overlooked for its potential as a launching pad for a more full-blown foresight activity. While the planning goes on, opportunities for other kinds of foresight, such as new opportunity for development or even scenario planning, can be concurrently developed and linked back to the plans.

The public voice

This extremely rare positioning may be the most highly evolved form of organizational foresight. I can only think of one example, *foresight's* very own board member and BT futurist Ian Pearson. Visit his web page and you'll see the long list of public presentations.

His success is so stunning that the situation cries out loud 'why aren't more companies doing this?' It's truly brilliant. BT develops a vision of the future, and sends Ian and colleagues out to tell the world about it, in effect, gaining if not adherence at least awareness of BT's visionary work. So tomorrow's developers of products and services will implicitly or explicitly be working toward a vision of the future put forth by BT. Kudos!

I think many of us practitioners admire, if not envy, the public voice role. We are often forced to keep a very low public profile. We don't want to get caught 'on the record' lest we get a call from the corporate public relations police. More than once I've heard, 'if they ever knew what I was doing...'

I believe that as organizational leaders becoming increasingly aware that guiding the organization into the future is their key responsibility, we will see more foresight practitioners with a public voice, promoting the vision of foresight that they help generate.

The point is

As has been emphasized throughout *hinesight*, we overlook the positioning and selling of foresight at our peril. The categories above give us some examples of positionings in practice today. For those about to embark on an organizational foresight odyssey, it behoves you to spend some time thinking about positioning up front. Probably the two key factors to consider are the needs of the organization and the personality of the practitioner.

Some organizations really need a wake-up call. Those consciously seeking it may be inclined to bring in an inside-outsider. Those who need it, but may not know it are probably better approached stealthily. Others in less of a crisis mode are better approached through an evolved or planning approach. The public voice approach may be ideal for an organization already doing great foresight work that would benefit from sharing that vision with customers and collaborators.

Practitioners will be better suited personality-wise for some roles over others. The inside-outsider is probably the most connected to a personality type – either you fit the role of 'agent provocateur' or you don't. The public voice, of course, requires great presentation, networking, and media skills. The others are for those more politically inclined, those who prefer working within the system.

So if you're new to the game, think about how to start. If you're already there, have some fun seeing where you fit in and, maybe, think about a repositioning. (Andy Hines is Ideation Leader with The Dow Chemical Company. This regular column reflects issues concerning the use of futures thinking in the business sector.)