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singing hinesight

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

foresight and the cult of personality

With technology in overdrive and business clamouring for solutions, it's time for futurism to develop as a science. That means majoring on methodology and soft-peddalling on personality. After all, isn't genius one part inspiration, ninety-nine parts perspiration?

In a recent email discussion group¹ on the subject of environmental scanning, we came to the topic of institutionalizing foresight. Jim Dator, *foresight* board member and Chair of the Hawaii Futures program, made the observation that 'in my experience, futures work is still too closely dependent on personalities and not sufficiently tied into structures, whether in government or business'.

Boy, did that strike a chord!

The early story of futures studies is heavily tied into personality. After all, it was the pioneers that put our field on the map: people like Kahn, de Jouvenel, Toffler, Gordon, Harman, Dator, Henderson, Coates, Schwartz et al. Without their strong personalities, we wouldn't be having this discussion. So I'm not trying to take potshots at the personality-based approach, but rather recognizing it as a necessary and vital stage of the field's evolution. Though we may have fewer superstars in the future, I believe we'll be healthier and better off for it.

¹ A group started by University of Hawaii Futures program graduate Richard 'Kaipo' Lum, and including Cheryl Anderson, Christian Crews, Clem Bezold, Jim Dator, Michelle Bowman, Robin Brandt, Richard Lum and myself.

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If you ever met any of the names listed above, you'll know what I mean. These were such talented and charismatic individuals, they'd have been captivating whether they were peddling futures, physics or automobiles. It was simply our good fortune that they chose us! They could walk into a room and command a degree of attention that the rest of us mere mortals can only dream of. But it's been a mixed blessing. The downside is that the futures message has sometimes got so deeply intertwined with the personality that futures as a discipline has suffered.

To me, this suggests that a move away from the personality-based approach to one based more on systems is vital to our long-term health. We need to plant seeds such that our work lives beyond our individual contributions. Unfortunately, we have all too often witnessed the withering of a foresight-based undertaking when its charismatic progenitor moves on. This gets us into a vicious circle of having to continually re-sell and re-establish our value, or more simply, re-invent the wheel, as Jim's initial quote succinctly captured. In our preferred future, the value of our work will be self-evident; not simply a vote of confidence in an individual.

This transition is clearly taking place. My travels in futures circles convince me we have a very talented group of up-and-coming futurists who will serve the field well in the coming generation. At the ripe old age of 38, I'm already feeling intimidated by some of the younger folks coming along who are so damned smart! This is to the great credit of the pioneers. They, too, have recognized the need for transition and have been grooming this new crop. I personally owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to my mentors Joe Coates and Jennifer Jarratt, who took what I freely confess was the roughest stone and helped polish me into a relatively serviceable futurist.

But lest the new generation relax, let us recognize that we ain't quite there yet. I wonder how much of my own tenure at Kellogg's I owed to personality rather than academic status. In that position and my current one at Dow, I've used inter-personal skills more than I'd like to get the message across. Maybe it's the only way to survive in this business. (Yes, we understand all too well the challenges of the pioneers!) On the other hand, I've seen my successor at Kellogg's able to carry our work forward, in often challenging circumstances. I also feel I'm being a bit wiser this time around, in more quickly and extensively involving others in the foresight work.

While we practitioners may recognize this need for a shift away from the cult of personality, what are our clients thinking? As a participant in some multi-client projects involving some pioneers, I have witnessed at first hand a few transitions-in-the-making that may provide some insight. While I suspect we will lose some clients who are totally enamoured with the personalities, rather more haven't even noticed that a transition is taking place. To the credit of our clients, most have been remarkably open to seeing how this transition would go, recognizing quality when they (continue to) see it.

The acid test is how many organizations will continue to sign up with futures consulting firms in which this generational shift is taking place. In sum, I see a very healthy transition taking place in the foresight world, in which the torch is being successfully passed to a new generation of well-prepared futurists. Now, we future futurists, must step up and deliver. I believe we will!