

Translating futures work

A regular column on business futures by Andy Hines

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I've recently participated in some interesting philosophical discussions about what is futures work. One in particular suggested that futures work is really all about challenging worldviews or epistemologies. In an ideal world, I might agree with this, but the number of organizations, particularly corporations, intellectually ready for this is very, very small. Thus, if we hold ourselves to this high standard, we risk irrelevance. I believe that if we have an opportunity to influence longer-term decision making (at least what is viewed as long term for organizations/corporations), I think we should take it. Personally, when I am involved in this kind of work, I feel that we could do so much more, but I also feel we do better because me/my perspective is there.

This led me to thinking that what we need is different kinds of futures for different kinds of contexts, and that there isn't one right approach to doing futures work. We need futurists challenging modes of inquiry. We need futurists doing environmental scanning and emerging issues and trends analysis. We need futurists challenging organizational strategy. Bringing these different kinds of futures work together is where the magic begins to happen. In isolation, each is useful, but weaving them together is much more powerful.

It might be useful to think in terms of a "futures ecosystem" using a continuum to situate the different kinds of futures work along with the typical organizational audience (see Figure 1). In this diagram, futurists are placed on a continuum of the "purity" of futures work. Thus, academic futurists typically engage in the most pure futures work, followed by consultants and then those working within an organization. I've aligned the internal audience in terms of receptivity to the futures message: the true believers being the most receptive, followed by the bridge builders, and last the decision makers.

Figure 1 *A futures ecosystem*

I've borrowed the simple typology of three principal types of futurists from the World Future Society's Professional Members Forum. The organizational types are adapted from some of my previous *foresight* columns. To briefly explain:

The futurists

1. Academic futurists – housed in the various university programs and typically do most of the theoretical research in the field.

2. Consulting futurists – those who make their living or a part of their living selling futures work in a consulting role.
3. Organizational futurists – those with positions inside organizations fulfilling a futures role, often serving a broker-type function with consulting and/or academic futurists.

The futurists' audience

- True believers – those inside an organization who get the futures message and are excited about it, but are often fringe players inside the organizations (largely because they get it!).
- Bridge builders – those inside an organization who can see the practical value of a futures message and have the political skill to "re-package" it to decision makers.
- Decision makers – those inside an organization who are the power brokers and make decisions.

To play on the ecosystem metaphor, a healthy ecosystem needs each of these players to thrive. We cannot survive without one another. But let's be even more practical. One obvious hypothesis is that communication is easiest between neighbors on the continuum. The organizational futurist has the easiest time translating the consulting futurist message and delivering it to the true believers on the inside. Consulting futurists tend to act as translators between the academic and organizational futurists. Bridge builders act as translators between true believers and decision-makers, and so on.

The more controversial hypothesis is that it is very difficult to leapfrog a neighbour. Even more so, it is near impossible to leapfrog two neighbours. For example, a consulting futurist may be able to package their typical message such that they can reach a true believer, but it is going to be very difficult for them to reach a bridge builder. Similarly, an organizational futurist can sometimes reach the bridge builder, but will have a very difficult time getting directly to decision makers. The academic futurist message in its pure form will have a difficult time even getting into the organizational setting, period. (It should be emphasized that the bias of this column when it speaks of "organizations" is toward corporate and big.)

The above paragraph speaks to the need for translating futures work. It does not mean that, for instance, academic futurists should stop trying to influence organizations. It suggests that the pure academic message will need to be translated, typically with the help of a consulting or organizational futurist, in order to be better received within the organization. Similarly, the organizational futurist can help get the consulting futurist's message deeper into the organization than the consultant can do alone. The sense of partnership should hopefully be becoming clear.

Let me give a few examples of how I've seen this play out in my work. In previous columns, we've talked about the critical role of the bridge builders, which we called the amphibians or frogs. They are so valuable because of their ability to translate our message in ways that appeal to decision makers, but we have to accept that they may sometimes have to "sell us out" when the politics aren't right. I kiss my frogs as often as I can. I go out of my way to do favours for them because they grant me access that I cannot get on my own. My message, coming from me without some kind of pre-conditioning, is simply too unpalatable for most decision makers. I either need my frog to deliver it, or to set the audience up for me, often working in concert with my true believers.

I think the same principle applies to the futures end of the continuum. The academic futurists could think of the organizational futurists in the same terms that organizational futurists think of bridge builders. We can translate or re-package the academic message in a way that gets it into the organization, although we occasionally may have to "sell out" if the climate isn't right. The organizational futurist is closest to what's going on inside, and, one hopes, most attuned to the politics, and can provide precious advice on how to package a message.

I hope the point about the difficulty of leapfrogging and the need for translation are clear enough such that you can play with the continuum and draw forth your own implications. I'm reminded of the path-breaking work of Don Beck and colleagues regarding Spiral Dynamics and Ken Wilber's Integral Worldview model. A key point behind these works is that messages speaking from the point of view of one worldview often say very little to those coming from another worldview. Using Beck's terminology, a "green" message in green terms won't say much to those immersed in a "blue" worldview.

Yes, futurists on the outside, and dear colleagues receiving and delivering the message on the inside, we are indeed part of the same ecosystem, and will flourish only if we support one another.