An audit for organizational futurists: ten questions every organizational futurist should be able to answer

Andy Hines

Ideation Leader, The Dow Chemical Company, Midland, Michigan, USA. E-mail: ahines@dow.com

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Abstract *This paper is intended to provide a guidebook for organizational futurists in building a foresight function inside today's organizations by suggesting ten questions that ought to be answered. It addresses how to start from a blank page, but can also offer help to those who have already established a function by suggesting additional questions to think about. It is intended to give auditees a sense of the key issues and challenges they will face. Managers may also find this audit useful in giving a sense of what an organizational futures function can deliver and the skills required of a prospective organizational futurist. A key assumption here is that while there is a growing demand for organizational futurists, the role is evolving to more of a broker function than the building of a staff function more typical of the past.*

Introduction

A subtitle for this piece could be "how to institutionalize futures thinking without being institutionalized.'' Futures work in the organizational setting is very demanding – at its worst it is maddening and at its best it is rewarding. The paper starts from the question of "what do you need to think about to create or build a futures[1] function inside today's organizations?'' A ten-question issue audit for futurists is proposed to prepare for the key issues and challenges that will likely be ahead, and offer potential responses based on my own experiences and those of colleagues in similar positions in other organizations. Ideally, it will give those presented with a "blank check" to create a futures function a place to start, if not a blueprint from which to build.

Five years ago, I went ''inside" the corporate world. This followed a little over a half-dozen years as a consulting futurist with Coates & Jarratt Inc., and earning an MS in Studies of the Future from the University of Houston – Clear Lake. My decision to go inside was largely based on the fact that in our consulting work, we saw again and again how our corporate clients struggled with implementing our work. I thought, ''Wouldn't it help if someone on the inside understood what these futurists on the outside were talking about and trying to achieve?'' I have had the good fortune to interact with many people in positions similar to mine to achieve similar goals. While some are trained professional futurists, most are not. And I have had the opportunity to write about my experiences in my Hinesight column in the

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journal *foresight* for the last few years. And I might add, the practical application of futures thinking and tools is never very far from my mind.

Today's organizational context is different from the 1980s and early 1990s when futurists were often employed in organizational planning functions. Those positions have largely been "re-engineered" out of existence. Most of what passes for strategic planning today is little more than number crunching and spreadsheet manipulation. Futures in the organizational context has been slowly re-appearing, but in non-traditional places, such as market research and new business development. And more happily, a couple dozen organizations have established small "foresight" groups (see Coates, 2001). Again, sometimes with professional futurists on staff, but more often not.

An important cautionary note is that this re-emergence in new places and new forms is more often the result of the efforts of enlightened individuals rather than a serious organizational commitment to future. Either an enlightened manager sees the need and has the freedom and power to make it happen, or a futurist sneaks under the radar or emerges from the inside. Most likely, senior management blesses or at least tolerates the function, but with a few exceptions, it is typically not initiating it.

So, five years after going inside, I can confidently say that having an organizational futurist in a broker role between the inside and outside works. It helps not only the organization itself, but also the consulting and educational futurists as well. While there could be a competitive dynamic between in-house and external consulting futurists, experience suggests that the two be best friends. This partnering presents the opportunity to test and apply theory and research directly on the field of play. While most often the educational futurists work will first collaborate with the consulting futurist to do a translation activity to make it more palatable for the organizational world, there will likely be more and more cases of leapfrogging from the university to the organizational setting.

The approach advocated here could be called "permission futuring," which borrows from Fast Company columnist Seth Godin's superb book called Permission *Marketing. The premise is to think of our work with internal* clients in terms of dating or courtship. We hope to attract our internal customers enough such that they say "yes" when we ask them for a first "futures" date. If we perform well on this first date, analogous to going for a cup of coffee, we can then ask permission for a second date, perhaps the equivalent of dinner. If we perform well on that . . . We get to do progressively deeper and more interesting work, provided we "deliver the goods" of the early simpler dates or tasks. Experience suggests this approach is a viable one – my own tasks have generally become more involved, interesting, and futures-oriented over time. A key dynamic that makes this especially suitable for the organizational world is the need that internal clients have for saving face or maintaining credibility. It will almost always be politically wiser not to take the risk of doing a futures-related project. So our sponsors will look for a track record to back them up as they insert their necks in the political noose. The risk of this approach is that we get caught up in "delivering the goods" and lose focus on the futures agenda. Constant checking in with ourselves and our work is the best way to avoid this trap.

Finally, a key assumption made here is that there is lots more futures work available than there are futurists to do it. Unfortunately, some of our colleagues see a small pie and guard their knowledge closely. Yet there is a much larger pie out there for the taking if we can demonstrate our worth in the organizational context. Our expertise could be much more widely applied, in areas that today are dominated by the mainstream consulting firms. It will take more effort and creativity on our part to forge into new areas where our expertise is sorely needed – the organizational context being one of the key fronts in this battle.

So let us get to it. Here are the ten questions every organizational futurist should be thinking about and, sooner or later, able to answer.

Q1: How are you going to spend your time?

Three categories are proposed for how we can think about spending our time on futures work within the organization:

(1) Process work – approaches and tools for interacting with futures work.
(2) Content work – generating knowledge and insights about the future.
(3) Culture/mindset change – influencing mental models, aka changing minds, regarding the future.

There is overlap, but there is value in having a rough sense of how we are or would like to be spending our time, and how we should like that to evolve. In my first organizational role at the Kellogg Company, I estimated that my time was 70 percent on content, 20 percent on process and 10 percent on culture/mindset change. At Dow Chemical, I have switched the emphasis on process and content at Dow – so it is now roughly 70 percent process, 20 percent content, and the same 10 percent culture/mindset change. The numbers will vary depending on the company, the management, and the needs of our clients. But I am prepared to offer a preliminary conclusion that the organizational futurist role should be primarily about process rather than content. Most of us do not have the luxury of a large staff – in many cases we have none. Given limited time, we are better equipped to focus on process, where we can "deliver the goods" of futures work. Our superior understanding of how our organizations work makes our consulting futurists brethren ideal team-mates in that they can be engaged to provide the lion's share of content that we will lack time to generate by ourselves.

Ownership of process and content is fundamental to today's audience. They want to participate in the creation of futures work rather than be handed tomes prepared by experts. Most no longer prefer to learn in the classic lecture

format. We are forced into the role of becoming process experts. This does not suggest abandoning our content role, but rather blending the two. For example, one approach I have used successfully has been literally stacking the "process" deck with "content cards". I have developed a card game called trend poker that has participants examine and prioritize a large number of trends printed on index cards. They can add their own trends, but the list is comprehensive enough such that it is rarely necessary. This game has been a useful and fun way to get audiences interacting with futures content in a following a workshop format.

The culture/mindset change role is called out separately to remind us that ultimately our goal is institutionalization of a futures capability. And it is a long-term effort. Perhaps 90 percent of our effort should be focused on "delivering the goods", while slowly, almost surreptitiously working to institutionalize our teachings via culture/mindset change. An example of how I have been working toward culture/mindset change is a creativity and innovation training course I created that is now globally available to employees and includes some futures concepts and tools.

Figure 1 shows an example of how I used to spend my time with examples of the types of activities in each category.

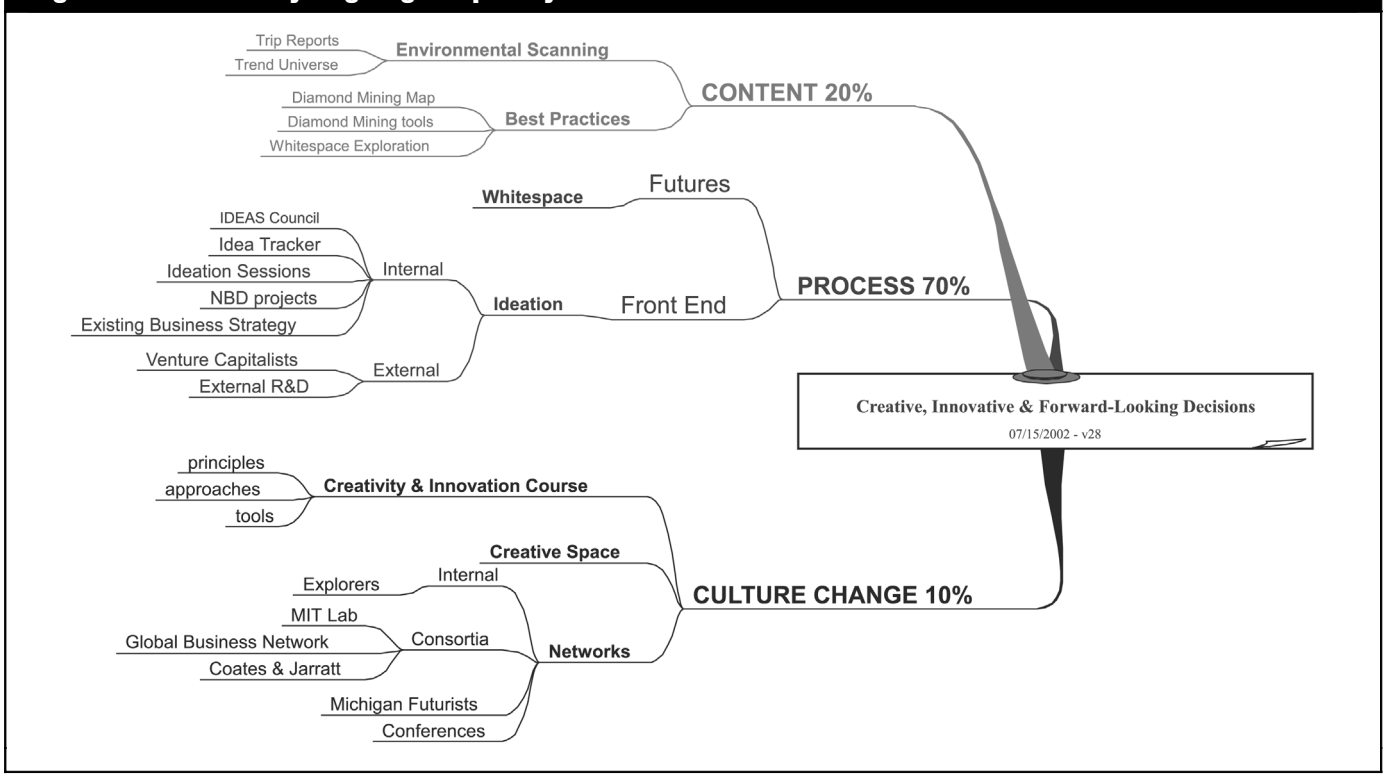
Implications

Note the choice of "viral strategy" as the guiding principle of the overall approach – borrowing from the popular "viral marketing" concept. Our role here is one of spreading a message through continually "infecting" new messengers, in hopes that they will in turn infect others, and so on, until a critical mass is built. It is not clear yet how long this will take. It will certainly vary according to the particular situation. But it is safe to say we are talking about years, not months. A secondary point is that the use of popular business terms is often an effective "cover" for futures work. It serves a translation function that helps those not familiar with futures jargon.

Moving to a more nuts-and-bolts level, we need to balance our process/content checkbook, both personally and organizationally. The easiest way to achieve balance is to bring in another person with complementary skills. I had the great fortune of developing a terrific de facto partnership with a colleague at Kellogg's. While I focused more on content and she on process, we often switched roles, and I think kept the distinction clear for our audiences, and kept a check on one another to maintain this clarity.

Next, develop a strategy for building process skills. An easy way is to "get certified" or at least trained in futures tools. This may come from conference, consulting firms, or educational institutions. For example, a recent survey of futures courses around the world identified 50 universities offering futures course and roughly 14 offering degrees in futures studies (see Ramos, 2002). It is amazing – if not a bit disheartening – what a credential can do. For example, I had helped write a book of scenarios, taught a course on scenarios, and used them frequently, but these credentials paled in comparison to a week-long scenario training course

Figure 1 — How are you going to spend your time?



that I took from the Global Business Network. I came back with a "diploma" and thus had the paper credential. So do not be proud – even when you are already an expert, do not underestimate the value of getting certified.

Finally, a strategy for maintaining or enhancing our content skills is to keep active on the outside – keep presenting at conferences and publishing and networking. This can be tough to position with our internal colleagues, because we can be viewed as self-promoting when we should be "working". We can cite professional development, but in addition we need to be disciplined about bringing back insights and making them available, even if just a simple trip report. It is also useful to bring back concepts and terms from the "outside", when we are at these events. It demonstrates that we are out there scanning the world for our colleagues.

Q2: What is your positioning?

Five major positionings of organizational futurists' work seem to be in play. They are placed along a continuum emphasizing inside to outside focus (Figure 2).

The evolved

Many organizational 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. But this is also the potential weakness of this positioning, in 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 us 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 futures thinking. This positioning should not be overlooked for its potential as a launching pad for a more full-blown futures activity. While the planning goes on, opportunities for other kinds of futures, such as new opportunity for development or even scenario planning, can be concurrently developed and linked back to the plans.

The stealth

A lot of us organizational futurists 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. There is still baggage associated with the term futurist. So many of us have created other ways of characterizing ourselves. One colleague dealt with this by positioning himself in charge of "special projects". Under this rubric he has been successful in introducing futuristic thinking and projects. If it works . . . I was at a meeting of a dozen organizational futurists, part of the Michigan Futurists Network, including reps from Ford, GM, Kellogg's, and Alticor among others, and nobody had the word futurist on their business card.

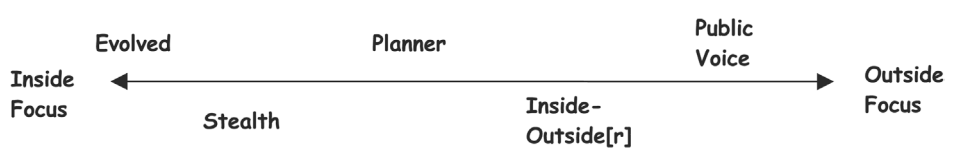
The stealth positioning may also be sensible to start from if you are unsure of the lay of the land. I have direct experience with this, although my stealth was never very stealthy. It consisted of not calling myself a futurist, rather using the more palatable "trends manager". Everybody is familiar 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 came out of the closet and became a full-fledged inside-outside[r].

The inside-outside[r]

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 it into awareness that something needs to be done. Or, it may be that complacency has led to a gradual slippage that has become unsustainable. Present thinking and strategy is not getting it done. So in come new people and new ways of thinking, which often includes new or renewed emphasis on futures. The futurist 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 certain personality traits in order to survive and be effective. First, the inside-outsider must be provocative and not shrink from conflict. Those choosing this positioning should like a good fight. Of course, this does not mean a deliberate strategy of making enemies, but it means that given a choice between "the truth" and political

Figure 2— What kind of futurist are you?



expediency, it must be the truth. The good news is that despite being high on many enemies' lists, our 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 (okay, we are not there yet!). 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 you 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 we must incite the revolution and bring in a successor more suited to running the new system.

The public voice

This extremely rare positioning may be the most highly evolved form of organizational futures activity. The only example I am aware of is foresight board member and BT futurist Ian Pearson. Visit his Web page and you will see the long list of public presentations. It is truly brilliant. BT develops a vision of the future, and sends Ian 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. One wonders why more companies are not doing this?

Many of us practitioners admire, if not envy, the public voice role. We are often forced to keep a very low public profile. We do not want to get caught "on the record" lest we get a call from the corporate public relations police. More than once I have heard, "if they ever knew what I was doing . . . " As organizational leaders become increasingly aware that guiding the organization into the future is their key responsibility, we will see more futures practitioners with a public voice, promoting the vision of futures that they help generate.

Implications

We overlook the positioning and selling of futures at our peril. The categories above give us some examples of positionings in practice today. For those about to embark on an organizational futures odyssey, it behooves 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 futures 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 we fit the role of *agent provocateur or we do not. 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 are new to the game, think about how to start. If you are already there, have some fun seeing where you fit in and, maybe, think about a repositioning.

Supplemental: are you planning to describe yourself as a futurist?

Q3: What is your leadership style?

I will argue that organizational futurists must accept a leadership role in order to be effective. This may not be comfortable for many of us. We may be more comfortable in the role of provocateur, sitting on the sidelines and lobbing in our bombs of wisdom. Implementation is often seen as something that "they" do. I say, not so for organizational futurists. Our value-added is in the translation of these wisdom bombs in a way that our internal clients can act upon – we can't leave it to them.

If we accept this, we must be prepared to accept a leadership role. We will find ourselves working more and more with groups, more and more with process, and less and less alone, working on content. Influencing people requires leadership. Thus, we need to think about our leadership style (see Figure 3).

I borrow from the excellent work of Daniel Goleman to give us a framework of leadership styles. What could be an interesting research opportunity – as more of us move into organizational futurists roles – is to customize this collection of leadership styles particular to organizational futurists. Here is a very brief summary of Goleman's styles:

- Coercive leaders demand immediate compliance.
- Authoritative leaders mobilize people toward a vision.
- Pacesetting leaders expect excellence and self-direction.
- Affiliative leaders create emotional bonds and harmony.
- Democratic leaders build consensus through participation.
- Coaching leaders develop people for the future.

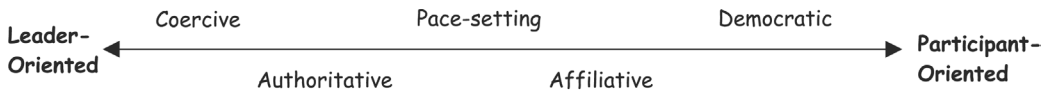
Implications

Quite simply, we must accept the leadership challenge.

An interesting twist particular to futures is the question of reliance on personality versus methods. The early story of the futures field is heavily tied into personality. In effect, we got onto the map due to the brilliance of the field's pioneers – the Kahns, de Jouvenels, Tofflers, Gordons, Sarkars, Harmans, Masinis, Dators, Jungks, Hendersons, Coates, Schwartzs *et al. Without their strong personalities, we would not be* having this discussion today. Put more directly, I am 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 long run, we will be healthier and better off for it.

The rub is that the futures message often gets so deeply intertwined with the personality that the discipline suffers.

Figure 3 — What is your leadership style?



Source: Goleman (2000)

To me, this suggests that transition away from the personality-based to a more futures-discipline-based approach is vital to our long-term health. We need to sink roots such that our work lives beyond our individual contributions. Unfortunately, we have all too many times witnessed the withering of a futures activity when the charismatic pioneer involved 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.

And lest we new generation relax, let us recognize that we are not immune to the personality phenomenon. I may be being optimistic in suggesting we are moving beyond the cult of personality phase. There is evidence to suggest that we are not quite there yet. I wonder how much of my own tenure at Kellogg's was personality-based as opposed to discipline-based. In that position and my current one at Dow, I have found myself leaning on my "personality" more than I would like to get the message across. I think we who have been struggling long and hard tend to develop a personable, marketable approach – or we do not survive. Yes, we understand all too well the challenges of the pioneers! I am hopeful in that my (hand-picked) successor at Kellogg has been able to carry our work forward, despite often challenging circumstances. I also feel I am being a bit wiser this time around in more quickly and extensively engaging others in the futures work.

Q4: What is your framework?

The essence of what organizational futurists deliver can simply be divided into three main buckets:

(1) The strategic entails bringing a greater understanding of the future to bear on current decisions. Herein lies strategic planning, scenarios, forecasting, technology assessment and the like.

(2) The creative entails bringing fresh thinking to businesses stuck in their self-constructed "boxes", and generating new ideas and business opportunities. For this, we have environmental scanning, trend analysis, cross-impact matrixes and a host of creative thinking tools.

(3) A general educational role regarding the future, for those within the organization at large, could be broken out separately, but really is a means for improving either the strategic or creative.

To further help us frame these buckets, let us overlay them on the widely-used McKinsey Three Horizon's framework (see Figure 4), where Horizon One focuses on executing the core business, Horizon Two focuses on lines extensions off the core business, and Horizon Three brings us into new territory.

The figure suggests that:

- Strategic challenges focusing on current decisions tend to be closer to Horizon 1.
- Creative challenges entailing fresh thinking tend to be closer to Horizon 3.
- The educational challenge underlies all three horizons.

The strategic project involves helping the organizational client answer a known question or address a known issue. There is an answer or solution to this project – we help find it. For instance, the decision could be to either buy company XYZ or not. These types of projects typically have management buy-in and resources at their disposal. This is the comfortable bailiwick of the big six management consultant firms. When we get the opportunity to play here, where we often "go wrong" is in the endless generation of alternatives, new questions and new issues. The organizational client is frustrated because we never get to a solution.

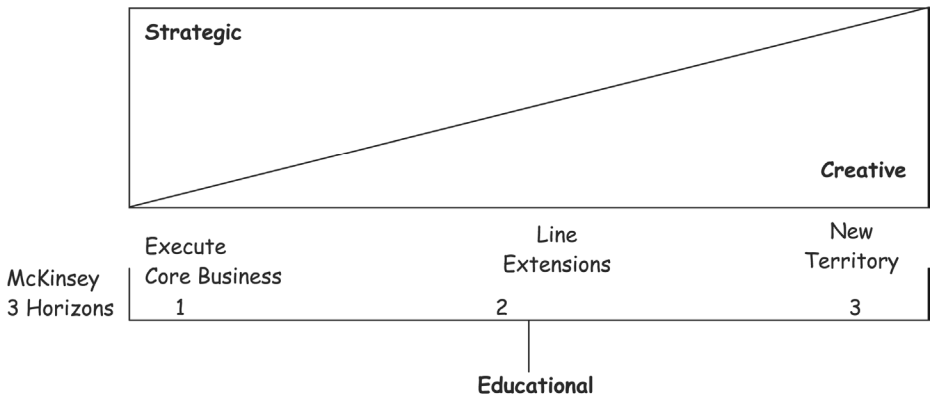
The creative project involves discovering and raising new issues, or coming up with new options or alternatives. There is no single answer or solution. These projects are essentially about helping the organization think differently, and it is up to the organization to decide what to do with this thinking. The trap here is in trying to prescribe solutions. I am grateful to a former client from my consulting days who once gave us a "no solutions" directive. This truly freed us up to be more creative – try it some time!

The educational challenge is to plant seeds of futures thinking in order that they may later take root and eventually flower. This will involve a "push" approach – perhaps a newsletter, lecture, trip report workshop – in which you are delivering a futures message that people are not necessarily asking for. The goal is to get a few people excited about futures work and others at least exposed to it, so that it will later seem less foreign when it comes time to do a futures-related project.

Implications

A key principle of how we can better deliver our insights is to frame our client's request appropriately. While there is, and ought to be, overlap between the strategic and creative, unintentionally mixing them, or delivering on one when the

Figure 4 — What is your framework?



other is really what was asked for, is a key delivery problem. Keep in mind that it is not always going to be crystal clear whether the project needs one or the other. It may start one way and veer another. In fact, a good futures project will often uncover the "real" problem that is quite different than the officially stated one. This phenomenon suggests "checking in" throughout a project and making sure the team is still on the same page about the nature of the problem. How often do projects change in the middle, but half the group never makes the transition?

In my opinion, futures is ideally positioned for the creative Horizon 3 challenges. But we must develop "translation" steps that enable our organizations to see the path to Horizon 3 from Horizons 1 and 2. Organizations have great difficulty in getting there from here, thus the need for us to lay out a pathway.

Of course as futurists we will be deeply concerned about the educational role – it is typically why we entered futures work in the first place. I think we need to be very thoughtful and oftentimes subtle about how we go about it. We do not want to be labeled as "crusaders" or "preachers". This turns too many people off. Rather we should strive to be seen as useful. This is not suggesting we abandon our idealism, but that we temper in a way that better enables us to be effective.

In practice, my role – based on my particular context – has been more creative than strategic. And I have perhaps been overly cautious about not being too over-bearing with my futures message. I suspect this balance will vary depending on the company and the industry. In any case, it is very important to "take the temperature" of the organization and see what is needed, rather than try to force-feed our preconceived ideas. Although we want to bring in our own ideas about what is needed, this is best done from an informed point of view.

Q5: Who is your audience?

One of the first commandments of organizational futurists is "Know Thy Audience!".

Figure 5 depicts:

- True believers can be thought of as lemmings who will follow us (almost) blindly.
- Bridge builders are amphibious; they are the frogs that can live on the land of corporate politics and the sea of futures work.
- Fence-sitters are akin to rats who will come if they smell the cheese or abandon ship if things appear to be going badly.
- Laggards are the vultures who will never like our message and are circling around and waiting for us to fail.

True believers

Our message of change and thinking differently about the future will be music to the ears of a small segment in our organizations. We will be seen as a breath of fresh air. They will want to help and in many cases will help spread our message. They will help us through the tough times if we get down. They are good loyal friends.

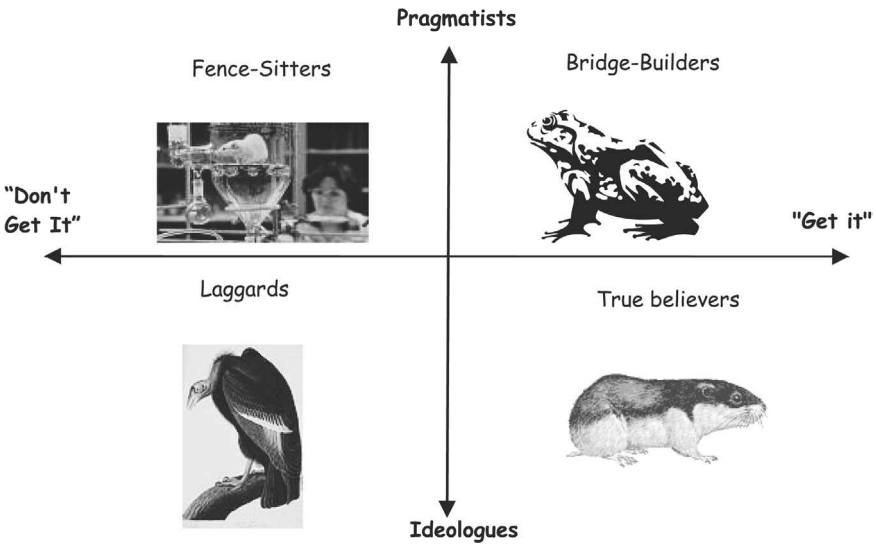
We need to nourish our true believers and go into battle side-by-side with them. But we must be careful not to mistake their voice or views for that of the mainstream organization. They are often the fringe players, and if we are not careful, our lemmings will take us over the cliff with them.

Bridge-builders

These are our most valuable friends – we must kiss our frogs! Without them, we will have a very hard time. They are our translators within the organization – keeping in mind that we are translators between the future outside the organization to inside it. They can take and re-package our message in a way that gets it to the organization power brokers and movers-and-shakers. It is a rare breed that has the political and ambassadorial skill to successfully position our message with the "suits".

The first challenge is in finding them. Building on the frog metaphor, we must kiss a lot of frogs to find the prince. Once found, we must be prepared for them to occasionally sell us

Figure 5 — Know thy audience



out. While they believe the message, their survival instincts will tell them when to compromise or back down. And they will do it, and we must accept that, and not take it personally. Sure, we wouldn't compromise – which is precisely why we need them. They have a finely tuned sense of which battles to fight and when.

Fence-sitters

The tough news is that our biggest audience sits on the fence. Thus, our message must primarily address them. For the most part, they will go about their business and ignore us. So our message to these "rats" must be appealing enough that it smells like cheese and they come. It must not be off-putting such that they abandon ship. Very few will convert to true believers or fall back to laggards. They will remain opportunistic and tend to judge our work on a case-by-case basis. The good news, however, is that if we "deliver the goods" we will earn some loyalty.

Laggards

There will always be vultures hostile to our message under any circumstances. We are marked from the get-go. Our message about change and thinking differently will be seen as hostile and threatening. The suggestion here is to ignore them. They will not convert and cannot be persuaded. So let us not waste our time. Happily, they are a relatively small number.

The bad news is that while some will just ignore us, others will circle around us like vultures waiting for a sign of weakness. And when that moment appears they will strike. In our line of work, we must be prepared to be sacrificed. They typically can wait us out, and will likely prevail in the end.

Implications

Where possible, we should tailor our messages in terms more palatable to the organizational mainstream – the fence-sitters. We must translate our message into business terms to the fullest extent possible. Numbers are always comforting. By all means, avoid the Siren's song of damning "them" as short-sighted, hard-headed, or whatever terms we use when frustrated by our clients' inability to see what is plainly clear to us. Understand that these differences are natural, accept them, and move on.

At the same time, we must build our army or true believers to help us spread our message and go about the difficult search of finding-bridge builders. The organization futurist role is not one of a lone ranger, but rather of a coalition-builder – is politician too unpalatable a term? And by all means, do not try to convert everyone. It is impossible and distracting. We must do our best to stay clear of the laggards, who have it in for us anyway.

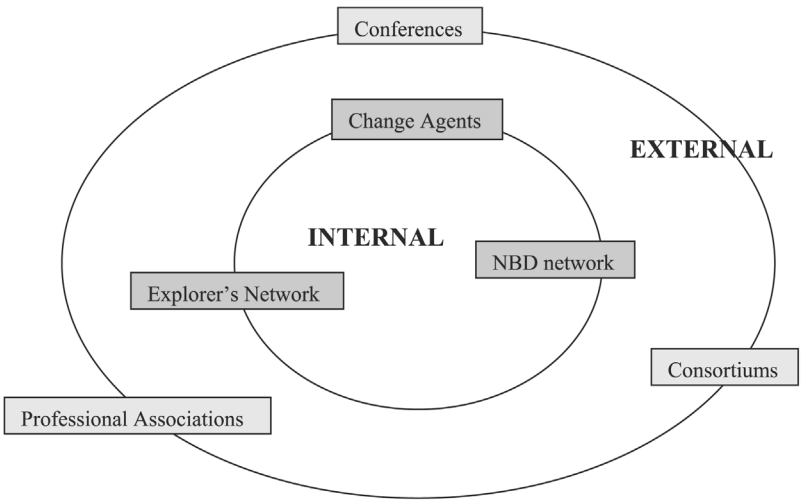
Q6: Who is in your network?

It is difficult to over-emphasize the importance of internal and external networks for the organizational futurist (see Figure 6). Networking really must be in our skill set to be effective in this role. We must think of ourselves in terms of brokers between the larger futurist community and the inside. This may result in occasionally making us long for the days when we did "real" futuring, as we will have little time for environmental scanning and content generation — this we must leave to our external partners, as we focus on translating the futures message for those on the inside.

The internal network is all about getting our work implemented and is pretty straightforward (albeit not easy) stuff once we understand our audience. Figure 6 shows an example of a few internal networks I have either created or participate in.

The external network is what we must pay strict attention to. The assumption here is that the days of empire-building

Figure 6 — Who is in your network?



are out and that our futures function is likely to stay lean-and-mean. We are seeing three- to five-person teams re-emerging as a futures function, since the re-engineering of the 1980s and 1990s wiped out many organizational futurists, particularly those in some type of planning role. Thus, we will have to rely on our networks, not a big staff.

The good news is that there is an increasing emphasis on networking and institution building with the field. The World Future Society and World Futures Studies Federation continue to attract a steady membership. A new Association of Professional Futurists has recently been formed to focus on the needs of the professional futurist and the futures profession. Many of the established futures consulting firms offer consortium projects that focus on a particular subject and provide a forum for people from different organizations to discuss the topic and network. More and more traditional conference venues are offering topics that have a futures bent. An increasing number of futures courses are being offered around the world, as noted above. And these are just the formal ones – as we get on "circuit" we learn of even more informal networks and events that take place.

Implications

There are several reasons for networking. First and foremost is for our own knowledge. We are brought into an organization to provide a fresh perspective. At the same time, it will likely be very difficult to keep up a robust environmental scanning approach, as we will be dealing with all the organizational stuff that hungrily devours our time. Our external network provides a cost-effective way to keep current, or at least not fall too far behind.

Second is that they provide content and tools for us to use with our internal audience, providing the fresh perspective that is part of our value proposition.

Third, is providing our internal clients access to the external world. For me, this is when I started to feel like I was making a more permanent impact on the organization. When our clients want to experience it themselves, we've really got them hooked.

Q7: What is in your tool kit?

Our brokering and translation role of bringing the future inside will require us to have a set of tools. So let us be up-front and aware of what is in our tool kits (see Figure 7). What will we use to deliver our message? I confess to not having an organizing scheme for my tool kit that is entirely satisfactory. I have fallen back on organizing them by the length of time for which they are employed. Project-length tools can guide an entire project from start to finish. Workshop-length tools direct anywhere from a half-day to two-day workshop. Exercises are complementary tools that plug in to either a project or workshop for a relatively brief period of time. In the example below, my tool kit is a mix of creativity, innovation and futures tools.

While I have generally found broad agreement on the questions discussed so far, my colleagues are more split on this one. In particular, the issue is to what extent we should emphasize a tool kit. Some advocate that we should put more emphasis on outcomes than tools, arguing that internal clients do not really care about the tools – they just want the job to get done. I find this a perfectly reasonable case, although I am in the other camp that puts more emphasis on leading with a tool kit. I am certainly not arguing that tools are more important than outcomes, rather it is a matter of emphasis in marketing our work.

My experience is that internal clients tend to view futures work as something almost akin to wizardry. At the very least, they have very little sense of how we do futures work. They will typically be a bit reassured when we refer to mainstream

Figure 7 — What is in your toolkit?

PROJECT TOOLS

- Scenarios
- Lead User
- Roadmapping
- Ideo Deep Dive
- Innovation Landscape
- Strategos Lenses & Action Lab

WORKSHOP TOOLS

- KAI, MBTI, HBDI
- Bottom Line Innovation
- Knowbrainer
- Critical Methods
- Causal Layered Analysis
- Trends-to-Opportunity
- Learning Journeys
- Open Space

EXERCISES

- Know Your Brain Game
- Trend Poker
- Mind Mapping
- Six Hats
- Brainwriting
- The Usual Suspects
- Futures Wheel
- Uncovering Assumptions
- Idea Recycling
- 10 Years Ago
- Social Change
- Visioning

OTHERS

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

tools such as trend analysis, forecasting and scenarios – but still not very comfortable. Thus, we need to be very explicit about what is in our tool kit to help provide reassurance that we are not wizards.

I address this in part by having a "one-pager" that lists some of the tools that I like to use and am competent with. On the other side is a summary of the generic approach I use in approaching problems and opportunities. I have found this to be invaluable when meeting with a potential client for the first time. It gives us something to frame our conversation around, and something tangible for the client to work from. I find it far more useful than a completely open-ended discussion.

A second benefit of emphasizing our tool kit is that it demonstrates that our approach is different than the typical organizational one. Most organizations like to standardize around one "right way" of doing things. They like to believe that there is one best tool for a particular problem, and it is simply a matter of identifying the best tool and applying it to every situation. As futurists, we know that "it depends"[2]. Some tools work better for some problems, depending on the particular context at a particular time. We are very wary of having one-size-fits-all answers. But this runs counter to organizations that prefer to standardize and achieve economies-of-scale. Almost monthly, someone asks me to create a matrix of my tools compared with the types of problems, so we can devise the "right" tool for every problem. I have resisted this at some cost, because I feel it violates the rule of "it depends". A big value we bring to our organizations is our emphasis of a flexible, customizable tool kit and approach.

A caution regarding tools is to not get overly enamored with them. They are a means and not and end.

Implications

The first step is to figure out what is in our tool kit. What are we skilled at doing, or what can we gain or provide access to? It is not necessary that we be a master of every tool in our kit, but we should know where to get the expertise if it is not us. In the organizational role, we will be subject to the fate of being a "jack-of-all-trades and master of none". It is almost inevitable. We may start our job as a world-class scenarist. But after a year or two, if we are following a tool kit approach, we may have used scenarios once or twice and a dozen

other tools several times. Meanwhile, there are consultants out there using scenarios every day of the week. They are constantly improving the state-of-the-art. Eventually, we will fall behind. Accept it. It is not all bad news anyway. I now suggest to my internal clients that I can surely do a scenario project for them competently. But, if they really want the state-of-the-art, I can put them in touch with someone from my external network.

Again, I believe putting folks directly in touch with the external network is a big win for institutionalizing futures thinking. It starts to get beyond the whole effort being embedded in a person or two, who may eventually "get hit by a beer truck" or simply leave the company – leaving behind the whole effort with them. In what will be an increasingly common arrangement, the organizational futurists will serve as a virtual partner with the consulting futurist. It is a win-win. The consulting futurist needs one less person, and also gets the benefit of working with someone on the inside who can help get the work more effectively implemented – always the big challenge for the consultants. The organizational futurist gets to upgrade their skill set by working with the consultants. I will confess that I was astonished by how much I learned in this arrangement, just five years away from being a consulting futurist myself.

Another implication is to then actively build our tool kit. This is a place where our external networks can really help. We practically must be skilled in facilitation to be successful in the organizational role. The good news is that there is lots of training available in this area, and it is an area where practice pays off. I still vividly remember my horror at being in front of groups many years ago. Fortunately, my determination to improve overcame my fear, and after years of training and practice, I have become a capable facilitator. It is not magic, it is hard work.

A second area for tool building is the whole realm of creativity. There is a substantial overlap between creativity tools and futures tools. Often we use the same tools with slightly different intentions and different names. Futurists use a futures wheel, while the creativity community uses mind mapping. Not only will the creativity area provide us tools to use, it will help us develop the ability to improvise and customize. I have found one of the most interesting parts of my organizational work to be project and workshop design. I sometimes feel like a chef searching for the right ingredients and recipes.

Q8: What is your guiding orientation?

This question, like several others in the audit, should be answered both from our perspective and that of our audience. Hopefully, we have already been thinking about our own orientation, but it is good to refresh this upon preparing for organizational futures work. Diagnosing our audience is much trickier and more time-consuming work.

An orienting framework is presented here as an example, not as the "right" one. There are other ways to frame our orientation. I have found this one handy. Nor do I want to go into great depth on it, rather refer to the great work of Rick Slaughter (1999) and Sohail Inayatullah (1998) in emphasizing the need for a layered approach to futures work.

For our purposes, here is a simple breakdown (see Figure 8).

For our purposes, the useful idea is to think of our work in terms of depth and layers. Some of our work will be relatively close to the surface and some will get deeper. We need to develop our sense of what layer or level of depth is required and likely to work with the audience in question. For an audience that is relatively unsophisticated in futures thinking, a pop or problem-oriented approach may make sense. Now, before you start writing angry letters to the editor about that statement, recall the "permission futuring" metaphor developed earlier. Sometimes the "first date" of futures work may need to be at a pop level. This is okay, as long as we are in the process of building a relationship, where we will come back and ask for a second date, at a deeper level of interaction. "Hard-liners" may feel this approach to be a sell-out. It can be dangerous, but my experience suggests that we simply cannot begin at a deep level with an audience not prepared for it. Critical futures studies and epistemological futures work will simply not work with audiences not ready for it. We need to educate and develop our audience over time and towards this direction. Put simply, and especially true for the organizational futurist, we must start from where we are.

Implications

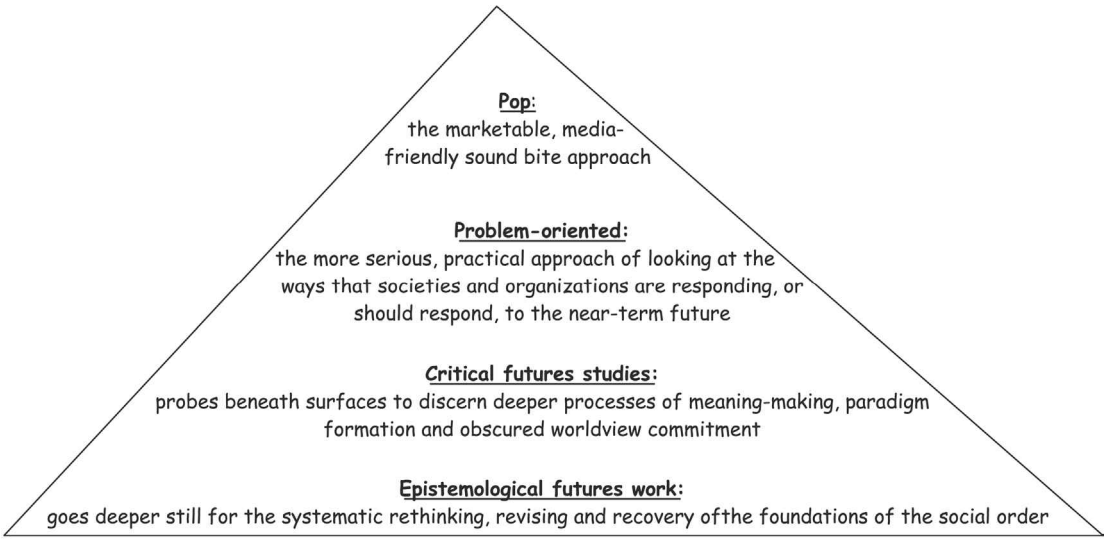
So perhaps we begin our endeavor emphasizing trends. The more clever internal clients will begin to learn that there are deeper insights to be had beyond trends analysis. And they will begin to ask for it, perhaps prompted by our efforts, perhaps not. Then we begin to introduce the notion of deeper and layered analysis.

Q9: What are your purposes?

This and the next question are intended as the most open-ended and least prescriptive of the audit. Your purposes are likely to be different from mine, based upon your philosophy and the nature of your particular situation. Nonetheless, some purposes seem to cut across a wide variety of situations, and at least to some extent have been battle-tested on the inside. In other words, this is not an invented list as much as the product of an iterative process between what is been tried and what has succeeded or seems likely to succeed. Four such purposes, drawing on a previous piece published in Futures (Hines, 2002), are:

- To be more future-oriented.
- To think more deeply and systematically.
- To be more creative.
- To better deal with change.

Figure 8 — Orientation framework



Source: Slaughter (1999)

To be more future-oriented

As the kids say in school, "duh!" While it is obvious to us, we should not take it for granted that our audiences will see it the same way. We are fighting enormous inertia. The knee-jerk inclination to approaching problems is to look for the precedent or the case history. The past is where organizational leaders made their careers. It is familiar terrain. The issues, the people, and the technologies of the past are comforting places to look for answers.

The future, however, is uncharted territory. It is often a scary place. It represents new challenges, new technologies and young, hungry upstart competitors for jobs. It may mean obsolescence. The payoffs are uncertain. This terrain is not only unfamiliar, but perceived as hostile.

In this context, the future is lucky to get a few sentences of discussion before the serious people point out the need to make "hard decisions". The future is still seen as providing soft, nebulous information not appropriate to serious decision making. Again, this is an obvious but no means an easy purpose.

To think more deeply and systematically

As organizations look for competitive advantage in the future, we will increasingly see multi-level analysis as a regular feature of our work. The driver from the organization side will come from the organization's need to become more innovative, which will in turn drive a need for greater insights. Today's approaches to innovation and futures within organizations are increasingly stale and producing more of the same old stuff. The next arena is depth. Rick Slaughter and colleagues (see Voros, 2001) at the Australian Foresight Institute have initiated a move to "integral futures" based on the bringing the provocative philosophical/worldview work of Ken Wilber[3] into his four-level orientation framework introduced in the previous audit question.

To be more creative

As has been suggested earlier, creativity and futures go hand-in-hand. From the beginning of my work inside organizations, I have (luckily) been tasked with building an understanding of creativity, due to my role in helping to stimulate new business development. Since creativity and innovation are more palatable "inside", I have often used them as cover for FS tools and concepts. For instance, I put together a course on creativity and innovation that surveys the key principle, approaches, and tools, and have included tools such as trend analysis, roadmapping, and scenarios under this rubric.

To better deal with change

I firmly agree with my former professor Peter Bishop of the UHCL Futures program[4] when he says that "futures studies is really about understanding change". Three levels of change we can help organizations with are on the personal, organization, and social levels.

At the heart of our challenge is changing the minds of individuals. We must really understand why people are resistant to change, and why that is really the "normal" approach – our receptivity to change as futurists is not typical. Change usually involves loss and we should be very sensitive to this, lest we be accused of being either cold-blooded or naïve.

Change at the organization level is the most obvious and is a relatively crowded field. Most organizations have some sort of OD (organizational development) function. While they

could be natural allies, be careful at the same time, as these groups have often been bureaucratized to an extent that has rendered them useless.

At the social level, the challenge is to move away from the confrontational, finger-pointing approach that labels all things organizational as bad, and to re-purpose the message in a way that gets it a more serious hearing. There is certainly a role for directly and aggressively confronting bad organizational behavior. Our credibility is at stake if we do not. What is tricky is employing a less strident approach for less obvious bad behavior that gives organizations a way to engage controversial issues in a positive way. So many times, the message falls on deaf ears because of who is giving it and how it is given. We need to be more sensitive here to how we bring difficult messages, if we want to get them the hearing they deserve.

Implications

Having a sense of purpose is useful in organizing our work as well as a communications device to our clients. This will be especially important when we have had a particularly trying experience, and we wonder "just what the _____ am I doing here?" A co-conspirator and me used to call it "taking a beating." We would go into a meeting full of good intentions and future purpose, and our audience would subvert the message and often personally attack us. With experience we learn to take our beatings and get more skilled at avoiding them in the first place. But when it happens, we should fall back on our purposes and take comfort in them. Call a friend in our network and commiserate. We've all been there before and can sympathize. We often joke that we are closer to our contemporaries in other organizations than we are to those inside our organizations. Take comfort in that while the tough experiences tend to outnumber the great ones in quantity, the quality of the great ones brings a satisfaction that makes it all worthwhile.

For communication, when someone asks – and they inevitably will – what we are trying to achieve, it really helps to have a ready answer. Hopefully, we do not even have to think about it and it simply rolls off our tongue. If not, at least commit it to memory until we get there. Organizational types, especially senior managers, love to lob these kinds of questions at us when we are least prepared, be it in the lunch line, elevator or bathroom. So be ready!

Q10: What are your intended uses?

This last question relates to the first. It is intended to be more explicit and help bring together not only the first but other questions as well. It addresses the tactical or the "how," and is translated in ways that an organizational audience can readily grasp:

- What is going on out there?
- Problem finding.
- Problem solving.
- Seed planting.

What is going on out there?

Our value is in bringing the outside in. As futurists we have been honing our ability to look at trends and developments and interpret them in a relatively sophisticated mental model of how the world works. This is a unique and valuable skill. This is what separates us from most of the organizational mainstream, where the focus of mental models is primarily on the particular industry or customer. We excel at making unexpected connections between seemingly disparate events.

Let us not forget this value proposition, because there will instantly be tremendous pressure on us to become an industry or market expert. The manuals and training courses and "must-reads" will start piling up on us, and if we waver, we will be sucked into the vortex of being an industry or market specialist. In the words of the British comedy Monty Python and The Holy *Grail, "run away, run away, run away!" For example, if we are in* the food industry, we will early on be asked something along the lines of "what are the trends in pizza consumption". Less glibly than the Monty Python example above might suggest, there may be an opportunity for permission futuring and building a relationship such that working on this request makes sense. But if this is a simple industry trend data request, refuse to do it, explain our value proposition, and refer them to the appropriate number-cruncher.

Problem-finding

As mentioned earlier, ideally our work more often involves problem finding than problem solving. Problem finding is far more difficult. It involves the work of asking good questions. It involves understanding how the world works and what motivates people. It is indirect, intangible, and difficult to pin down. Organizations are full of problem solvers. It is full of people practically bursting with answers, and looking for every opportunity to share this wisdom with us. People bursting with interesting questions, however, are a rare and vanishing breed inside corporations. It is an unpleasant reality of organizational life that those who ask lots of questions, and especially lots of tough questions, are in a race with the executioner that they are doomed to lose. The more clever ones recognize the situation and voluntarily leave and become entrepreneurs.

We, too, inevitably have a limited lifespan inside. At least our roles are generally recognized to involve asking the questions and raising the issues that others cannot. We must be judicious with this license, yet we must also not refrain from exercising it.

Problem solving

Let us not stray too far from permission futuring. We must remember that getting permission to do the more interesting work often entails delivering on the less interesting work. Few things are more valued inside than being able to help people with their very real problems. Do this a few times, and watch how fast the word spreads. We can quickly become very popular. This is a good time to go back to the previous

question and recite our purposes, lest we lose focus and become pigeonholed as a deliverer of what we call less-interesting work.

Seed planting

Another use of our work is of the educational variety. While we are raising awareness, problem finding, and problem solving, we need to remember to plant some seeds for future harvest. To institutionalize our work, we will have to embark on a multi-year educational effort. We will never be sure which seeds will bloom, so we will want to plant as many as we can.

Yet this activity should not be our primary focus. I have seen or heard of too many efforts where a futures activity began with a focus around a big educational effort. They failed. The reason is that it simply takes too long to see the fruits of this labor. The bottom-line inquisitors will try to burn these efforts every time. The educational, seed-planting effort is a complementary one.

Implications

With this question we enter into the rugged terrain of "what is our impact on the bottom line?". Our inquisitors will be looking for A-leads-to-B, cause-and-effect kinds of response. In our defense, the nature of the organizational world is such that it is hard to pinpoint anything as a cause-and-effect relationship. Put differently, there are so many factors influencing decisions, that is it is often impossible to point to anything as the cause.

Perhaps a central principle of our work is that we not be worried about who gets the credit, that is, if we really want things to happen. We must smile cheerfully while an executive talks about his or her idea, that they "borrowed" from us several months before. I am not suggesting we become doormats. We need to be sure that our sponsors are aware of the value we are bringing. They should know about these "borrowing" instances, but mark it down as the price of getting action.

The hopeful news here is that there is increasing discussion about the need to measure the impact of futures work and some tentative proposals on how to do it. While I applaud these efforts, I suggest we do not hold our breath. It is going to be very difficult, if not impossible to arrive at an answer that satisfies the bottom-line inquisitors.

More recently I have shifted my focus away from the educational function and more towards big projects or WOW projects[5]. Part of my strategy is looking to score a big victory with a successful project that I can point to. It seems to me that success with a WOW project is worth a couple of dozen "raising awareness" successes. It remains to be seen how this strategy will play out.

Summary

The emerging brokering and translating role suggested here for organizational futurists requires us to develop a new strategy if we are to be successful. This ten-question audit is proposed as a first step in getting us to think through this new role. It is hoped that it is a beginning of a much richer body of knowledge and practice in the arena.

In closing, let us review the ten questions:

(1) How are you going to spend your time?
(2) What is your positioning?
(3) What is your leadership style?
(4) What is your framework?
(5) Who is your audience?
(6) Who is in your network?
(7) What is in your tool kit?
(8) What is your guiding orientation?
(9) What are your purposes?
(10) What are your intended uses?

While it is suggested that we should be able to address the complete set, in practice some will be more useful than others. Each futurist, each audience and each organization is different. So when thinking through the audit, do not get overly enamored with any "right answer – remember, "it depends".

Notes

1 The term futures is used here for consistency's sake, and to perhaps make a case for the use of that term to best describe our discipline – surely pork bellies are not the only futures that term can describe? One could also substitute the terms foresight, futures studies, or futures research in most cases.

2 I would like to acknowledge Jim Butcher of the Global Business Network for drilling home this idea to me. At a scenario training course, we had a running joke how the answer to every question really could be "it depends".

3 To become acquainted with Wilber's work, visit http://wilber.shambhala.com

4 See http://www.cl.uh.edu/futureweb/

5 For an outstanding article on the importance of project work, I recommend Tom Peter's "The WOW project" in the May 1999 issue of Fast Company.

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