

Making managers fit for the future

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We have always needed leaders able to understand what the future may hold. It's just that today we need them more than ever. **Patrick Harris** and **Dr Rebecca Nash** outline how we might produce them

It is easy to suggest that, given the uncertainty in the world today, having a future-focused leader at the helm is more important than ever. However, while it is tempting to assert this, it is wrong to do so.

The fact is that we have always required leaders who study and try to understand how the future might unfold. Today, the need is simply more apparent when we see significant shifts in areas such as global energy supply and security, climate change, a macro-economic shift in power and a fall in the trust afforded to institutions.

But what does it mean to have a future-facing leader? More importantly, how can we equip our emerging leaders with these critical skills before they are exposed to the cut and thrust of leading significant areas of organisations? One sure-fire way to build success in this area is by incorporating Futures, or Strategic Foresight, within leadership development programmes.

A working definition of what we mean by the term “Futures” is that it is the means by which an individual or organisation maintains a mindful brief on the medium to long-term future, identifies opportunities within uncertainty, prepares for possible future events, and embeds its future-focused thinking into strategic and decision-making processes.

Why Futures for leadership?

“For tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today.”

African Proverb

The two primary reasons for enabling leaders with Futures skills are the need, as Gaston Berger, the widely respected French Futures pioneer, put it, to “disturb the present” and to lead while dealing appropriately with a context of uncertainty.

Disturbing – and acting in – the present

Futures activities can run into difficulty when there has been no intrinsic effort made to link an exploration of the future to an organisation’s strategic and decision-making processes.

For solid strategic linkage, leaders must fully embrace a Futures mindset and thereafter promote the ability to act upon the ramifications and opportunities that possessing a longer-term perspective brings. This combination of Futures study and taking action today is a powerful means of making decisions more robust over the long term

Leading in a context of uncertainty

Along with the aim to make better, more informed decisions sits an equally straightforward reason for developing future-facing leaders – dealing appropriately with uncertainty. While some events can be planned for, there are others that possess a higher degree of uncertainty and it is in these areas where leaders need to build in not finite plans but agility, preparedness and adaptability.

Leaders, however certain their agendas may appear today, must deal with uncertainty in the longer-term. How else will an organisation respond appropriately to changing circumstances?

Nearer-term responses can usually be developed with planning tools, medium-term with strategic evaluation. But for incorporating a longer-term perspective, where uncertainty is the norm, the language and tools of Strategic Foresight become indispensable. For clarity, the uncertainty we refer to here is the likelihood of a particular event or outcome occurring within the timeframe under consideration, or the degree with which the event may or may not occur at all.

Enabling leaders with longer time frames and different sources

"The future is already here, it is just unevenly distributed."

William Gibson

The above quote by the gifted science fiction writer William Gibson is an oft-used expression in Futures work. His meaning for our context is that if leaders are to understand tomorrow they should begin by looking closely at weak signals around them today.

Scanning as the first step

Gibson's quote is also helpful for identifying horizon scanning as the initial building block of future-facing leaders. Consider the future-probing examples below.

A person driving a car not so many years ago would have perched a map on his or her lap; now they might rely instead on Global Positioning Systems. Was the awkwardly positioned "lap map" a weak signal of drivers needing to see both the road and navigation aids at the same time?

Or consider that central locking is standard on cars today but we still tend to use keys to enter our homes. Is central locking of the home a future state that we can expect to see once the appropriate technologies and behaviours fall into place? What triggers might be necessary for this to happen?

The language of Futures

A capacity to scan the horizon provides insights into emerging weak signals, as well as a solid understanding of factors that will influence the future. It is these drivers of change that leaders, working with others, can build into key trends that have the greatest relevance for their organisation.

Often a future-facing programme of work will develop further by using key trends to construct scenarios – descriptions of future worlds, each as plausible (or implausible) as the other – which leaders can use to paint a picture of the future and which decision makers can use to test future strategies.

These Futures components – insights, drivers, trends and scenarios – can show leaders how to steer their organisations into new product areas, invest in R&D or to build adaptable strategies that can respond to the key triggers identified.

Leaders can serve a Futures agenda well by accessing multidisciplinary information, by ensuring that the organisation maintains a mindful brief on cues and signals and by being sensitive to alternative points of view. Importantly, by maintaining a set of plausible Futures – each describing a coherent and logically consistent description of a future world – it becomes easier for leaders to select or to create a preferred future for the organisation.

Choosing preferred Futures can be defining for leaders – both emerging and established.

First, the ability to use strengthened awareness to identify and convincingly articulate a preferred future is not only a hallmark of respected leadership skills but it is also a good way to identify potential emerging leaders.

Second, established leaders who are able to align an organisation behind goals to help create a preferred future are demonstrating sound visioning capabilities and are building significant strategic momentum as they progress – an all-important ingredient of achieving strategic aims.



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Constructing a programme for future-facing leaders

“Minds are like parachutes, they only function when they are open.”
Robert Dewar

We have discussed the importance of future-facing leadership and the basic recipe required in any Futures activity. But what can we say about the transfer of Futures knowledge in leadership development programmes? What tips are available to ensure that leaders emerge capable of dealing with and responding to uncertainty? Below is a list of principles to bear in mind when incorporating Futures in leadership programmes.

Work with individuals – recognise that while the vast majority of Futures studies are conducted with cross-sections of an organisation, it is people that bring Futures to life and who will ultimately make decisions afterwards. The need to establish personal attachment to Strategic Foresight should be emphasised when developing existing or emerging leaders.

Build a shared language – the Futures space is still a nascent one and can be populated with differing views, methods and applications. Make sure that your leaders have a shared understanding of the language employed.

Establish familiarity with methods – knowing and sharing a language is a first step; knowing what approach to apply, when it is best deployed and how to apply it is just as critical.

Consider internal skills – developing Futures skills across the organisation is important to help leaders in their capacity to “see more” and to respond better when facing situations of uncertainty.

Stimulate organisational awareness – a programme that develops leaders in Strategic Foresight – and one that lives afterward in the work of leaders – will transfer organisational awareness, help to identify key events and triggers that indicate future shifts, improve the organisation’s ability to respond and provide greater propensity to adapt to new models and new sources of competitive advantage when identified.

Emphasise the importance of inclusivity – leaders need to engage the organisation in order to have the greatest success.

Futures as a tool – ensure that leaders know that Futures is just one tool in their tool box. It is an important one but is no magic bullet.

Know when to start – leaders should appreciate that Futures is a preparatory activity and is best begun before the organisation is feeling a particular strategic pinch

Ensure cultural fit – ensure that future-focused thinking employed in the leaders and organisation has an appropriate cultural fit

Futures is about decision making – above all, remember to connect Futures thinking to strategy formation and decision making. Futures is not the end product but a key necessary step to improve decisions taken in the organisation.

These principles are a helpful reminder of the characteristics of Futures work that leadership programme designers should bear in mind as they work to construct development platforms. The principles also form a checklist that leaders should firmly grasp if they hope positively to influence the decision-making, preparedness, agility and long-term success of their organisation. **gf**

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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