

Taking time out to think and act

So why am I such an advocate for taking time out to think and envision the future? Well, in order to influence markets and connect with your audiences, you need “big dreams” because these are what win you loyalty and market share. As Walt Disney pointed out: “If you can dream it, you can do it.”

However, when we look at today’s corporate culture there is still a long way to go for the majority, as most thinking revolves around calculated risk and projected profit. In my early years in the forecasting industry, an artist friend of mine pointed out that thinking is often not really valued in our society because, as he put it: “Thinking is seen as nonproductive – people want tangible output that can be measured and turned into a sale.” When we contrast this attitude to the reverence we feel for the great philosophers and scientific thinkers of history, this does seem a surprisingly short-sighted approach because they have profoundly influenced and directed the cultures and truths we live by today.

Having often reflected on this observation, I find that now, almost 20 years later, more companies are finally starting to engage in the kind of deep thought and vision required to work out their role and contribution to society – they are gradually joining the conversation. This, for me, is a huge positive as it shows corporate recognition of the need for meaningful contemplation in a much wider context – balancing the tangible calculative thinking with the more intangible meditative thinking as a means to produce better results. I believe that this new engagement is a sign of our times, in that we are moving towards a more inclusive and compassionate era.

Allowing for the unexpected

It can be hard to trust in the process of balanced thinking as a method to find inspiration and practical direction, as we often tend to subscribe to one school of thought – with a preference for either pragmatic or intuitive thinking. Certainly, to maximize the process, it is important to recognize that we may not find the answer we were expecting. In science, this is a well-established process, as many discoveries, from penicillin to Viagra, have been made on the road to searching for another application, while

drugs initially assumed to be abject failures have turned out to have life-saving applications elsewhere.

Many corporations are still not comfortable with “thinking time” and ideation as active tools to move forward, so one way of rationalizing their importance is to view them as future capital – a vital part of a sound planning process. In 2003, we started a series of conferences called Time to Think, where we invited people from a broad range of industries to take time out to think with us. Our friends from the Copenhagen Institute of Future Studies⁷ – known for the book *The Dream Society: How the Coming Shift from Information to Imagination Will Transform Your Business*⁸ – joined us as partners. It was an inspiring and fruitful experience that made us see the world around us in an entirely different light. I now fully trust the process of thinking time and know that this is the best fuel for innovation and positive change. With this personal experience behind us, when we start a future project with a client, the destination is never set in stone – openness to the unexpected is a requirement of the process, signaling a willingness to bring on real change by engaging in an honest exploration where we mutually evolve with the project, the organization, and the people.

Balancing analysis with informed intuition

So where does analysis stop and innovation begin? Traditional linear thinking can often become a stumbling block for generating fresh ideas – hence it is important to nurture the unique and the radically different, disruptive approaches in order to create a strong identity and a solid, future-proofed direction.

The world of today still mostly engages in left-brain processes, only considering factual thinking and everything that can be measured. However, while statistics reveal past and present patterns, they seldom tell us much about the future. This is why, over many years, we have developed and proposed a system that integrates right-brain thinking; it delivers a clear focus on qualities of intuition and vision, thus providing essential balance in the forecasting process. By visualizing the whole picture and considering society’s currents and how these relate to people’s real needs and wants, we get closer to a human-centric outlook. This process necessarily means we step outside our corporate box in order to envision how our

organization appears to others – using whole-brain thinking. Because it provides a broader and more holistic view of our surroundings, it becomes far more likely we will innovate in a way that appeals to our audience.

Edward de Bono,⁹ the father of lateral thinking, described in 1967 how thinking outside the box is a skill everyone can learn, but requires an alternative approach to unleash people's creativity. While I don't necessarily follow de Bono's core philosophies, I support the principle that creativity is not a gift, but a process that can be nurtured by using a set of structured arenas where it is enabled and encouraged.

The ongoing process of navigating complexity

Globally, the business landscape has transformed immensely over the past 50 years. As part of this change, we have witnessed a significant shift from a ME approach involving a few influential stakeholders to a WE approach, in which large communities of people are in constant dialogue about our society, business values, and ecosystem. Currently, most organizations still use rational approaches alone to navigate complexity, but what we need are models that are agile, scalable, and intuitive enough to explore the unknown.

The American futurist Herman Kahn planted the early seeds of scenario planning. While working as a defence analyst at the Rand Corporation in the late 1940s, he started telling brief stories to describe possible impacts of a nuclear war and ways to improve survivability – he was imagining the worst of all possible futures by mapping out scenarios. The pioneering French oil executive Pierre Wack, who later invited Kahn to help him adapt and further develop the use of scenario planning for Shell in the 1970s, said this process is about “being in the right state of focus to put your finger unerringly on the key facts or insights that unlock or open understanding.”¹⁰

Their method was all about insight, complexity, and subtlety, not just formal analysis and numbers. Wack had a brilliant story about how intuition works. A Japanese gardener had once told him that if you throw a pebble at a thick bamboo stem and it hits the trunk slightly off-center, it will bounce off, hardly making any sound. But when you hit the trunk dead center, it makes a distinctive “thump” sound.¹⁰ This was how Wack described the process of intuition, saying that you must know the sound

you want to hear in your own mind before you even throw the pebble and then listen out for it.

Intuition may not be the reassuring sound of a pebble on bamboo stem for all of us, but Wack was clearly describing a process of learning to trust our judgment; and it's worth remembering that he was prodigiously successful at foreseeing forthcoming oil crises and, in an era when the petrochemical giants were struggling to change course, he proposed a new model of flexibility and awareness. There is space beyond the known world and its hard data sets that we must become familiar with and comfortable inhabiting if we want to plot the future with confidence. The results, as described by Wack in *Scenarios: Uncharted Waters Ahead*, a 1985 *Harvard Business Review* article,¹¹ make the effort worth it:

This transformation process is not trivial – more often than not it does not happen. When it works, it is a creative experience that generates a heartfelt “Aha” ... and leads to strategic insights beyond the mind's reach.

INTUITIVE DECISION MAKERS

In the 1980s, John Kotter studied the behavior of a group of top executives and found that they spent most of their time developing and working a network of relationships that provided general insights and specific details for their strategic decisions. They tended to use mental road maps rather than systematic and structured planning techniques. In 1984, this point of view was backed up in a study by Daniel Isenberg, which concluded that senior managers make highly intuitive decisions.

Companies that actively engage in the process of change were described as “learning organizations” by Arie de Geus in the 1990s and this concept was later popularized by Peter Senge¹² in *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. Both de Geus¹³ and Senge were describing environments in which gathering and analysing information in order to evaluate and form fresh ideas and thinking patterns were part of the culture. The learning organization encourages its people to see the bigger picture together and act on it in order to perpetuate the organization. Such an organization is an organic entity capable of learning and creating its own processes, personality, and purpose.

Due to the rising complexity in the world, organizations have to explore how to best adapt to change. A common feature of companies that have prospered for at least 50 years is that they have adopted an intuitive learning model to further their innovation process and business survival strategy. In most cases,

it has not necessarily been an even curve of constant progress but a bumpy journey of lessons to be learned.

IBM is a good example of an organization founded on old-style business principles that found instilling creativity throughout its organization was the only route to navigate change. The tech and office giant was facing a multi-pronged assault: industry transformation, shifts in global economic power centers, new legislation, increased data volumes, and new customer preferences. The utilization of online discussions with its internal stakeholders (staff) in 2003–4 led to a rewriting of company values and, ultimately, a redefinition of company direction.

In today's business environment, we know that an overreliance on any single strategic approach would not be wise. Organizations need multiple methods that combine intuition and analysis, as this is fundamental to creating an approach to the future that cannot easily be replicated by the competition. Intuitive strategic management is an important part of cultivating the future as well as engaging in an ongoing process that keeps a keen eye on your business direction and the environment in which you operate.

Navigating a steady course is never easy, but Wack's visionary 1960's approach does resonate with the times in which we live. To borrow Wack's pebble on bamboo metaphor, the most important question for any 21st-century organization to ask is: What is the sound that most resonates with my future? Then you can tune into that sound for signs that point you in the right direction. After all, the future is not just somewhere we go to, we create the future.

SUMMARY: Time to think

- Corporate culture still focuses on projected profit, but the process of future planning builds performance by inviting "big dreams" to win loyalty and market share.
- With trend management, your final destination is not set in stone, rather it is important to nurture disruptive and radically different ideas within the step process.
- "Whole-brain thinking" overcomes traditional overreliance on left-brain (facts-based) thinking to nurture more intuitive and creative approaches.

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- Taking ownership is vital to successful innovation because when we feel personally involved we become influencers and active change-makers.
 - Future planning must recognize the shift from a ME to a WE focus in society, in which people-centric products and services will be required.
 - We must develop multidimensional strategies to produce agile, scalable innovations and business models that cannot easily be replicated by the competition.
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