

Editorial: Strategic Leaders Should Know Better

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by Jay Gary

In 1932, science fiction writer and social prophet H.G. Wells claimed that while vision had created the motorcar, it was lack of foresight that produced traffic jams. “All these new things . . . come crowding along; every one is fraught with consequences, and yet it is only after something has hit us hard that we set about dealing with it” (Wells, as cited in Slaughter, 1989, p. 3). Well’s statement challenges us today to examine our unchecked visions.

I can remember three times throughout my adulthood that the paradox of vision without foresight hit the U.S. hard: the 1973 Oil Embargo, the 1979 Three Mile Island accident and the Y2K crisis. The lesson for leaders is that good visions like the car or computer, progressive visions like nuclear energy or even faith-based visions cannot presume to stand on their own merits apart from considering their unintended consequences. The lesson here is that even when strategic leaders claim they have a measure of foresight—that in itself is not enough.

For the past year I have been teaching futures studies in the School of Leadership Studies at Regent University. When people hear that Regent is focusing on the future, they often assume that students ponder the high-tech inventions of 2050. To a degree, organizational futurists do master the skills of environmental scanning, competitive business intelligence, knowledge creation or benchmarking new technologies.

But contrary to popular perception, the study of the future is not an attempt to predict what *will* happen, but as Wells admonished, to consider what *might* happen, in order to take preventive and precautionary measures. This fits well with the concept of a strategic leader as the servant of the wise organization that works for a triple bottom line of economic prosperity, ethical good and ecological recovery.

Only team foresight and corporate wisdom can overturn the often mentioned litany of project management, covering six phases: 1) initial enthusiasm, 2) disillusionment, 3) panic, 4) search for the guilty, 5) punishment of the innocent and 6) promotion of the non-participants.

Ireland and Hitt (1999) claim the “Great Leader” view of strategic leadership is the problem. They find that “substantial numbers of CEOs have adopted the notion that strategic leadership responsibilities are theirs alone” (p. 45). These CEOs see their primary task as choosing a vision for their organization and carrying it out. The “Great Leader” model is still attractive in the religious and military sector, where unity of command is valued. While appropriate for the predictability of the past, today’s global economy prevents “single individuals from having all the insights necessary to chart a firm’s direction” (Ireland & Hitt, p. 45).

In contrast to the “Great Leader” model, according to Ireland and Hitt, we need a “Great Groups” model of strategic leadership. Rather than centralize foresight in the judgment of the CEO, a great group sees the

organization as a community where strategic leadership and the foresight function is distributed among diverse individuals “who share the responsibility to create a viable future for their firm” (Ireland & Hitt, p. 46).

Recently, I've taken a research interest in the work of a Swedish firm that is developing a “Foresight Style Assessment” tool that leaders can use to help their teams relate to change (Dian, 2003). This tool, based on innovation theory, proposes that people have a style preference for one of six roles with respect to change: Futurist, Activist, Opportunist, Flexist, Equilibrist or Reactionist. The *Futurist* is the long-term thinker who gets satisfaction in generating ideas. The *Activist* advocates the one best future they see, rather than generate conceptual options. The *Opportunist* is not bound to convictions but aims to capture prevailing wind or trend. The *Flexist* is a style player who is oriented to present relationships. The *Equilibrist* has an innate sense of the larger system and strives for balance and equity. The *Reactionist* acts against change and digs in their heels when they sense new directions might invalidate shared traditions. The main lesson this tool teaches teams is that it is okay for people to address change from different vantage points. Not everyone has to be a Futurist, and there is even a role for the team Reactionist. Dian (2003) claims diversity in groups is vital—it can lead to a richer solution set. To that degree, great groups become great because they value all styles toward change.

That being established, what will future generations say about our vision? Will they say we had both the vision and foresight to redeem a runaway world? Or will they say we were captive to one-dimensional ideology that was reactive at worse, responsive at best? It is not enough, as leaders, to develop a great vision for the future. Organizational communities are needed to assess the secondary and tertiary impacts of any great endeavor.

So, strategic foresight or the new strategic planning, as Mintzberg (1994) claims, does not boast it can determine the future, but settles for more modest aims, such as a) preparing for the inevitable, b) preempting the undesirable and c) controlling the controllable. As we move into the future, caution, not control needs to be the watchword. Strategic leaders should know better that vision without foresight lacks insight.

About the Author



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