

# Foresight: Engaging with the Unknowable

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# The future is unknowable – it is inherently open-ended

*“Any invention, any discovery, which consists essentially in the elaboration of a radically new concept cannot be predicted, for a necessary part of the prediction is the present elaboration of the very concept whose discovery or invention was to take place only in the future. The notion of the prediction of Radical conceptual innovation is itself conceptually incoherent.”*



A. MacIntyre (1985, p.93)

# Organizations and the Future

- Organizations are systems for reducing equivocality – for standardizing behavior and enhancing predictability
- However:
  - (a) the categories of standardization are inherently incomplete
  - (b) The environment is inherently uncertain

# Organizations and the Future

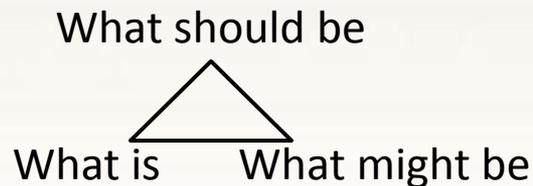
- (a) To what extent is there a knowledge base for anticipating important events?
- (a) To what extent is there a stock of knowledge on which to draw for undertaking action?

## Organizations and the Future: A typology

<p><b>The extent to which there is a stock of knowledge on which to draw for undertaking action</b></p>	High	<p><b>Contingency planning</b> e.g. Man-made catastrophes; natural calamities</p>	<p><b>Forecasting Techniques</b> e.g. Seasonal demand</p>
	Low	<p><b>Scenario based learning</b> e.g. Disruptive technologies; Abrupt political changes</p>	<p><b>Analogical reasoning</b> e.g. Nation building</p>
		Low	High
		<p><b>The extent to which there is a knowledge base for anticipating important events</b></p>	

# Scenario-based Organizational Learning

- Uncertainty cannot be eliminated
- A process to prepare the organization to see discontinuities
- *Foresightful organization*: a sharpened ability to see, observe and *perceive*, i.e see differences between how things canonically should be and how they actually are or might be



- Beyond institutionalized categories to contextual adaptation and improvisation
- SBOL creates “memories of the future”

*“The language of scenarios is about the future, but they should make a difference in what is happening now. If it is successful in embedding different models of the business environments in the consciousness of the organization, it will make the organization more aware of environmental change, Through early conceptualization and effective internal communication scenario planning can make the organization a more skillful observer of its business environment. By seeing change earlier the organization has the potential to become more responsive.”*

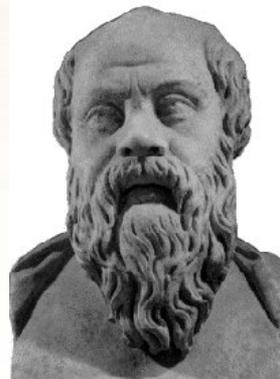
K.Van der Heijden (1996, p.118)

*“The ‘jolt’ in this case was that on considering the scenarios, there was a realization within the senior management team that their success formula – which had served them well for 20 years – was unlikely to generate the same success in the future. It did not matter much which scenario one looked at; there were a number of changes in the contextual environment which they had not previously heeded, and which made it unlikely that the organization could continue to succeed in the future without fundamental rethinking taking place in the organization.”*

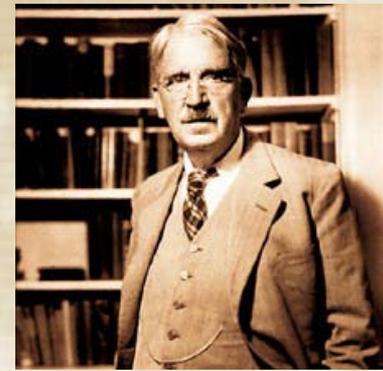
K. Van der Heijden et al. (2002, p.177)

Foresightful action is possible through greater *self-knowledge*, i.e. clarity about one's behavioral tendencies – aware of one's potentiality

Potentialities are interactively produced



*“The object of foresight of consequences is not to predict the future. It is to ascertain the meaning of present activities and to secure, so far as possible, a present activity with a unified meaning.*



*Hence the problem of deliberation is not to calculate future happenings but to appreciate present proposed actions. We judge present desires and habits by their tendency to produce certain consequences... Deliberation is not calculation of indeterminate future results. The present, not the future is ours. No shrewdness, no store of information will make it ours. But by constant watchfulness concerning the tendency of acts, by noting disparities between former judgments and actual outcomes, and tracing that part of the disparity that was due to deficiency and excess in disposition, we come to know the meaning of present acts, and to guide them in the light of that meaning.”*

J.Dewey (1988, p.143-144)

# The skill of organizational foresightfulness

Foresightfulness becomes an *organizational skill* when future-oriented thinking ceases to be a specialized activity undertaken by experts and/or senior managers, in which they engage from time to time in order to deal with something called 'the future,' but acquires the status of expertise that is widely distributed throughout the organization and is spontaneously put to action.

# The skill of organizational foresightfulness (cont.)

A foresightful organization is one whose members spontaneously forge connections between past, present and future. In other words, organizational foresightfulness is fully developed when it becomes an institutionalized capacity of unobtrusively responding to an organization's circumstances so that the organization may get around in the world.

Dealing with the future becomes a pervasive, *background* organizational skill, not a focal art.

A foresightful organization is *subsidiarily* aware of the past and the future while *focally* engaging in the present. It is aware of the fact that it ought to be able to continue being attractive to customers in the future, while serving them in the present on the basis of abilities it has acquired in the past. While engaging in its primary task, it is unobtrusively adjusting its service to carry on drawing in customers in the future.

An organization develops its subsidiary awareness of the future by developing its *distentive* capability – the ability to narratively link past, present, and future.

*“I’m turning over to you a sacred trust and I want you to bear in mind everyday and every hour you preside over this military government and civil affairs venture. Our people sometimes say that soldiers are stupid. I must admit at times we are. Sometimes our people think we are extravagant with the public money, that we squander it, spend it recklessly. I don’t agree that we do. We are in a business where it’s difficult always to administer your affairs as a businessman can administer his affairs in a company, and good judgment sometimes requires us to build a tank that turns out not to be what we want, and we scrap that and build another one... But even though people say we are extravagant, that in itself isn’t too disastrous....”*



*(continued...)*

*“But we have great asset and that is that our people, our countrymen, do not distrust us and do not fear us. Our countrymen, our fellow citizens, are not afraid of us. They don’t harbor any ideas that we intend to alter the government of the country or the nature of this government in any way. This is a sacred trust that I turn over to you today... I don’t want to do anything, and I don’t want to permit the enormous corps of military governors that you are in the process of training and that you are going to dispatch all over the world, to damage this high regard in which the professional soldiers in the Army are held by our people, and it could happen, it could happen, Hilldring, if you don’t understand what you are about.”*

*G.Marshall, Chief of Staff, US Army, World War II, (cited in Neustadt and May, 1986, pp 247-8)*