

# Future Before You Plan

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*(with the assistance of Edward Lindaman)*

*(My colleague, Ed Lindaman, died in China in August, 1982.*

*As a full-time futurist he was my mentor and inspiration.*

*The presentation in this chapter is derived from a  
book in progress which we were co-authoring.)*

For the past 5 years I have been discovering how important and different an activity futuring is a prelude and adjunct to strategic planning or MBO or other approaches to long and short range goal setting. I'd like to report some of my discoveries and the designs which have emerged as organization development strategies.

## **Images of Potential vs. a Problem-Pain Focus**

Twelve years ago a team of graduate students, in a social research methods course, made a study of about 25 problem-solving planning and goal setting groups, such as agency boards and staff goal setting sessions. The sessions were tape recorded. The analysis indicated that such groups usually began with some type of inventory of problems, sometimes called a problem census. The coding of the tapes from these sessions revealed an increase of depression in voices from one 15 minute interval to the next.

A second finding was an increase in the frequency of statements of attribution of the causation of problems to sources outside the control of the group, which was interpreted as mobilizing a rationale for rejecting problem solving responsibility. A third finding was an increase in the frequency of words and phrases indicating feelings of impotence, futility, and frustration. When the decisions, goals, and plans of the groups were assessed, they seemed to indicate short term symptom oriented goals aimed at getting away from pain rather than moving toward positive future-oriented goals.

These findings led three of us (1) to begin experimenting with what we called "image of potentiality" exercises. To quote from our work at that time, "The motivations and perspectives generated by getting away from pain are not likely to contain the creativity or to generate the energy that derives from aspirations generated by images of concrete feasible steps toward desirable goals. Images of potential are not only strong initial sources of direction and motivation, but they also provide the basis for continuous feedback, motivation and renewal...The excitement and rationality of taking initiative toward the future must replace the anxiety associated with reactive coping with confrontation." (1, p.4)

Working with many clients – school boards, agency staffs, company management, families, and individuals – I affirmed many times the validity of this observation. But I had a growing concern about the quality of the imagination revealed in some of the imagery. Then I met the futurists.

## **The Development of Futurism.**

Three years ago I found myself on the long-range planning task force of the National Council of the YMCA. It was chaired by a full-time professional futurist, Edward Lindaman. Twenty years earlier he had joined the new offbeat World Future Society. He was soon to become director of planning of the Apollo mission to the moon. Let me quote a brief historical statement from Ed Lindaman. (2, p.3,4)

Thinking about the future is increasing rapidly. This is a hopeful sign. The membership of the World Future Society, for example, has grown from a few thousand in the late sixties to well over 20,000 persons world-wide. The National Conference of State Legislatures recently held a major conference under the theme "Foresight Activities in State Legislatures." The defined legislative foresight as the function 'by which the legislative process anticipates and deals with approaching problems, issues, needs, and opportunities, and by which the potential future impacts of pending or proposed legislation are determined, analyzed, and assessed.'

In 1972 Congress established the Office of Technology Assessment to provide early indications of the probably beneficial and adverse impacts of the application of technology, and to develop other coordinate information which may assist Congress. They have already done future-impact studies in the fields of energy, the ocean, health, transportation, and world trade.

In 1976 a group of eleven members of Congress created an organization entitled 'The Congressional Clearing House on the Future.' Now more than two hundred congressmen and their staff members meet monthly to discuss issues that affect the future. The organization is for the purpose of assisting members of Congress to become more aware of the ways in which the future is affected by today's decisions.

Many states have futures programs, including: Hawaii 2000, Goals for Georgia, Idaho Tomorrow, Alternatives for Washington 1985, California Tomorrow, and many others. Major universities now offer extensive courses, even degrees, in futuring. The World Future Society recently published a book entitled The Future: A Guide to Information Sources. It has 600 pages!

On the way to the moon the Apollo astronauts made tiny 'mid-course corrections' that enabled them to land at an exact predetermined spot on the moon. The corrections were small, but because the moon was far away they made a big difference. It is like that with us. Some of the changes we make in society, in our lives, or in our organizations seem insignificant, but over the years they can have a major impact.

### **Where We Get Our Data From to Think About the Future**

1. In our culture we tend to avoid or neglect reflecting on our past (as a country, community, organization, or self) as a source of perspective in thinking about the future. With many clients we have found a Decades Exercise (1, p.11) very revealing. The group brainstorms the memory of themes and events of the past by decades, and reflects on the meaning of those themes – as achievements, mistakes, important values, successful copings, etc.
2. A second neglected source of data for future planning is a review of policies and priority goals we have set and have not yet fully actualized.
3. A third more familiar source is input from our assessments and surveys of the needs, expectations, desires of those we serve as clients, consumers, and markets.
4. A fourth source of data is the review of our own current operations and achievements. Unfortunately, we tend to focus on the problem-pains instead of including the accomplishments we are proud of. To balance this we use a "Prouds and Sorries" exercise (1, p.17) with our clients.

5. A fifth source of data is the policies and goals set by those above us in our systems. These must be related to as we do our own goal setting.
6. A sixth very familiar source is the extrapolations and trend analyses and predictions about the future made by “the extrapolators.”
7. A seventh source of input to help us think creatively in the future tense is a scan of the goals and successes of others which we see as comparable or relevant to our situations.

All of these are triggers for our own imagination in projecting our scenarios for the future.

### **Preferring vs. Predicting**

In a presentation to the NTL Laboratory on Futuring at Bethel in July, 1982 Edward Lindaman remarked, “If we could only have used a small proportion of the millions of hours humankind has devoted to trying to predict the future in imagining preferred future options, we would be living in a different world today.” Efforts at predicting have been of little value, and lead to a reactive psychology of adapting or fitting in rather than a pro-active posture of “what do we want.” In his remarks Lindaman quoted a leading futurist, John McHale, “The question is no longer can we change the world, but rather the question now is, ‘What kind of world do we want?’.”

In his newsletter, Future Tense (3) Lindaman quotes Professor Magoroh Maruyama of Portland State University,

We are now entering an era of transition of a different nature. It is a transition from a chain of stationary patterns – which the population accepted as given – to a duration of perpetually transforming patterns which depend upon people’s will and choice. It is a transition between types of transitions. This can be called a meta-transition.

Lindaman goes on to say that Professor Maruyama “suggests that this cultural symbiosis (the accelerating interaction of what are sometimes severe opposites – for mutual benefit) demands a totally different educational philosophy.”

The Pulitzer Prize-winning biologist, Rene Dubos, who died February, 1982 said in his last essay on “A Celebration of Life”:

Human beings inevitably alter the course of events and make mockery of any attempt to predict the future from an extrapolation of existing trends. In human affairs, the logical future, determined by past and present conditions, is less important than the willed future, which is largely brought about by deliberate choices – made by human free will. Our societies have a good chance of remaining prosperous because they are learning to anticipate, long in advance, the shortages and dangers they might experience in the future if they do not take technologically sound preventative measures.

Many have challenged our enthusiasm about future tense thinking. Their personal experiences have caused them to question “whether there is much point in trying to think about the future or plan for the future.” They feel, “It just leads to disappointment because things are so unpredictable,” or “Forces outside of our control are really calling the shots.”

Our experiences with ourselves and with many persons, groups, organizations, and communities confirm the insights of the poet, Bradford Shank, when he observes: (4, p. 30)

The sleeping person (or group)

Resembles a Brownian particle  
Tossed about in a meaningless  
And endless dance.  
But the awakened person (or group)  
Like Maxwell's demon  
Chooses among the influences  
Emanating from their environment –  
Admitting those which favor their purposes  
Avoiding those which hinder –  
Thus steering an increasingly  
Self-determined course  
Toward inwardly chosen goals

And later he adds: (p. 41)

The future holds unpatterned potentialities  
Which are molded into a unified whole  
By all nature.  
The bolder strokes of creation  
Involving vast and enduring masses  
Are fixed for you and me  
But the finer details of the pattern  
Lie within our creative influence.  
And the amplification  
Of small but consistent choices  
Confers the geometrically mounting  
Power of time  
Upon the enlightened choosers.

So the job of preferred futuring requires that we examine the data of the past, the present, and the events, trends, and developments (EDTs) going on around in our world, community, organization, and personal lives. Then we use these data to imagine and envision images of the future that we prefer, not limited by presently perceived frontiers, yet triggered by the realities of the present and emerging human technological situation.

Then we take that commitment to preferred and prioritized images and move toward intentional action by preparing a goal-and-action implementation plan which will make optimal use of the human and technical resources of the organization.

### **Differentiating Futuring and Planning**

As we have worked with organization leaders, top managements, and planning teams on the futuring and planning process, we have been impressed with the different psychological postures, group climates, and types of activity designs involved in the freedom of futuring and the discipline of planning. We have asked quite a few groups that have been through the flow of work to list some of the distinctions they can make, form their own experience. Here is an incomplete list of the distinctions they have proposed.

<b>Futuring</b>	<b>Planning</b>	<b>Futuring</b>	<b>Planning</b>
Right brain	Left brain	Images	Goals
Day dream	Decision	Scenarios	Objectives

Predicting	Intending	Expansive	Limited
Wide angle	Zoom	Prefer	Commit
Prefer	Design	Searching	Defining
Creative	Methodical	Hypothesis	Conclusion
Fluid	Disciplined	Surveying	Mapping
Free-wheeling	Focused	Abstract	Concrete
Visionary	Structured	Sensing	Risking
Unstructured	Structured	Mind	Brain
Field oriented	Linear	Mystic	Engineer
Conjecturing	Deriving	Spontaneity	Discipline
Guessing	Concluding	Explore	Map
Ambiguous	Certain	Direction	Path
Open	Committed	Stretching	Condensing
Non-judgmental	Evaluative	Inclusive	Selective
Qualitative	Quantitative	Forecast	Decide
Comprehensive	Bottom-line	Possible	Feasible
Rainbow	Black-white-gray	Alternatives	Consequence analysis
Intuitive	Systematic		

### **A Case Example of the Flow of Work from Futuring to Planning**

In order to be concrete in presentation of the model I have chosen a decentralized human service system. The flow of the process, with small adaptations, is comparable to that which we have utilized in private sector production systems, higher education, communities, local, state, and federal government units, professional associations, and action “cause” groups. Available reports are listed at the end of the case.

#### **1. Creating a leadership nucleus**

A group of key persons (“listened to,” “able to get things done”) from the horizontal and vertical structure of the system were nominated and invited to participate in a three-hour “What it might be like if” session to explore the model of futuring and planning. The nominators had considered age, sex, and racial mix as well as location in the system and evidence of leadership initiative and respect.

The three-hour session included experiences in retrieving the past, prioritizing “prouds and sorries” about present operations, and a review of a sample of events, trends, and developments in the society and in their organization.

Then the group, in heterogeneous tables of 6, took a future trip five years ahead. They made observations of things that pleased them (behaviors, policies, attitudes, structures, etc.) which were results of their five years of work. These observations were in the form of brainstorm call-outs, in the present tense, of all the preferred images anyone could imagine and call out. They had to be concrete. They were not predictions or fantasies, but desired possible scenarios.

The 30 persons at five tables created 95 images of desired futures. Energy and excitement were high. The newsprint sheets from each table were posted for reading and each person had ten votes to cast on their top priority images.

The process was then halted. The possibility of using this procedure to involve the units of the organization in futuring was presented and ways were discussed in which this nucleus leadership group could guide the process. This involved plans to generate task forces to work on steps of action toward priority images.

#### **2. Design for organization futuring**

At this first session the nucleus group broke into volunteer task forces to:

- A. Develop the materials for futuring sessions of organizational units,
- B. Retrieve, edit, prepare the events, developments, and trends materials needed as stimulus for futuring,
- C. Prepare a “where we have come from” and “what we are proud of” statement from interviews with the historians and leaders of the organization,
- D. Train pairs of persons, including nucleus group members, to lead and document the organization futuring sessions.

Future kits were prepared and sessions conducted with organization staff units throughout the geographically decentralized system. The Board and top corporate staff were involved in futuring sessions.

### 3. Creating Integrated Scenarios of Preferred Futures

The nucleus group created a special team of five and two editorial staff writers to read the input of prioritized future images from the 40 Future Shop sessions, representing input from over 1500 persons. There were many items of agreement in the data from the different sessions. The 25 top priority images were selected and one page scenarios were written of what that image might look like, concretely, if it were achieved or in the process of being achieved.

These scenarios went to the planning staff, Executive Council, and Board to begin work on goal formation, feasibility analysis, priority sequencing, and potential implementation responsibilities.

### 4. Decisions on major goal thrusts

A Board-staff two-day workshop worked in small team task forces on converting the preferred future scenarios into detailed goal statements, with measurable criteria of achievement, and identification of the units in the system that would need to have responsibility for setting and implementing operational goals and designing the steps of action and budget proposals.

The work of the task forces was presented to the total Board as 5 year goal and budget recommendations: recommendations of procedures for assignment of implementation planning responsibility, and for feedback on this reality testing phase which it was recognized could influence some reformulation of the goal statements.

### 5. Operational goal setting and implementation designing

The key point is that all the staff units now involved in making implementation designs and commitments had been involved in futuring sessions, preceded by event-development-trend analysis, including trends in their own part of the system, and review of their own “prouds and sorries.”

There was no sense that goals were imposed from on high; there was a sense that they had contributed imaginative input based on materials and activities that helped them to be, as Lindaman would say, “at least 10% futurists.”

### 6. The continuous process of progress measurement, scanning, and re-futuring

The planning staff of the organization worked on a pilot basis with several units to develop a feasible, do-able procedure of stepwise progress analysis and reporting which would help each unit to define its own progress toward achievement of the organization goals. National goal monitors were selected for each goal, to receive, review, and report on progress and to identify outstanding progress to be recognized and celebrated.

An EDT scanning task force had the job of identifying new important trends in the environment or in the organization which should be used as a basis for generating new images of potential and ideas of re-futuring.

### **Some Traps in the Futuring–Planning Process**

1. The most serious trap is the limiting of the process to a small team who attempt to “do the planning” for the organization. Not only does this greatly limit the resources of experience and imagination mobilized for future imagery, but it tremendously reduces the level of commitment and motivated energy available to implement the goals.
2. Another trap is to limit the efforts to scan the environment of trends and activities which have major implications for possible futures. The futurist literature is exploding, and the information revolution is generating, for most of us, an overload of data. We must organize our retrieval and analysis efforts and teams.
3. A third trap is to confuse predicting and preferring. Clarification of preferences involves clarification of our values, which often involves confrontation and revision of our organization mission statements.
4. A fourth trap is to short-circuit the process of priority analysis of preferred images, and the converting of images of potential into concrete well-formulated goal statements.
5. Another trap is to limit right brain creativity during the disciplined process of implementation planning. The diagnostic analysis of alternative way of achieving the accepted goals often is a rather constricted process of considering “how we have done it.” Real mind-stretching brainstorm of alternative action ideas can free up the implementation planning to a productive and creative process.
6. The sixth, very frequent trap, when good action plans have been made, is to neglect the crucial step of rehearsal before planning for keeps in the risky world of action. In our work on “connecting images to action” (1, p.71; 2, p.35), we have tried to look at the big gap between goal plans and skillful action.

### **Summary Comments**

I hope this has provided the reader with an orientation and design which complements and supplements the more familiar orientations of strategic and long-range planning. From my experience with clients, these activities are a very motivating and insight-producing intervention. And a whole new world of reading has become part of my personal professional growth program.

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