

What's Your Future...Six Steps for Gaining Strategic Foresight

By Dr. Merlin Switzer

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

African Proverb

"We are all time travelers on a journey into the future," writes Edward Cornish in his book, Futuring – The Exploration of the Future. The writer of the African proverb understood this, but also understood that preparation for tomorrow begins today. The future is coming...for you, for me, and the organizations we represent. What steps have you taken to prepare for it? "Ah," you say, "who has time with all that must be done?" Yes, the tyranny of the urgent is always the enemy of the future. As a career public servant, I understand the challenges of officiating in the tug-of-war between the urgency of the present and the looming future. However, not preparing for the future leaves one in a perpetual state of crisis management. If you are tired of living in this state...if you want to chart a course for your organization with greater confidence and preparedness, then this article is for you. You will learn how to develop strategic foresight that will help you prepare for the future.

What is Strategic Foresight?

Webster's defines foresight as "thoughtful regard or provision for the future." Nick Marsh in his book, Strategic Foresight – The Power of Standing in the Future, says, "Future Studies involves the examination of key trends and their outcomes, with the hope of successfully influencing those outcomes." Strategic foresight is a way of getting a perspective of what the future holds and working backward to determine what steps need to be taken today in an effort to experience a preferred future tomorrow.

In his book, The Extreme Future, James Canton defines three time categories: Near-term (one to three years), mid-term (three to five years), and long-term (ten to fifty years). Strategic foresight is generally focused at the mid- or long-term time frame.

Six Steps to Develop Strategic Foresight

Andy Hines in his article, "Strategic Foresight," identifies six critical steps to develop the foresight you need to navigate in this rapidly changing environment: Framing, Scanning, Forecasting, Visioning, Planning, and Acting.

Framing – Framing is identifying the focus...the issue...for which strategic foresight is needed. There are many potential issues an organization may be concerned about; but which few are most important? Taking time to clarify what is most important to the organization's mission will help avoid focusing on too many issues, or the wrong issues.

Scanning – The second step is scanning. Scanning is the process of looking internally and externally to identify what is on the horizon that may impact the organization relative to the issues you framed in the prior step. Usually, change occurs in one of five areas: societal, technological, economical, environmental, and/or political. Some examples relative to training are technological advances in e-learning, societal shifts in the workforce, the recessionary impact on organizations, the environmental "go green" emphasis, and political decisions about public retirement systems. Scanning is a way to identify the driving forces behind the changes, while they are still on the horizon.

Alternative Futures – The third step is creating alternative futures...pictures of what the future may hold. There are three different types of potential futures. In the book, Scenario Planning, three categories of futures are introduced: possible, probably, and preferred. Possible futures include a wide range of options. The further out the time frame, the more potential options exist. Considering the nature of the issue, some futures are more probable than others. Among these many futures, there will be a preferred future...how you want things to turn out?

There are five benefits for taking time to identify alternative futures. First, you are less likely to be surprised by the future. Second, your organization will be better prepared to successfully deal with the future. Third, it encourages an organization to think about current assumptions. Fourth, it allows the organization to conduct an "if...then" analysis. Fifth, the organization can plan and act differently now.

Preferred Future – The fourth step is deciding the preferred future for the organization. This step focuses attention back to the present. Considering the range of possible futures, what is the best for the organization? It is important that the strategic foresight process connect the preferred future with the organization. It is a way of saying, "Here is where we are and here is where we want to be in the future."

Planning – The fifth step involves planning. Given the gap between where we are and where we want to be, what does the organization need to do to bridge the gap? This is where planning develops specific goals and strategies to move the organization in the direction of the desired future. This is strategic planning.

Acting – The last step is acting and is where the planning is implemented. Like any planning process, communication is vital, as is involving the people who will be impacted, namely employees and stakeholders. What processes will be changed? How will progress be evaluated? Who is responsible for which strategies? Who are the executive sponsors? These and other questions must be thought through.

This does not mean that the organization moves forward blindly from this point. Rather, the scanning process needs to continue in order to identify further changes in the environment and feed that information back into the organization. This requires a willingness to learn, be flexible, stay humble, and balance the tyranny of the urgent with future preparedness.

Futurists in Training

Recognizing the importance of leaders having a futures perspective, the California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST), developed an extensive course entitled, Law Enforcement Command College. The purpose of this training is “to prepare law enforcement leaders of today for the challenges of the future.” Key elements of this eighteen-month program are:

- Leadership principles needed to influence the future direction of the organization
- Strategies to identify emerging issues and provide a proactive response
- Skills and knowledge necessary to anticipate and prepare for the future
- Methods and benefits of sharing information
- Use of stakeholders in problem solving

During the program, students must scan various sources to identify emerging issues and explain how those issues may impact the law enforcement profession or the student’s department and/or community. Each student must submit a final research paper that demonstrates futures competency by identifying an emerging futures issue that will affect California law enforcement.

One student identified an emerging issue as: How will law enforcement leaders motivate employees to accept change in 2010 (ten years out)? Trends indicated that change would continue to accelerate, that managers needed to be more conversant in transition management, and employee buy-in was essential for successful implementation of change. The research provided the basis for developing a course entitled, Leading Effective Organizational Change. The course was provided to more than 400 supervisors and managers in the student’s organization to prepare them to be more effective in leading change.

Conclusion

John M. Richardson, Jr. wrote, “When it comes to the future, there are three kinds of people: those who let it happen, those who make it happen, and those who wonder what happened.” Perhaps there is a fourth: those who resist it happening. The real question is, “which one are you?” Organizations, especially in government, need leaders who will help their organizations develop the strategic foresight needed to prepare for the future. Cooperative Personnel Services has the expertise and experience needed to be a partner in helping your agency move toward a desired future.

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Bio

Dr. Merlin Switzer works exclusively in the field of leadership. He holds a Doctor of Strategic Leadership with an emphasis in Leadership Coaching. Dr. Switzer is a leadership coach, consultant, trainer, and conference speaker. He has worked with numerous leaders and organizations across the U.S. to help leaders be more effective. More recently, he has worked with leaders in Ecuador and Cambodia.

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