

# Foresight in Challenging Environments

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## Abstract

*Written as an action learning practitioner inquiry, this article explores foresight in challenging environments. These include organizational and institutional contexts, that are in trauma, that are risk averse, beset by change fatigue, or believe that change is impossible. Methods as processes for successful foresight are suggested.*

**Keywords:** Foresight, Metaphors, CLA and Visioning.

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## Introduction

Foresight in itself is a challenging practice. As James Dator has said many times. “It is an unnatural act.” (Dator, 2002). Research from brain science as championed by futurist Jake Dunagan has arrived at a similar conclusion (2016). When the mind searches for the future, it sees the past. There is a strong correlation with the parts of the brain related to past events when “the future” is envisioned. Thus, we see, as Marshall McLuhan (Carmody, 2011) suggested decades ago, “the future with a rearview mirror.” Brain science research, however, is contested, with some, such as Moshe Bar (2007) asserting “the human brain is continuously busy generating predictions that approximate the relevant future.” As Dator (2009) argues: “our brain is constantly anticipating what is about to happen, and comparing its expectation with reality in order to improve subsequent forecasts.”

Whether our brains resist the future, or anticipate it, certainly the rigorous use of the methods and tools of futures studies can make a difference. Empirical research suggests that optimization results. In a recent study (Rohrbeck and Kum, 2018), firms that were futures literate increased their profits and market share significantly when they imagined the future, engaged in horizon scanning, and acted on their research.

For sure, Futures studies or futures thinking has become far less of a challenging practice in the past two decades. Claims of futurists that the rate of change is increasing, even exponentially so, no longer seem alarmist. With the Fall of the Soviet Union, the invention of the internet, the rise of the peer to peer revolution, three and four dimensional printing, the transformation of the Chinese state from communist to extreme capitalist, disruption in business after business - the future is not what is used to be. Other cultures too have joined in as with the rise of Afro-futurism, imagining a world where it is not America but Wakanda that is the global center.

With the adventures of Elon Musk and the rise of corporate foresight, futures studies has become a buzzword. Everyone is doing futures, it seems.

Taking a first person reflective approach, in this essay, I explore four arenas where the practice of foresight is particularly challenging. These are (1) Hearing the trauma, (2) Risk aversion and the role of narrative, (3) The Monday morning question and action learning, (4) Nothing can work here and finding the zone of control.

## **Hearing the trauma: pain yesterday, pain today, pain tomorrow**

Still, there are some environments that are far amenable than others. I remember working in the former Yugoslavia, in Dubrovnik, only a decade after the city had been shelled. Students at the workshop had little interest in the increasing rate of change or positive possibilities. They were still experiencing post-traumatic stress syndrome. The thought of imagining a desired future seemed hopeless, a cruel trick to evoke hope and then crush it. Sensitive to their concerns, we changed the workshop focus. Participation flourished as we imagined the worst case scenario. Now creativity was at its peak. Once the ideas of the worst case - EU takeover, American Mcdonaldization, return of Serbian aggression - had been exhausted, then participants could easily imagine a green, organic, pedestrian friendly Dubrovnik. The imagined future was only possible once the reality of the past extended had been acknowledged. A new present could be created.

On a health futures project with indigenous peoples in Australia, the project changed from a focus on the number of Aboriginal surgeons and doctors needed for 2030 - a workforce planning issue - to a futures process where indigenous persons were politically empowered. In this future recasted, the prime minister and other key ministers were first nations people. Using the Causal layered analysis (CLA) game process (Inayatullah & Milojevic, 2015), they expanded the future from a technical question to a transformative vision of the restructuring of power. This startled the Ministry who was funding the project, as for them, while certainly appreciative of deep change, they still saw this process as empirically-led with stakeholder involvement. That the stakeholders would change the nature of the terms of reference became confronting. For the indigenous persons in the room, they took a long time to warm up, as they needed evidence that futures studies was not one more trick of cultural colonization. Trauma was historical and present. Lived pain and access to power had to be heard and solutions within the framework of participants created. These solutions had to ensure that the real problems were addressed, not exploration within the current institutional frameworks. The result has been a move toward a process of health self-determination. The futures work has been among a series of interventions responsible for changing the landscape.

This is difficult in real-time situations. Working with the Ministry of local communities, I found myself presenting at the end of the day to a tired audience of over 550 rural mayors, CEOs, and planners. I was to provide a horizon scan of the changing world - the rise of China, artificial intelligence in farming, climate change, new national measurements beyond GDP were some of the issues I was focused on. For them, already depressed by depopulated towns, major funding drops, all they heard was their world was ending. They resorted to heckling. The minders from the Ministry, noticing that the audience was turning, immediately left the room to hide. Instead of addressing their trauma, I continued to speak. I would say at least 50% of the audience tuned out, increasing their alcoholic beverage in-take. I should have stopped the speech about future challenges and pivoted toward their concerns of being powerless, but I was unable to process the collective discomfort. Instead, I hurried through the final slides. Afterwards, numerous council CEO's and planners came up to me after the speech, largely to share in the pain, stating that my fifteen minutes of suffering was their daily reality. They were thankful for my efforts to lift the conversation toward alternative futures. The next day numerous Mayors apologized to me, saying their behavior was disappointing. But for me, it was clear that I had been unable to present futures in a way that could help them find ways out of their personal financial and emotional depression.

Certainly then, working with collectivities where trauma is present can be challenging; equally confronting are risk averse cultures. For the futurist as well, there can be trauma. And thus, sharing experiences, case studies, and stories, is critical. Colleagues can provide advice, sympathy. As one colleague told me after I shared with her my experience of working with rural mayors: “You now have a wonderful ‘war’ story.” The event became a part of my learning process, and not a failed speech.

## **Risk aversion - Finding and the metaphor to change the story**

Unfortunately, risk aversion tends to be the reality of most education departments. Caught between the cross-fire of parents who remember the good old days, students who wish for real-time change, media who are looking for a sensationalist story, and teachers, who, while supportive of innovation are tired that every change adds to their daily things to do list. Conditions of exhaustion are not supportive of innovation.

One large education department asked us to take the government’s educational leaders, public and private, through a three day foresight process. While excited, I immediately saw the warning signs when instead of a room that would encourage peer to peer interaction, we were placed in the premier/governor’s room. The stage towered over participants, with the paintings of the great leaders of the past staring down at them. The workshop in itself was fruitful. They imagined a new system that was student/child focused, engaged with students from other parts of the world via large AI augmented screens, innovation was central to what they did, learning from the best and brightest throughout the world. After the workshop, I was commissioned to write up the report of the scenarios, visions and strategies. The report took a week to write. However, the Minister’s office took over six months to release the report. Once released it was devoid of any actual content. I was puzzled, why pay for something and then remove any suggestions for innovation? Then I remembered their core metaphor that emerged during the CLA process of their workshop. They imagined themselves to be knights in a castle surrounded by hungry wolves outside. The knights were the principals, the king the Minister; the queen, the director-general. And the wolves were parents, teachers, the media and students. This image has stayed with me for years. They were in Camelot, but danger lurked everywhere. The danger was real and present. Now I understood the report. The workshop had gone from forecasting educational futures to a transformational process. Internally they loved this: but externally they sensed the risks.

A few years earlier, in the same city, a futures workshop on transportation scenarios had successfully imagined the four infrastructure futures. The lead facilitator had casually mentioned, “let’s make the work relevant, of use to transport planners and citizens. This is not about forecasting when aliens will land in the city.” The next day, the largest newspaper in the region reported: “City planners imagine aliens landing.” The risk of public ridicule is real for those who wish to create alternatives. The metaphor of the castle surrounded by hungry wolves defined the deep views of the organization. They would spend on foresight, but not really act on it.

A large urban utility exhibited the same behavior. Keen to understand changing futures of water, energy use and consumer behavior, they commissioned a large foresight project. Senior managers developed a report on energy futures. They asked me to help make them futures ready, futures proof. After my presentation, they asked if I could stay after the board meeting. I did. During the board meeting, everything that emerged from the futures work was put aside. It was business-as-usual. When asked for comments: I suggested that the meeting was boring and useless. They were wasting our time and energy. But why were they behaving so? Again, it was in the metaphor part of the process that clarity came. They saw themselves as a large ship, Queen Elizabeth, with very little need to change. They had a state monopoly. Even though rationally they knew they had to change, at the narrative level, they really did not believe they should or would. The Queen, the crown, does not

change, others do. Given this reality, we articulated a metaphor that resonated. This was the Queen Elizabeth with four patrol boats leaving it, to venture forth and bring back information about distant lands. Patrol boat one was a project on smart homes, how to ensure that each home had real time information on water-electricity and gas use. Homes then themselves could reduce consumption or be aware of the price implications of their resource use. Patrol boat number two went further, going beyond the horizon. It investigated homes as energy producers. What would the state look like if each home produced its own energy? How would the grid be stabilized? What would be role of utility companies? The third patrol boat explored additive printing and energy? What would be the energy implications if each home or a group of homes, or a neighborhood, used three dimensional printers? These research projects were action learning experiments. The patrol boats left the mother ship, and would return with information, helping the Queen Elizabeth, slowly but certainly change direction. The process for this utility without a doubt is slow and cumbersome in that the returning boats can just be parked on the side, away from the captain's cabin.

The conclusion of these stories is that groups will be delighted to pay for information about the future, but far less likely to make the internal changes to strategy and human resources to follow up on these changes. This is often because the institutional or organizational metaphor runs counter to what is needed. They have become risk-averse.

For the futurist, merely giving more information - accurate, enlightening, challenging - does not necessarily lead to change. Rather the task is to understand the deep underlying narrative. Once that is found, then a new more appropriate story can be created that allows for the information to be recognizable. A global police department was engaged in a foresight process. During the workshop, we realized that the current metaphor was a "toothless tiger". In this context, information about the future would only have an academic interest - which in policing means none at all. The toothless tiger story ensures no real actions can result. An alternative narrative that emerged as preferred was the guard dog. The guard dog is community friendly, and thus community engagement becomes a necessity. A guard dog has bite, i.e., it can protect citizens and hurt offenders if need be. But most significantly, the guard dog acts as an early warning system. Within this narrative frame, information about the future now can be sensible, of tangible use. Foresight suddenly not only makes rational sense, it can be a story that can make a difference.

Futurist Steve Gould (2018) reports how one client was so tied to their historical mission and narrative, that they had become afraid of change. At every annual conference, they would go through the tired ritual of vision, mission, and strategy. Participants sensing that the culture was stale would throw a barrage of rocks in the form of critique, questioning, and judgement at the head executive. This "stoning" of the Head had become an annual ritual. Finally, one of the local divisions which had embarked on the futures process suggested that they use a futurist to challenge their rituals. Gould pointed out to them that they were living a used future (Inayatullah, 2015, p. 11), continuing yesterday as if it was still relevant. Using scenarios and CLA, he moved the discourse from rock throwing to we are in the boat together, i.e., "rowing, not throwing." This moved them from the past to a sense of agency, that they could create a new future.

Risk aversion is often based on fear of the future. This fear may not be endemic, but residing in particular persons who have a great deal to lose. Futurist Patricia Kelly (2008) suggests we move away from the language of resisters to the language of points of resistance.

A state level and global museum leader initiated a foresight process as they wished to move away from the traditional expert-based system of museum curation. We explored augmented realities, citizen-led curation, with the tagline of every person creates their own museum experience. While a number of visions and actionable strategies emerged, what was more important was the role of one of the museum directors. It became very clear that she would lead the resistance against innovation after the meeting was over. Not surprisingly, she was the Professor of Curating. For her, a move to peer to peer and crowd sourced methods was an affront to her expertise. To ensure

innovation throughout the system, her needs needed to be acknowledged. We used the integrated scenario (Inayatullah, 2015, p.41) method for this. In this process, the preferred future is first articulated. In this case the co-curated augmented reality museum. Then the disowned is expressed. In this case, the role of material reality and the role of expertise. Scenario three was the integrated - what would a future look like that was material and enhanced via augmented and virtual reality, that included expertise and the crowd? Scenario four was the outlier, what is beyond the horizon that we need to consider as we move forward? Scenario three eventually became the desired vision. Her point of resistance was the need to be valued and included. Museum leaders appreciated the need for traditional expertise and deep public engagement, curating.

In a project for one the largest construction companies in Australia, a similar process occurred. Senior managers suggested that their focus on profit, while sound, was not bringing in the best of industry graduates. Young graduates wanted to work for a corporation that was focused on green values, on environmental sustainability. One senior manager even suggested that they begin the process of imagining and designing spiritual communities. While ideas flew across the room, one person looked visibly distressed. When I inquired as to his silence. He was direct. “These people will ruin our company.” “Money makes the world go around, not values.” Using the integrated scenario methods, we then articulated the preferred future, which was a green construction company. The disowned future was “Profit - the only bottom line”. The integrated scenario focused on green projects that could make a profit, as measured through a triple bottom line process. The Chief Financial officer was now heard. I believe if he had not been, he would have certainly caught the ear of the CEO afterwards and ensured that the day remained intellectually interesting but devoid of any actions that resulted.

This is the issue of multi-dimensionality, understanding different perspectives, particularly the disowned. Dator (1998) writes that during a problem solving exercise for the Hawaii judiciary system in the 1970s, after three days of deliberation, the number one problem for employees was parking spaces. While this may be trivial to some, for a system steeped in hierarchy and a lack of space - high density - parking was everything. While important to explore other dimensions of justice, the views of the criminal justice system, the views of clients, the views of stakeholders and challenges to the present via artificial intelligence, the shift to mediation, or culturally appropriate dispute resolution, parking was also one dimension of reality that could easily be forgotten. Foresight needed to be all-dimensional to be successful, seeing the system from multiple perspectives.

## **Change fatigue and the Monday morning question**

A way to ensure action from foresight is through open space technology. Finding new narratives is crucial, as is, using the integrated scenario method. The impossible can then become if not the plausible, at the least the probable. Organizations are often concerned about Monday morning. They may be experiencing change-fatigue if not exhaustion for a number of reasons including internal and external politics. In this context, futures plus action learning through open space technology is a way forward.

With one ministry focused on rural health outcomes, the room was divided by horizons. Most of the group imagined a health care system that had moved from ministry-run, doctor-led and hospital-based to a system that was modelled after the five Ps of: (1) prevention (fence at the top of the hill instead of an ambulance at the bottom), (2) personal (precise, personalized medicine, i.e. tailored instead of one medicine shoe fits all), (3) predictive (using the latest from genomics and epidemiological research to predict health factors), (4) participatory (the patient as an active agent in her health, driving health, not being a passive passenger) and (5) partnerships (working with all health organizations to optimize outcomes). In this future, the hospital would recede in importance.



On the second day of the workshop, the health director in charge of the over all state health strategy was visibly disturbed. He was concerned that this vision, while laudable, would overly challenge current health systems. After all, “one cannot cut the ribbon on prevention” - that is Ministers used health projects as attention gaining-vote getting events. Moreover, as hospital funding was often a political issue, the emerging vision would challenge the budgetary process. Instead of narrative or scenario work, we shifted to open space technology. We asked the forty CEOs what projects they were interested in creating when they left the room. This was the Monday morning question. Ten individuals raised their hands and described their interests (a framework for prevention; creating prevention based HR systems; a plan to create new partnerships, home based health, for example). Participants moved to the issues that they found inspiring. Seven working groups were created. After an hour of facilitated brainstorming and real time research, the groups presented back. The director in the room in charge of overall funding, announced that all seven projects would be funded. The energy in the room was palpable. The future ceased to be far away, a dream, it had become reality. However, there remained the issue of the long-term future, the 5p vision. Ultimately, the long-term received 25% of the funding, and 75% for shorter term action learning projects. Energy and funding went to projects that directors actually believed in.

This differs from developing the traditional strategic plan, a list of items to do. I remember one project decades ago in Fiji on the futures of education in the Pacific. Funded by UNESCO, the project had inclusion and great foresight design, but the buy-in was not there. We ended the day with an official list of who does what and by when. Participants raised their hands, but, in fact, had no intention of going forward since there was no immediate funding for the projects. The future remained an ideal, not a co-created reality.

Recently also for a national police force, the day was to end with a list of projects that would link the changing operating environment with actionable projects. I intervened at the time and suggested to the lead facilitator, that they get a list that looks good on paper, but will not become reality because no one owns any of the items. Lists are performance enactments for bureaucracies, not change processes led by dynamic individuals. We moved to open space technology and three action learning projects emerged.

## **Nothing can work here - Finding the zone of control**

In numerous nations, the response to foresight and innovation is: “yes, interesting, but nothing works here.” Their experience was of engaging in futures and the process being shot down by those upstream. Fear is often an appropriate reaction. “Great course, but the Board should take it! We can do nothing” “Amazing work, how do we get our CEO to be part of this? Why is he not here?” “They will agree with the need change for the photo-opportunity but then do nothing about it.”

In one African nation, we were working on energy futures. Participants were presented with data that the price of solar had now dropped below the price of coal. Using the futures wheel, they developed implications and alternative futures. The first implication was that in the current trajectory, they would be bankrupt in five years. The second implication was that to avoid this fate, they needed to start investing in renewables or purchasing renewable energy companies. However, it became clear that for Africa, there were still decades before each home could become an energy producer. However, they easily imagined an energy future where villages using solar to harness energy and batteries to store could become energy producers. Their company would then refocus to develop energy cooperatives and a continent wide internet of energy, an “uber” of energy. The possibilities were exciting. The next step was moving the debate to the CEO and Board level. This is where hope was lost. Prior to the next foresight workshop, he was indicted for corruption. Thus, the conclusion: futures works everywhere but here. The political process, the weight of the past, organizational and cultural inertia ensure great ideas die.

What are some steps forward in these situations? First, I try and focus on the zone of control. How one can use the future to change the parts of personal life and work life that the individual has control over. One probably cannot change national, or continent, or global decisions - we are not the Black Panther, nor are we from Wakanda. Clarity on one's zone of influence, where one can make a difference is crucial. Otherwise, the futures process can do more harm than good. Individuals are inspired with nothing to do - all dressed up with nowhere to go. At one corporation, three engineers approached me with how excited they were with the new ideas that had just emerged from the futures methods. I said, "great, I hope you can implement." Their response was that the hierarchy was too steep. Instead, they decided to leave the organization and start their own company. Clearly, this was not the vision of the CEO/Board when it agreed to venture into futures thinking.

Along with discerning one's zone of control, there are other workable strategies. Secondly, examples from similar nations or institutions mired in chains are useful. How did they manage? What worked? In one local shire in Australia, the foresight process has been remarkably successful, but after local elections, a particular councillor ensured it died by approving the vision but denying budget (Gould, 2009). When another shire started a similar 2040 process, we ensured that each councillor went through the foresight process. We needed their votes or enough votes to ensure vision and budgets were approved.

Third, narrowing down the action steps after the scenario and the CLA process is crucial - the zone of influence/control. This means not doing everything but during the backcasting process, choosing three core strategies forward.

Fourth, as with the utility company, finding a new metaphor that could help one take mini-steps forward. As always, this metaphor needs to be locally contextual, ie for the Islamic world participants comment that the narrative shift is from "trusting in Allah" which is crucial to "Trust in Allah, but tie up your camel," engaging in contingency planning, and in alternative futures thinking.

The fifth is the personal. In one nation, where foresight was required by the Prime Minister, foresight seemed like it would be easy. However, while the PM had required foresight, the Ministers below him and the permanent secretaries could not see the benefit, as they knew that ultimately, the top leadership would continue to make decisions. Asking individuals to take greater risks as well, while solid advice, was nonsensical, since in this nation, everyone knew everyone, and the "nail that sticks out is hammered." The most rewarding project ended up not being workshops or reports - as these had no anchor - but a request by one director to run a foresight process for their (her and her colleagues') teenage children. This was truly important to them, far more than their official national job duties. Futures became sensible when they could see how visioning helped their teenagers gain clarity about the futures they sought. They imagined desired futures, and then worked to create core metaphors that aligned with these futures. Futures became real since it worked within the realities of their nation.

In one large international bank, a senior economist commented that while he loved the foresight process - we had just completed a three day course - he did not believe that funding models and projects funded would change. I asked him, if that was true, why did he stay. In the inner CLA process or the CLA of the self, he determined that his work metaphor was "golden handcuffs." He wanted to leave, but they continued to pay him very well. Indeed, the more he disliked the place, the more he was paid, it seemed. His new metaphor was the "Midas touch." This to him meant exploring his own entrepreneurial possibilities, moving from being chained by money to creating wealth. He could not influence international banking or his own bank, but he could change his life.

In a project for a large global city, the Mayor could not understand why they needed to engage in futures studies - why a digital strategy was required, what virtuality was, or artificial intelligence. They were too busy meeting the needs of the present, indeed, they were "pummelled by the present". What turned his perspective around was when he imagined himself running within the

current trajectory, and noted that crime, pollution, congestion, would likely rise. Once he imagined his desired future - running safely, peacefully, in a green, pedestrian based city - he immediately understood that his vision of tomorrow could eventually become reality. The future personalized suddenly made sense. He could see how he could make not just a difference but the difference. He could then see its usefulness for city strategy.

In another country, where the national mantra is “nothing can be done here,” Ivana Milojevic (2018) reports that while elders continue the chant, young people approach her thanking her for painting a different picture, telling a different story. It may be true that nothing can be done today, but that does not mean that is the case forever. Generational change may be the difference.

The following table summarizes the four challenging foresight environments and possible ways forward.

Table 1. *Challenging environments and ways forward*

ISSUE	APPROACH	ACTION
HEARING THE TRAUMA	Listen to the key concerns of participants.	Change workshop design. Ensure worst case is addressed - that is, use approaches that acknowledge fears.
RISK AVERSION	Listen to the data and information and reframe within a new narrative.	Use CLA to dive deeper and recast the data. Also use, CLA to map the multiplicity of perspectives Move from the language of resisters to the framework of particular points of resistance Include the disowned through the Integrated scenario process
CHANGE FATIGUE	Understand the Monday morning question.	Use open space technology to find the projects that have interests and enthusiasm, thus ensuring budgetary approval. Use multiple horizon thinking to ensure all horizons are addressed.
NOTHING CAN WORK HERE	Find the zone of control and influence.	Personalize the future through visioning and CLA of the self. Focus on generational change. Find examples where transformative strategies have worked. Narrow the backcasting steps to a few simple doable actions.

## Conclusion

In these examples, whether working with trauma based cultures or risk averse clients, or in situations of disowning, or with groups who believe nothing works here, or with individuals who wish to change everything but cannot, I find that the key is not just sound methodology but seeing futures as a learning journey. This narrative shift helps me move from creating the perfect workshop to creating a context for participants to join in the co-creation of alternative futures. At the personal level, this means, I need to be alert to what I don't know, what makes me uncomfortable, what challenges me, where I am the problem. The self-reflective practitioner - focused on continued



attention to the place from which we speak (Kelly, 2018) - is a necessary condition for foresight processes that work. Otherwise, the futurist can become broken, equally traumatized. Methodology - CLA, narrative foresight (Milojevic 2015), integrated scenarios, personal visioning - is the sufficient factor.

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