Envisioning Personal Futures

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By teaching strategic foresight methods, two futurists are helping people think more critically about their futures.

FROM THE EDITOR

Many tools are available to help us model different futures so that we might take action today. This month’s authors share their unique tools and teaching processes for envisioning personal futures.

—Brian David Johnson

One of our shared passions is bringing “futures thinking” to the public. People typically project their past into their future because they don’t know how to imagine the future any other way. But what if we could learn how to better explore our futures? Picture the benefit to our society if everyone—not just those with the means to do so—were enabled to think more critically about their possible futures.

With that goal in mind, we created an interactive workbook that introduces the foresight mindset and makes the tools and processes approachable rather than complex and daunting: What the Foresight: Your Personal Futures Explored. Defy the Expected and Define the Preferred (CreateSpace Independent Pub. Platform, 2016).

Our process focuses less on research and more on interaction. We’ve distilled several strategic foresight tools to their core, with the goal of teaching people to apply strategic foresight to their personal lives. Conscious consideration of possible futures is not only fun but also helps people better understand their present lives. It enables them to see the gap between what they’re currently doing and what they’d like to be doing—and then take action to close this gap and realize their preferred future.

So what does creating a tangible future look like? How do we get there? We must first identify clear values upon which the possible futures will be built. These values serve as guiding principles throughout the foresight process.

After articulating our values, we need to acknowledge our inherent assumptions about the future, thereby giving ourselves permission to move beyond them and discover other possibilities.

Once we’ve uncovered our assumptions, we can explore possible futures in various ways. One approach is the Alternative Futures method, a tool that stretches our thinking and helps to uncover scenarios never previously imagined or considered. To simplify this process, we created phrasal-template word games similar to Mad Libs for four future scenarios:

- Growth: Certain elements of life increase. In the US, especially in business, this is often the only scenario we can envision.
- Constraint: Elements of life are deliberately managed. Take, for example, regulation by the government or your place of work.
- Collapse: Familiar life is disintegrating, with implications for all sectors of life. Many might point to the current events in Aleppo and broader Syria as an example.
- Transformation: Remarkable change occurs, transforming the way we think. For example, it’s difficult for many to imagine life without smartphones, yet it wasn’t always this way.

Everyone should be able to experience the process of imagining future visions for themselves. By exposing people to this process and encouraging a foresight mindset, we increase our collective ability to create more interesting and diverse futures.

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