



Why Predict the Future?

A futurist explains which predictions are worth making and which aren't.

BY PAUL LEMBERG

How many times have you relied on predictions you didn't quite trust? No one can say with certainty what will happen next week, much less one year from now. And five years out? Yogi Berra said it well, "It's hard to make predictions, especially about the future."

Everyone agrees. Predicting the future is hard. It's so hard that a 50% success rate is considered extraordinary for a professional futurist. In other words, the professionals are wrong at least half of the time. Yet we need these predictions; we need to make plans. In fact, there are three common organizational tools which *require* predictions:

1. Future Revenues

We continually use estimates of future revenues. For better or worse, this chimerical factor governs many of our decisions. This bald-faced and often-wrong bit of soothsaying is expected by almost everyone who

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fund, lends to, invests in, partners with, works for, and even receives services from our organization. Plus, we establish our organization's spending patterns for the coming year based on these same divinations. And like it or not, our revenue forecast is based totally on questionable predictions about the future.

2. Industry Scenarios

We use predictive scenarios to describe changes we expect in our industry, our sector, and the environment around us. Because our own responses can take months and even years, if we don't want to get caught fatally short, we must react now to events we believe have a high probability of occurring in the future. If we

correctly anticipate those changes, we can get a head start rather than always being behind the eight-ball.

3. Long-Term Strategy

Many high-performing organizations work in the context of a strategic direction, setting annual and longer-term objectives with plans to meet those objectives. Resource planning, financial planning, market planning, and project planning all rest upon complex predictions about the future.

Now here's the rub: How can you be successful making decisions and

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plans like these if your assumptions about the future are based on predictions which are likely to be wrong?

If you measure the success of a prediction by its *exact correspondence* to the final outcome, don't make predictions. If you measure success by making plans and sticking to them exactly, always producing the forecasted results, then don't make plans. You will almost always fail by these standards.

Why even try predicting the future if it is such a losing game? Well, remember this saying: "The best way to predict the future is to invent it." Instead of using future estimates, predictions, and plans to react to the future when it finally gets here, be proactive by creating your own future, right now. Use your beliefs about future possibilities to choose the direction in which your enterprise will go.

Invent your own future. Declare your direction, and set plans in action now to take advantage of that direction. You may, if The Force is with you, end up exactly where you said you were going. Then again, you may not. Along the way you may shift completely, your northward heading now facing east and your west now facing south. But you will get somewhere, and that somewhere will likely be much farther along and much closer to your declared direction than if you had no direction and only "reaction plans."

Declarations, predictions, and, yes, even strategic plans have a way of focusing our attention and mobilizing our efforts far more effectively than random action, or worse still, just plodding along with no

sense of the future. A boldly conceived and declared future energizes everyone in your organization. We never fail to be excited and inspired by what art historian Kenneth Clark called "the shock of the new." And, by inventing the future, you may alter the nonprofit landscape and bring into being things so great that they simply didn't exist before.

Predictions—even the wrong ones—are the only way to gain insight into how the world may unfold in time. Based on these insights, you develop your own views about what is possible. But what really drives the future is what you choose to do about it now.

You see, the future is really whatever we say it is going to be. Once we decide what is possible, become inspired by the possible, commit our resources, time, and energy to achieving specific objectives, we can turn future possibilities into reality.

Better than even money says you'll be wrong if you predict the future. But you'll be right if you invent your own future. ■

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