

Looking To the Future: Are Your Feet on the Ground or in the Clouds?

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Over the years, it has been noticed that different kinds of people treat and use the ‘future’ differently. We operate in a complex and emerging world where the future is uncertain and total knowledge is impossible. In this article, Mark McKergow explores the various ways in which managers and leaders view the future including the dreamer, the realist, the business planner and the host.

First things first, are you going to step forward, or step back?

As a leader or manager, it is likely that you find yourself sometimes stepping forward and being assertive, and sometimes stepping back to allow others to shine. Stepping forward means taking action. Stepping back means being aware, and preparing to step forward again at the right time. This outlook shows a fundamental basic truth: we don’t fully know what’s going to happen next.

In the financial world, projects are appraised using the system known as net present value. Money you get today is worth its face value, and money you are scheduled to get next month, year, or so on, is worth less, as there is a risk it won’t arrive. Accounting folk call this discounted cash flow, and there are frequent discussions about exactly how much less cash will be worth in a year’s time.

The same kind of reasoning applies to people’s plans, but with a twist. Our ideas about the future also become less reliable, less certain and less valuable as time goes on.

We have noticed over the years that different kinds of people treat and use the future differently. Let us look for a moment at three tempting but not altogether useful alternatives that you may, like us, recognise from your experience of life at work.

The Dreamer

The Dreamer is the person who sees a wonderful future ahead where things will be better and the possibilities are endless. They give all their attention to expanding (and expounding) on the immense benefits and innate attraction of the better future.

That’s great, of course. However, the Dreamer seems unwilling or unable to put actual steps in place to build towards this future. Perhaps the whole task seems so big that any actual step is not worthy of the goal. Perhaps such a big future should seem to be matched by a big plan of action – which never actually gets off the ground. The dream remains just that, and meanwhile the Dreamer continues to fixate on it and get frustrated that nothing is happening and nobody shares the dream.

The Realist

The Realist is rather the opposite of the Dreamer. The Realist is very keen to make sure that things happen, and will go out of their way to chase actions, make plans and get stuff done – useful people to have in your organization.

However, the Realist doesn’t let themselves be bothered by the long term. Doing today’s work as well as possible is their aim. They might think that long-term hopes and dreams are a recipe for disappointment,

or that any long-term goal will inevitably be thwarted by others in power. They may (with some justification) agree that whatever will be will be. However, our thoughts today about possible futures can certainly influence what we do.

The Business Planner

The Business Planner orientation is not as prevalent as it once was, but does still appear in some situations. Business plans are (or used to be) concerned with things on a middlefuture timescale (one to three years). What is the cash flow for year one? How much profit may appear in year two? And given all that, how much might the business be worth at the end of year three?

The phrase “given all that” is the big giveaway here. By looking at a middle timescale, the plan can take our eyes off the most important areas. In a moving, complex and uncertain world, the classical business plan is only as good as its assumptions.

These exercises can easily turn into mere arithmetic and rapidly become detached from reality, with the Business Planner spending much of their time in “ant country” – our phrase for the middle distance where things are too complex to predict in detail.

This leads us nicely onto a fourth, alternative concept which might provide some much needed relief from the limitations of the three approaches we’ve discussed so far. It is that of leading as a Host.

The Host

Hosts are always open to changes and uncertainty. When we organise a party we know the big picture – the kind of event we want – and the next steps. We can’t, however, predict exactly what we will be doing at 8.37pm. This is why we focus all the time on stepping forward and back, on manoeuvrability and flexibility. And we don’t get bogged down in “ant country.” So, the Host will use the future in this fashion:

Focusing on the near future – practical next steps and signs of progress – and the distant future – hopes, intentions and their precursors – is the trademark of a good Host. So next time you are discussing the future, why not think more like a Host?

This is an adapted extract from new book “Host: Six new roles of engagement for teams, organizations, communities and movements” co-written by Dr Mark McKergow and Helen Bailey, published on 6 October 2014 by Solutions Books in paperback (£11.99) and Kindle formats.