

Exploring the Future: A New Pattern of Thinking for Leaders

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Barker is best known for his leading edge work in paradigm shifts and organisational vision.

During my 30 plus years as a futurist, I have looked for large ideas that could be useful for a wide range of organizations. In the early 1980's, I was the first to popularise the connection of Thomas Kuhn's work on scientific paradigms to its much larger application across all sectors of society. In the late 1980's I began to promote the importance of vision and visionary leadership at all levels. Jim Collins, of course, followed up in the early '90's with his wonderful research that proved, beyond a shadow of a doubt, the value of vision.

During the 1990's I began to research two areas that I felt were becoming vitally important to the ongoing success of organizations all types: complexity and long term consequences.

I saw leaders at all levels acting without sufficiently understanding the complexity within which they led; not understanding even how to think about that complexity. As a result, this often resulted in "unintended consequences," a phrase that is now used almost as often as "paradigm shift."

That phrase has recently evolved into a kind of axiom which you can find referenced in such thoughtful publications as *the Wall Street Journal*, *Forbes*, and *the New York Times*: "The Law of Unintended Consequences."

The addition of the word law suggests an inevitability of these unintended consequences; and

further since they are not the *intended consequences* there is also an implication that these consequences are bad.

Thus as leaders, according to the Law of Unintended Consequences, when we act, we should expect that there will be bad, unknown results that we can't predict. This creates a steady, low grade fear of the future, because it is full of nasty, unknowable consequences.

One could argue that this fear is good, because it slows us down from making snap decisions and modulates reckless enthusiasm for trying anything new. There is some truth in that. But, I believe the other side of that coin is the more common response: because of our fear of unknown consequences, we move slowly, over-cautiously into the future. But such prudence means we leave open the pathway to new ideas and new innovations for others more willing to move quickly.

The first attribute of a leader is the ability to get your people to follow you to a place they would not go to by themselves. Where is that "place"? By and large, whatever the place, it is located in the future. Finding that place and leading your team to it is the leader's most important responsibility.

Now, here's the dilemma. If you are unsure of what is ahead, if you are afraid of the unintended consequences awaiting you, you will lead slowly. And that can put you at a competitive disadvantage.

The Wagon Master

But what if there were a way to identify those consequences before they happened? What if you could gain the necessary information about the future so you could lead faster?

Let me offer an historical example to illustrate: The American wagon trains of the 19th century and the wagon master's role.

The wagon master's job was to lead the pioneers through dangerous



territory to a safe and fertile destination. He also had to get the pioneers to that place within a given time.

Before a good wagon master rolled the wagons, he would send out the scouts to see what was over the horizon. This exploratory behaviour provided him with crucial information that allowed him to make quicker decisions with higher confidence and move the wagons forward at a faster pace.

What kind of impact do you think it had on the rest of wagon train knowing their leader was scouting their future before making critical decisions that affected their well-being? Everyone's confidence was improved.

What are the attributes of scouting? There are four that must be met for scouts to be successful:

- ❖ *Speed.* Scouts have to ride out, make their observations, and come back quickly. If they linger too long, their information loses value.
- ❖ *Qualitative, not quantitative, information gathering.* Because scouts must be fast, they can't take the time to measure and analyse and record lots of details. Instead, they return with observations, impressions and images that are qualified by their past experience.

- ❖ *Many Directions.* To get a broad a view of what's over the horizon, scouts have to scatter in many directions. Without a broad spectrum of exploration, they may miss the best pathways.
- ❖ *Decision-enhancing information.* The work of the scouts is used by the wagon master to enhance his decisions. No matter what the scouts report, it is still the leader's job to take in the information and choose the wisest course of action.

With the scout's input, the wagon master can now do two things: he can make decisions that reach much farther out into the future—weeks instead of hours. And he can make those decisions with much higher confidence.

21st Century Scouting

Twenty-first century leaders need their own scouts. But instead of searching the geography of place, your scouts need to search the geography of time. The most important and accessible frontier for you is the next five to 10 years.

To scout the future more effectively, you and your scouts need to learn a new kind of thinking. I call it "cascade thinking." What do I mean by that? In my work, I have found that the most important implications of *any change* are rarely those that spring immediately from the initiating event, be it an innovation, an emerging trend, the introduction of a competitor's product, a strategic objective.

Instead, the most important implications are usually found several orders out from the initiating event. That is, they are the implications of the implications of the implications of the initial event which cascade out in all directions. This is where unintended consequences lurk.

And, yet, as I have worked with major organisations, both for profit and not-for-profit, I have found almost no serious effort to systematically identify these cascades.

Instead, I have seen what I call

"chaining." This proverb illustrates the process perfectly "For want of a nail, the shoe was lost, for want of the shoe, the horse was lost, for want of the horse, the rider was lost, for want of the rider, the battle was lost." This is a cause-effect chain of consequences.

The significance of this chaining example should not be minimized. It demonstrates that from a seemingly trivial event, the loss of a nail, the battle was lost. Time and again, an insignificant first order implication can lead to catastrophic results.

But a single "chain" suggests a pathway that is too simple—one cause leading to only one effect. In the real world, the cascade runs out in many directions creating growing complexity. The loss of the nail caused multiple consequences...as did the loss of the shoe and loss of the horse. Good scouting of the future must track those multiple pathways to be useful for the leader.

So let me suggest a way to generate a real world cascade:

You begin by asking a simple question. For instance, what implications might occur as a direct result of your company introducing a new product? You should be able to generate many possible answers to that question.

When you have answered as broadly as you can, you then look at those immediate implications and ask a similar question: what might happen as the direct result of each implication happening? This question triggers a fractal pattern of discussion. The result is a branching cascade of consequences both positive and negative:

- ❖ The initial triggering element has multiple 1st order consequences,
- ❖ Each of those has multiple 2nd order consequences.
- ❖ Each of those has multiple 3rd order consequences.
- ❖ And so on.

I have led these kinds of scouting expeditions using a variation of the cascade I developed called The Implications Wheel® Strategic Exploration Tool. Using this process, I have found that you must go out at least three orders of implications to

find the big surprises. Going out three orders also guarantees that you are scouting far enough into the future.

Why does thinking in this pattern work? For one very simple reason: it mimics the way the world works. This is truly how things unfold.

To ignore this pattern of thinking is to invite unintended consequences. To think in ways that are not consistent with this pattern is to ignore the natural order of the world.

By using this pattern of cascade thinking, organisations can increase the likelihood that they will identify the "unintended consequences" of a new idea **before** they begin to implement the new idea. That gives the leader the "lay of the land" well before he or she rolls the wagons.

What should be topics for this kind of exploration? Here is a short list:

- ❖ Emerging trends
- ❖ Innovations, both your own and your competitors
- ❖ Policy changes, both internal and external
- ❖ New laws and regulations
- ❖ Strategic objectives and goals
- ❖ Significant events, such as 9/11 and the 2004 Tsunami

By scouting the future of these kinds of issues, leaders will be able to see over the "time horizon," gain insights into the pattern of possible implications in front of them, and have a much clearer understanding of the complexities that lie ahead.

This new pattern of thinking, which helps you to generate the cascade of consequences, is going to be the major differentiator between successful and the unsuccessful organisations over the next 10 years, because those who take the time to think this way will be able to move more rapidly into the future with greater confidence.

About the author:

Joel Barker was the first person to popularise the concept of paradigm shifts for the corporate world. In 1986 his first video "Discovering the Future: The Business of Paradigms" became the best selling business video in history.