

How Foresight Leads to Insight

By Stephen E. Brimmer

Foresight is full-range thinking that views the past, present, and possible futures as interlocking systems. From the past we get *hindsight*, from looking into the future we get *foresight*, and in the present we get *insight* when we learn from hindsight and foresight.

Foresight is not the same as forecasting. According to Sanders (1998) forecasting is analyzing existing conditions and trends and simply extrapolating them into the future. Foresight, on the other hand, is the ability to see what is emerging and understand how it could reshape the future.

The purpose of foresight methodology is to provide a systematic process for exploring *possible* futures and envisioning *desirable* futures to improve leadership decision-making. Foresight methodology offers a framework for the full lifecycle of strategic initiatives from gathering information to developing plans to unifying participants to implementation and evaluation.

As one of the world's most recognized futurists, Jerome C. Glenn, Executive Director of The Millennium Project and chief editor of Futures Research Methodology identifies the value of foresight methodology:

- To enhance **anticipatory consciousness**, which enables leaders to act faster or earlier in dealing with change that either threatens or provides new opportunity for their organization
- To enrich understanding of likely future circumstances and **potential strategies** to bring about a desired future
- To challenge current mental models and open minds to **consider new possibilities**
- To **increase the lead-time** between potential events and current planning by providing early warning
- To help identify what you don't know, but need to know, to make **intelligent decisions**.

Foresight methodologies: a framework for decision-making

Many churches and Christian organizations fail in implementing change initiatives because they lack a proven process. Foresight methodologies provide a reliable and repeatable process as a framework for making and implementing strategic decisions. In addition to accepted strategic planning processes, foresight methodologies provide front-end inputs to inform leaders of emerging issues and thereby improve the quality of their decisions.

According to educator and futurist Wendy Schultz (1997) an array of foresight methods and techniques can be loosely grouped according to **five primary foresight activities**:

- *Identifying and monitoring change* – what are the current patterns of change and what potential change might we anticipate on the horizon? This usually involves an assessment and extrapolation of trends, cycles, and emerging issues.
- *Considering and critiquing the impacts of change* – what effects result from those changes and which effects are of concern to us? This is a critical step because the quality of assessment will impact the other four foresight activities.
- *Imagining alternative possible futures* – what if? Based on the above extrapolation of trends and emerging issues, create an array of different futures along with the range of threats and opportunities they imply for you.
- *Visioning preferred futures* – what do we most want? What is the best we can be? Creating a mental model of the ideal future is the beginning of transformational planning. While this requires leadership, it is best done as a group activity.
- *Planning and implementing desired change* – How can we best close the gap between our desired future and our current state? This requires commitment from the highest levels of leadership and involves best practices in creating and executing action plans.

These five foresight activities function best when they flow progressively from one to the next and then loop back to the beginning to form an on-going process of monitoring, learning, and improving. It is much more effective to repeat the foresight process every 2-3 years with escalating success than to attempt a single, massive transformation effort. Church Futures has designed a Futurecasting experience that incorporates the five foresight activities into a 3-day consultant led workshop.

References:

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