

A Future More Powerful than the Current Business Environment

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The job of a leader is to cause an organization to create and realize a future that wasn't going to happen anyway—a future different from the one predictable from the present reality. If those who install such a leader prefer the predictable future, then either the leader needs to enroll them in a new possibility, or find another job.

Thus, leaders constantly deal with the question: “How do I lead/manage my people so that they perform effectively, energetically, creatively, and enthusiastically to achieve the unpredictable future that I see is calling us?”

This question has increasing significance today, since the economic condition we enjoyed for some years has changed so dramatically. People are shaken, scared, uncertain. Telling them that everything will be OK, telling them not to be afraid, telling them what to do, or simply avoiding the subject, etc.—doesn't produce great performance. In fact, such approaches seem to cause the opposite effect.

Below we offer a set of counter-intuitive insights drawn from our human performance technology which opens up possibilities for effective action in the face of today's circumstances.

Insight #1: Executives we spoke with about the current state of business said that it looks (in their words) “challenging,” “difficult,” “sad,” “scary,” “like waiting for the next shoe to drop,” “disturbing,” “as though offering glimmers of hope followed by yet another disappointment.” At first these appear to be descriptions of the present reality. However, consider that they are actually *describing the future which they see as almost inevitable*. We call this “the future into which we are living” or the “default future.”

The first insight says that *our ways of being and acting*—our moods, viewpoints and behaviors—*are correlated to the future into which we live*. Critical point here: *a leader doesn't change behavior by working on behavior itself; rather, behavior is changed by altering the future into which we live*.

Try this on personally—ask yourself:

1. *What is the predictable, almost certain business future for me? For my organization? If circumstances keep going as they have been, what is mostly likely to happen? Where is this vector inevitably headed? Take your gut response, not your reasoned, justified, modified, objectified answer. The gut response is the actual one affecting you daily.*
2. Then ask yourself: *What is my mood (emotion) and what are the actions available to me to take in response to that future? You have to tell the truth here and get authentic with yourself—which is not always easy to do. It's not “cool” as a person-at-work to feel fear, sadness, anger, perhaps weak hope regarding the future. Equally not cool to see only a limited set of options for action. Is this the case, however? Power, and a transformation, begins with saying it the way it is.*

Insight #2: The future appears to be a group of facts. This is not true. The future is always and only “possible.” Thus, the future actually consists of interpretations and meanings we have made up or acquired, usually unawaredly. Examples: “challenging,” “difficult,” “scary,” “glimmers of hope...” are all interpretive statements. The trap is that human beings *by default* relate to these statements as though they were factual.

Insight #3: Interpretations exist exclusively in and by virtue of language—they are always something someone said (sometimes the someone is you). Something considered a “fact” is fixed, whereas something that is an interpretation is malleable—we *have a say* in the matter of interpretations.

Thus, since the future is an interpretation, we have a say in how it will be. This perspective alone can shift people from “helpless” to “powerful.”

Insight #4: Looking more deeply, beneath each of the interpretations we may have about the current business situation, *there is one underlying and pervasive interpretation* at the heart of our disempowerment:

Circumstances should be a certain way, they should not be the way they are now, and therefore something is wrong.

“Something is wrong” may apply to any/all of the following: the world, the economy, business, the investment world, government, my company, my leaders and managers, my colleagues, and, ultimately and finally, myself.

This is the fundamental interpretation that often sabotages organizations. Here is the fallout of this view:

1. Since we consider our view of the future “factual”, we can only change circumstances and people within the limits of this fixed, factual condition.
2. Because there is something wrong, we must fix it—the problem is so big, we can't do much to fix it, so we suffer from a loss of power.

3. As we all know, when we go to change someone, there is a certain resistance to this—particularly if they know they/something is wrong. This is why a large percentage of “change initiatives” fail.
4. We go looking for who/what to blame, or the solution to the problem. Both are barking up the wrong tree!

Tied to Insight #4 is a correlated insight—an alternative *interpretation* which produces more power and freedom, and which we are free to choose:

There is nothing wrong. Things are as they are, and they are not as they are not. “Wrong” is a linguistic interpretation, not “the truth.” The world as it is, however it is, is just that way. You may not like it the way it is; you may see more preferable ways for it to be. Nevertheless, it is as it is, just like a tree or a mountain.

If you get this, your shoulders should release. You can take a deep breath. This allows you to be in the present, related to the current reality simply as it is, free of default meaning and interpretation and the attendant mood/behaviors, free of hunting for fault or even solution. There is a space.

Insight #5: Accepting “what’s so” is a powerful place to stand. If there is nothing wrong with the way it is (and doesn’t have to be fixed or changed), and the future is an interpretation, then you have the opportunity to *create* the future. You have the freedom, the ability, and the authority to create an empowering future for yourself, for your organization—a future that gives you/your people an inspiring purpose to come from when dealing with the present reality. To get this, ask yourself and others:

“What future inspires me/us? Touches me/us? Calls to me/us?”

A few actual futures that our clients have created:

- We give businesses the most cost-effective solutions to their software needs, increasing their ability to realize their purposes and objectives.
- We empower our clients to expand their adaptability, to come out of this downturn far ahead of their competitors, stronger, more efficient, more effective and purposeful.
- We build synergies out of our collaborations with other firms, strengthening our core, to be a magnet for new business opportunities.

We suggest that the most difference-making, first action you can take is to pause. Take a breath. Identify the default future you and your organization are living into—invent a new, empowering future—and look from there to deal with

your current business circumstances. You may find it's a time for compassion, courage, commitment, creativity, new thinking and new opportunities.

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