

FUTURE *takes*

Transcultural Futurist Magazine

ISSN 1554-7744

Vol. 3, no. 1 (Winter-Spring 2004)

Where Were YOU?

Interactive Foresight Exercises

synopsis of June 2003 dinner program of the WFS Washington DC Chapter; summarized by Dave Stein

In a locally unprecedented, out-of-the-box adventure under the leadership of then-chapter president Eric Garland, the National Capital Region World Future Society (NatCapWFS) featured interactive foresight exercises during its June 2003 evening program. A departure from our normal series of dinner speakers, the exercises were led by three leading local area futurists, Joe Coates, Eric Garland, and Dick Smith.

THE DELPHI METHOD

Leading off with a participatory overview of the Delphi method, Mr. Coates pulsed the participants with the question, "The energy consumption in the US in 1960 was X quads (quadrillion BTUs). In 2000, it was Y quads. What will the energy consumption in the US be in 2025?" The participant responses ranged from levels far above Y quads to levels considerably below Y quads. The reasons identified for increased energy consumption in 2025 were (1) a large increase in the population, (2) new energy sources that make energy more readily available, (3) new energy efficiency technologies that lower the energy costs, (4) a sense of manifest destiny, and (5) an increase in the number of energy-consuming devices. Other participants envisioned a reduction in energy consumption in 2025, basing their responses on (1) different lifestyles in which there is less need to consume energy, (2) a drastic reduction in population as a result of war or other catastrophic event, (3) improved conservation, (4) an aging population that needs less energy, (5) a further transition to a post-industrial, IT-based society, and (6) new technologies.

To illustrate the method, Mr. Coates plotted the responses on an axis and identified three points that together represented the "average" response and the breakpoints between the mainstream responses and the upper and lower outliers. It is the outliers that represent thinking that is not yet incorporated into the conventional wisdom. As Mr. Coates put it, "the experts know and the non-experts think." Most "experts" extrapolate current trends and don't allow for discontinuous, nonlinear events. A few true genius experts will be out in front of a group of non-experts, but the non-expert group is generally smarter than most experts. Under the Delphi method, the new insights are incorporated, after which the group is pulsed again. In "real life," such pulsing is sometimes accomplished in a group setting and at other times is via correspondence.

As the exercise masterfully illustrated, Mr. Coates was quick to point out that the Delphi method does not provide "the answer" but instead indicates the specific studies that are needed for further information. Noting that a group with a shared base of knowledge will sometimes converge rapidly on an answer, Mr. Coates indicated that such convergence is not the primary objective of the method, nor is it necessarily desirable.

Variations on the theme include questions such as "In what year will [an event] happen?" or "How important is each of these factors on a 1-10 scale?"

To baseline or calibrate the group of participants, "almanac" or surrogate questions (for which the answer is already known) are sometimes used. For example, suppose the real question involves the level of cotton production in Alabama in 2015. Surrogate questions, based on the known trends leading to the level of cotton production there in 1940, can be presented to the group before they turn to the question of interest.

WHEELING AND WHEELING

The next exercise, spearheaded by Eric Garland, was the futures wheel, another technique often used by professional futurists. It is helpful to start with a template that consists of several irregularly-spaced circles on a single sheet. The technique involves identifying an event and writing it in a circle near the center of the page. Then, one asks what will result from the event. These primary consequences are placed in the circles that immediately surround the event circle. These consequences, in turn, nucleate ideas on secondary and tertiary implications, which are placed in circles progressively more distant from the event circle. The pre-exercise example, an event in the past, was the advent of the automobile as the preferred means of transportation. The primary consequences identified were (1) more privacy and freedom for teenagers, (2) the decline of the extended family, and (3) new living and working patterns – specifically, the freedom to live in one place and work at another. The decline of the extended family, in turn, led to (2a) the loss of intergenerational wisdom at home and (2b) the rise of long-term care facilities. At the same time, the freedom to live in one place and work at another ultimately led to lengthy commutes that resulted in a loss of leisure time and with it, a new *de facto* slavery. *[Author's note: In addition, it prolonged the absences of parents from homes, in turn adversely impacting family life (and possibly divorce rates, juvenile crime, and juvenile drug use). Furthermore, let's not forget the impact on the ability to maintain a balanced lifestyle with adequate rest, exercise, nutrition, and family/leisure time – and how does this impact health care costs?]*

For the exercise, the participants were divided into groups. One group's event was a biological attack in Ireland, resulting in 400 deaths. The possible "fallout" included (1) a stock market crash, (2) an impact on the travel industry, (3) calls for more surveillance, (4) a revitalization of the IRA, (5) increased church attendance, (6) an increase in charitable contributions from Irish people in other parts of the world, (7) new Irish folk songs, (8) the fall of the Irish government, (9) an Irish government request to the United Kingdom government to share more intelligence, (10) an increased flow of refugees to Northern Ireland, (11) new travel restrictions, and (12) an overload of hospital facilities. A stock market crash might well precipitate a general economic downturn. In the case of the travel industry, the secondary consequences might be (2a) an initial worldwide industry decline, which itself might lead to a general economic downturn as a tertiary consequence, followed by (2b) a rebound in which travelers prefer other destinations over Ireland. The calls for more surveillance might (3a) adversely impact privacy, (3b) precipitate a shifting of budget priorities within various governments, and (3c) result in higher security for biological laboratories. Increased church attendance might conceivably lead to a reduction in divorce rates in Ireland. If the UK does not oblige Ireland's request for intelligence sharing, tensions between the two countries might increase. Tensions might likewise be exacerbated by a refugee problem. Increased travel restrictions might themselves give rise to a general economic downturn. Finally, an overloading of

the hospital facilities by those who later die or by those that survive but become very ill might increase the health risks to other patients.

The second group considered an event of a substantially different nature, specifically, the growth of the Chinese middle class to a size that eclipsed the US middle class. The primary consequences identified were (1) a change in the diets of China's citizens, (2) increased mobility among China's citizens, (3) a growth of democracy in China, (4) an increase in the number of entrepreneurs in China, and (5) increased demand for and consumption of world resources. In turn, the envisioned secondary consequences of the diet change included (1a) new markets for US agribusiness and (1b) health implications of fast food diets (if such diets represented the direction of change), possibly extending to new leading causes of mortality in China.

The third group considered the discovery of a cure for AIDS. They envisioned primary consequences that were not only diverse but also contradictory in some cases (and contradictory consequences are permitted and even encouraged!). These primary consequences included (1) an increase in the African population as more people live normal lifespans, (2) a decrease in the African population as priorities shift away from having large families, (3) the development of cures for other diseases, (4) a new leading cause of mortality in regions where AIDS had been prevalent, (5) more investment by African nations in education as more resources were freed up, (6) impact on the women's movement and sexual freedom, and (7) favorable or unfavorable impacts on the pharmaceutical companies, depending on whether they discover the cure or whether biotech companies do so.

A fourth group considered the retirement of the baby boomers. The primary consequences included (1) new ways of self-enjoyment and self-actualization and (2) new types of housing and new ways to build it. Still another group looked at a hypothetical increase in the inner city populations coupled with a corresponding decrease in the suburban populations. The primary consequences were (1) a downturn in car sales, (2) an increase in mass transit, (3) restoration of old buildings (a secondary consequence of which might be a shot-in-the-arm to the construction industry), (4) an increase in community spirit, and (5) a plummeting of suburban values (leading to the secondary consequence of mass bankruptcies).

BRILLIANT IDEAS!

At this point, with the participants' minds already stretched, Dick Smith took the stage to enlighten them on a third futurist methodology, ideation. In ideation, future worlds are built by mixing and matching disparate trends, and these worlds become the backdrops for strategic planning and analyses. This particular exercise had a commercial focus, in that each group of participants was asked to hypothesize one or more new products that would have a large market in whichever "brave new world" was presented to them.

The trends left over from the futures wheel exercise gave the participants one leg up in creating the future worlds for the ideation exercise, as it was these trends that were mixed and matched. World 1 was characterized by increased democracy, more community spirit, less privacy, and new ways of physical enjoyment. The descriptors for World 2 were increased mass transit, increased attendance at religious activities (church, synagogue, mosque, temple, etc.), and an increasing pervasiveness of the North American fast food lifestyle and diet worldwide. You get the idea.

The new commercial products and services hypothesized for World 1 included (a) voting machines that make public who votes and who doesn't, (b) a free community co-ed spa membership for citizens who vote, (c) a community clothing line, and (d) an herbal pill that make one feel good in what ever manner he or she wants to imagine. World 2 markets might include (a) increased mass transit to

religious institutions, perhaps arranged by the churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples themselves, (b) fast food stands at the mass transit stops, perhaps catering to the special dietary needs of people attending religious activities, and (c) similar fast food provided by the religious establishments themselves.

Speaking of worlds, what world were you in during the evening of June 19, if you were not at our dinner and workshop?