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At the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

Ten Tips for Creating More Powerful Future Stories



Synopsis of the June 2006 workshop presented by Joseph Tankersley of Walt Disney Imagineering, an event co-sponsored by the WFS US National Capital Chapter and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars; summarized by Lindan Johnson.

“A story is the best way to weave together analysis of the predetermined aspects of the future with imagination about the uncertain. Stories are the way to make the link between planning and dreaming.”

– Pierre Wack

1. Use the Secret Story Formula

We’ve been constructing good stories the same way since Aristotle wrote *The Rhetoric* in 350 B.C.E. There’s a reason – it works. The three parts of any good story are designed to fulfill very specific goals. Use the structure to help you build your story.

The Beginning

- **Lay the foundation.** Begin by asking, “Who are we?” “Where do we come from?” “Where are we today?” Understanding these elements is critical to laying the foundation for your story. Stories, like future visions, are about change. In order to understand how we might need to change, and what change is possible we need to understand where we are starting. Ultimately, what we can become is determined largely by our organizational DNA.
- **Make connections.** Readers will “buy-in” to the most far-out future if you connect with them. These connections need to be established in the very beginning of the story. It is critical that the audience see how this future relates to them, today and in their own future.
- **Start with the problem.** The most powerful stories begin in the middle of a conflict. Establish early on the reasons that change is going to be imperative. What are the potential consequences of inaction?

The Middle

The middle of a good story takes the reader on an adventure or grand journey. Your future story needs to show the reader what they will have to do to achieve the preferred future you lay out for them.

The stuff of this future adventure includes emerging trends, potential countertrends, and wild cards that you have identified in your research. Emerging trends lead the reader to those critical moments where it becomes clear that their action will influence the course of the future.

The Resolution

We reach our goal. We see our preferred future and, most importantly, we know how we got here. In a good story the conclusion is always inevitable. It has to turn out that way, because of the steps that led to the conclusion. For the future storyteller this becomes the case for the preferred future he/she envisions.

2. Stories Need a Hero

The hero of a good story is our avatar. He/she becomes the person we can see ourselves becoming in the future we are trying to create. The hero is the bridge between the esoteric concerns of most strategic plans and the real world. He/she needs to confront real situations, real concerns, and real problems.

Heroes *do not* have to be amazing early adopters or even supporters of change. Heroes in stories are transformed by their acts of courage. In our case those acts of courage are represented by the decisions to embrace the vision and to confront the challenges that stand in the way of change. The story should demonstrate how the value of the future vision changes non-supporters into proponents.

3. Technology is NOT the Hero of Your Story

“The nature of the future world will be an expression of emotions at least as much as rational deliberations, programs and practices. Emotions are critical to what happens, both those emotions driving creativity and reasons, aspiration, power seeking, greed and the will to control, and those emotions responding to the existential questions of being human.”

– Donald N. Michael

Stories are about people and relationships. The future will be about people and relationships. Future stories that idealize or demonize technology take control of the future out of our hands. They create a “Futurelandia” – a world where technology has already taken over the future and we are at best supporting characters. This is not a vision of the future that will encourage anyone to take on the challenge of change. Technology should be the supporting player, or maybe just the scenery.

4. Fill Your Future Story with Conflict

Conflict is reality. The present is filled with conflict. The future will be too. In a future story conflict appears in the guise of wild cards, negative trends, countertrends. Conflict moves the story forward. Conflict compels us to work toward a goal. These obstacles will be difficult to overcome. Too often scenarios tend to dismiss the challenges. Identifying and confronting obstacles should be the core of your future story.

5. Stories Must Be Internally Consistent

Anything is believable if it follows the laws of the story's physics. In a future story we have to be able to understand why things happen the way they do.

If the world of your future works different from today then you have to make clear how and why. "How does it work?" "Why did it change?" Until you do that convincingly you cannot get readers to give serious attention to the much more important issues that your future story is based.

6. Tell One Story

There is no "one" future. The strength of futures inquiry comes in considering multiple versions of the future. However, when crafting a particular future scenario is it critical that you limit the focus to one main theme. It's a time tested rule—Keep it simple and your readers will follow along and be more likely to accept the story you have created.

7. Embellish for Effect

Too many scenarios get caught up in proving themselves with tons of minutiae. Selectively pick the details that add to the intent and interest of the story. Just because you can imagine some new idea or technology is possible doesn't mean that it is contributing to the type of futures thinking you want to encourage. Always ask: "How does this detail move my story forward?" Too many details can simply lead readers to conclude that the future is too complex for them to begin to consider.

8. The Problem with Endings

James Ogilivy argues in his book, *Creating Better Futures*, that negative scenarios are easy to create but psychologically difficult to entertain. Positive scenarios are easy to entertain but intellectually much more difficult to draw in a plausible and convincing way. No matter how brilliant your logic, or exhaustive your analysis people do not change to avoid disaster. People change because they see a brighter future.

9. Change Your Story Often

"Writers have a harder and harder time keeping up with reality. We have not yet learned to conceive, research, write and publish in 'real time.'"

– Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock*, 1970

One of the most basic tenets of foresight is that the future is constantly changing, yet we create permanent documents that tend to be out-dated almost as soon as they are completed. It's no wonder that so many scenarios are developed and then immediately shelved. A useful futures story is one that is constantly being rewritten and revised. One of the great benefits of modern technology is that we now have tools that make it possible to transform any story into a constantly evolving record of the journey we are taking.

Stories should *not* be changed just to satisfy upper management whims. Change should be directly tied to on-going scanning activities that provide early warnings of events and trends that might invalidate key conclusions inherent in your futures story.

10. Give your Story Away

Once the story is polished and perfect give it away. Invite the critics and naysayers to feast on the story. They will challenge the story, attack it and begin to rewrite it. Resist the temptation to demand that the story be unadulterated. You want it to be dissected and attacked. Why? Because now you have an entire organization practicing futures thinking. **If nothing else comes from the exercise this is worth the effort.**

Over time a transformation takes place – in both the story and the audience. As it becomes “my” story I’m much more willing to invest in it. I want it to work.

If the original story had validity it will be built around the core of a potentially realistic future and that core will remain even as others make the story their own.

And Finally, Trust in the Power of Story

“In dealing with the future it is more important to be imaginative and insightful than to be 100% right. The maps of the world drawn by the medieval cartographers were so hopelessly inaccurate, so filled with factual error that they elicit condescending smiles today when almost the entire surface of the earth has been charted. Yet the great explorers could never have discovered the New World without them.”

– Alvin Toffler, 1970

Story-telling remains one of the most powerful tools for change. Future stories, based on sound research and prediction, can become the blueprint for any organization trying to envision and achieve a preferable future.

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