Connecting foresight to strategy

by Maree Conway

Starting to read this book brought with it that déjà vu feeling that I’d seen these words before. Perhaps not the exact words, but the intent, the meaning which I’d written about in Foresight Infused Strategy. Patricia and I have already commented on the similarities between our books, but there are significant differences too.

We both wrote books based on our practice and experience, we both want foresight used routinely in organisations, we both think language is critical in the sense of creating reality, and both books are practical in orientation and focused on people.

Patricia’s is focused on leaders, mine on people doing strategy. Patricia talks about a foresight muscle; I talked about a foresight switch. I see the use of strategic foresight as the biggest gap in conventional strategy processes, and Patricia writes:

The practice of Strategic Foresight is one of the most important, relevant and necessary practices that any leader can have and develop today (p.4).

The book starts with an overview of strategic foresight before setting the scene for using foresight. It moves to understanding how we think about the past, present and future, how the stories we create to make sense of that (this chapter includes some excellent ways for people to understand and prepare for their own future journey), exploring in more detail how we think about the future before spending time on assumptions, perceptions and paradigms that enable or constrain how we think about the future.

We then move on to chapters about some tools and approaches in more detail. Each chapter discusses specific tools and methods that range from the familiar (horizon scanning) to the less often used (VERGE and Causal Layered Analysis), with case studies and exercises to provide practical examples. I particularly valued the discussion on Appreciative Inquiry and how to make it happen in practice. Indeed, there is an impressive toolbox provided in the book for both those new to foresight and old hands—and plenty of information to help people use the tools in practice.

The final chapter—Flexing your Foresight Muscles—pulls it all together in a clear discussion of how to be strategic foresight fit by strengthening and using your foresight muscles to navigate change, complexity and uncertainty to get to the future you want. A final review is provided of what is needed to start using foresight, reminding us of the comprehensive toolbox created by the approaches used in previous chapters.

There were some new and remembered things for me: the concept of the foresight muscle was new and useful, the reminder about the value of mental time travel, the usefulness of the foxes, hedgehogs and eagles metaphor for using foresight, and the image of decoupling from your baggage of the past and the present to be able to face the future. It reminded me of the need to refresh my own toolbox.

This is an exceptionally well written book, with clear discussion of concepts throughout. The wide range of tools and methods discussed is particularly valuable. It is also one of the most accessible discussions I’ve read about using foresight in organisations and increases the range of books available to anyone interested in what foresight is and how to use it in practice.

There’s much, much more in the book, too much to do justice to in this review. It’s full of ways to build and flex your foresight muscle, how to integrate foresight into your leadership practice, and how to start using it in practical ways. If you are interested in foresight and want to find out what it means, how to use it and how to become futures ready, it’s an essential read.

Strategic foresight: Learning from the future, by Patricia Lustig, is available from Triarchy Press.

Maree Conway is the author of Foresight Infused Strategy.