

## FUTURES THINKING IN A LEADERSHIP CONTEXT

### CREATING EFFECTIVE STRATEGY

Robert Burke

A major role of a leader is to create a preferred future for the organisation, community, and nation, whoever and whatever it is the leaders are serving.

Creating a preferred future always involves change, always involves people, and always is associated with anxiety change inevitably creates. As a rule, although it is acknowledged that change is needed, and is the only constant there is, it is also what we are most resistant and anxious about.

Over many years I have observed that often why CEOs tenure is so short is not because the CEO was trying to create change but because he or she *was* trying to create change but did not know how to navigate the inevitable anxiety associated with the change they were trying to bring about. This has also been my experience over 25 years, as the Australian CEO/Managing Director of International publically listed companies, and I have experienced this resistance to change first hand.

Working with anxiety is probably the main reason why practicing effective leadership is dangerous. You can get shot, metaphorically or for real. For example leaders who have created significant change such as Abraham Lincoln, who abolished slavery in the United States, and Dr. Martin Luther-King, who fought for equal rights for many of the descendants of these slaves, to name but two.

Avoiding getting shot, while instigating change, particularly significant change, involves acts of leadership. Leadership is not the great big all involving charisma thing. It is often just acts of leadership that can be quite small interventions, such as acts of appreciation and acknowledgement. Being really present in the here and now and engaged fully with those you are interacting with. This has the effect of mobilising people into positive action to facilitate the necessary change sought.

Why is this so?

First, we need to have an understanding of how resistance to change comes about. It is about how we learn and how we develop what we think is 'right' and what we think is 'true'. This can be summarized as how we develop our 'worldview'.

Our worldview is the way we see 'the world' and how we see any situation we are confronted with. It is the reason we go to war, form religious and other beliefs, and why we make judgments about almost everything and everyone we come into contact with. Judgement is an excellent attribute and comes from all the knowledge and experience we have gained throughout our lives. It is only a problem when we cease to be asking why, and we are automatically making judgements from our past experiences and beliefs without having an open mind to the new facts that are challenging us for the future.

Second, up until age 4-7 we have not yet formed our worldview. Our minds are open and we are constantly asking why and then why on the why on the why. Although unintended this great inquisitiveness of ours is often shut down when we go to school. At school we are presented with a curriculum that states what we should be learning to be an accepted member of society and of its worldview. This is an enforced worldview practice and is very powerful. It fails however to allow us to keep an open mind because we are examined and judged solely on our response to the curriculum and its espoused worldview. We see this played out daily in news events from around the globe.

What has this got to do with creating effective strategy? Well, everything.

Many strategic plans are never actually implemented. They are merely espoused goals without much substance. Many strategic plans are actually social defences against anxiety as Ralph Stacey argues. They are proposed at such a low level of anxiety or none at all. They are based on the knowledge that already exist and to which we are comfortable with. They are consistent with our worldviews and our assumptions defining what we think is the truth.

For more effective strategy we need to dive deeper. This means we can be challenged and we can get uncomfortable.

For me, what strategy is is what you actually do – in the here-and-now as it emerges. It cannot be anything else. The rest, including scenario planning and strategic planning, is just espoused. It is not real. The only real strategy is the strategy of actuality. From this viewpoint it is the thinking and feeling (emotions) that are important, the conversations that are created in the here-and-now. Education is after all about enquiry, not performance, but we have seen this largely eroded over the past couple of decades as politicians have ‘organisationalised’ education so that it has become about performance. Does your program, course, lecture etc. make for a good business case? This is bad news.

It is the dialogue, the conversations that emerge through futures thinking that is important, and the process to the plan, not the plan itself. All planning is about the future so futures thinking tools/methodologies are therefore navigational tools and methodologies largely to help navigate the anxiety and stress disequilibrium (change) evokes.

Futures thinking in a leadership context are an effective way of navigating anxiety, particularly productive anxiety.

Because the future doesn’t exist, and in a strategic planning process, never will exist, it is open to the influence of many different worldviews, many different ways of knowing, many ways of challenging our assumptions and how they might break down. Inayatullah’s Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) is an effective methodology for better understanding different worldviews and how to be better prepared for the challenges they present.