

Preparing for the Future: 12 Ways

A MindPrep Essentials Tool



Closing the gap between strategic intention and effective execution takes time which, for many of us, is our most precious asset. "Future awareness" is important because it takes your planning and execution out of reaction mode and gives you opportunity to be proactive. See if any of these ideas help you build your future awareness.

Leaders have three overriding challenges: to learn from the past; to deal with today; and to prepare for the future. The last challenge is the hardest. After all, there are no data from the future.

Do you wait for the future to become the present? If so, you'll forego the opportunity to shape your future and will forever react to others' actions.

How do other people and organizations prepare for their future(s)? How do others get ready for the unknown?

Here are a dozen examples:

The list is neither exhaustive nor are the items mutually exclusive. The point is to give you a starting point for thinking about and preparing for your future and the future of your organization. See which are most applicable to your situation and give one or more of them a try.

1. **DECLARE YOUR MAJOR:** You prepared for your own future when you answered the question "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Maybe you knew from the beginning or maybe, like many of us, you went to college, studied, decided your first answer was wrong and then changed your major. Or, like many of us, you finished college, entered the workplace and, for a variety of reasons, redirected your life into something else. In any case, you started out your efforts thinking about your future. Without getting too fancy, you were envisioning your future and putting a plan in place to achieve it.

Envision the future of your organization. Test this vision on a regular basis and, given an acceptable range of uncertainty, modify it to reflect your emerging reality. Remember the adage from Alice in Wonderland – if you don't know where you are going then it really doesn't matter which way you go.

2. **USE GAME FILMS:** Coaches and athletes prepare for their future by studying game films of their competitors in order to predict the actions they might take. They look for opposing strengths and weaknesses and how these align with the strengths and weaknesses of their own team.

Study your entire industry. Who's good? Who's challenged? How can you take advantage of current and emerging problems and opportunities? What will your future look like if your competitor wins (or loses)? Think beyond the confines of your own company.

3. **PLAY WAR GAMES:** Generals and admirals around the world prepare their armies and navies for the future by engaging in war games. They imagine themselves responding to the real or potential actions of an existing or emerging enemy. They may even assign a team of their best and brightest leaders to think like the enemy and play the role of the opposing combatant. On a small scale they may go out in the woods and play a very sophisticated version of “capture the flag” with referees and observers making sure that everyone plays by the rules (or not). On a much larger scale, computer simulation allows the two sides to play a massive game of real-world (but not real) war.

But what do they do when the real or imagined enemy doesn't follow rules? This may come under the heading of guerilla warfare or terrorism and established organizations often have a hard time even imaging what the enemy might do. Think about the war in Afghanistan and our apparent inability to defend against terrorism. What new rules are emerging?

Imagine the moves a competitor might make. How would you respond to them? Imagine the entry of a new competitor into your market space. What rules would they break? Did CVS and Walgreens play by the rules when they introduced retail health clinics in their stores? Now ask yourself “What rule could I break that would give me an advantage?”

4. **EXPLORE:** Explorers prepared for expeditions by understanding, as best they could, the conditions they were about to face and then went about improving the equipment they would use. Early explorers to the South Pole knew that they needed warm clothing and lightweight (but strong) sleds, so they focused a lot of their efforts on improving their equipment. Sometimes explorers opted for maximum flexibility because they didn't know how the conditions would change over time. Blankets can be used for warmth; they can also be used for shade. The explorers' reality is a world of known and unknown; and it calls for elegant flexibility.

The future is unknown (and sometimes unknowable.) What can you put in place that will give you maximum flexibility as the future unfolds? Consider the ultimate equipment at your disposal – the knowledge and skills of you and your people. In a world of specialization do you need some generalists? Who will be the catalyst in your organization to bring all your specialists together and make sense of their expertise? When times are uncertain choose flexibility.

5. **BUILD COMPETING EXPLANATIONS:** Intelligence analysts at the CIA get ready for the future by looking at clues and then developing and exploring a set of competing hypotheses. The clues are open to interpretation and, depending on history, ideology, and assumptions, the clues can describe a variety of differing futures. The important point here is that the set of competing hypotheses is broad enough and does more than suggest a repeat of history. Use your imagination. What else could the clues portend?

Gather your team and ask each person for their hypothesis of organizational success and failure. Use emerging data and business intelligence to test each of the hypotheses. Drop a hypothesis when the data show that you should; but add other hypotheses so that you always have a rich portfolio. There is always more than one path to the future!

6. **PLAN THE PROJECT:** Project planners prepare a budget and timeline for their projects and then sit back and think about what might go wrong. Then they consider how to mitigate the impact of something going wrong or what contingencies they will employ if something does, in fact, go wrong. Experienced project leaders know that every project has a blend of technical, organizational, behavioral, and business factors that come into play during the life of the project. Then they look at the risks associated with this blend of factors.

Getting to the future is the ultimate project for leaders. Look at your strategy (your project plan) and conduct a risk assessment. For which of the following seven families of risk should you try to mitigate or plan contingencies? Risk families: economic, informational, physical, human resource, reputation, psychopathic acts, and natural disasters.ⁱ

7. **PROBE:** Investigating the future may require sending probes into the unknown. As humans continue to be fascinated with life in outer space, we often ask the question of whether Mars could sustain human habitation. NASA sent rovers to Mars that are giving us information about the potential for finding water or other vital elements. Probes give us information and THIS information helps us prepare for the future.

What could you do to probe the future? Is there a test market that always seems to be on the leading edge of customer wants and desires? What do non-customers think of your new idea? When is the last time you left the United States and observed life “out there?” What can you do to get around the gatekeepers of detailed information?

8. **TELL A STORY:** Scenario planning came to the fore in the 1970s when Royal Dutch Shell created a scenario of the impact of high crude oil prices and how they might respond to it. The OPEC oil embargo put those conditions in place, and when the other oil companies were starting their response thinking Shell leadership was already modifying its preconceived scenario and moving into action.

Consider the critical success factors for your business and what assumptions you are making about each of them. Unfortunately, plans are often built on the assumption that our assumptions are correct. However, to refer to the U.S. Marine Corpsⁱⁱ, we live in a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) world. Spend some time preparing a scenario in which one or more of your key assumptions about the future is flat-out wrong.

9. **LEARN FROM THE PAST:** Can we prepare for the future by studying the past? The answer, when viewed through a systems thinking lens, is Yes. By studying the past we have been able to discern a number of patterns that seem to replicate themselves when similar conditions arise. Think about the pattern (archetype) called The Tragedy of the Commons. What happened in the 1700s when too many sheep were allowed to graze on the village common ground? Overgrazing. What happened in the late-1900s when more and more fishing trawlers swept the fertile fishing areas off the coast of New England? Overfishing. What happens when any common resource is overused? The common is

destroyed – and all of this happens while people are doing what is absolutely right for them. Want to predict the future of drinking water in Southwest United States? Think about the Tragedy of the Commons.

Our particular future may be unique; but patterns leading up to the future tend to repeat themselves. If you want to improve your chances of predicting the future get a book about systems thinking and learn how to see and intervene in the following systems archetypes: accidental adversaries, fixes that fail, limits to growth, shifting the burden, and tragedy of the commons. There are more, but this is a good starter-set.

10. **ACT!** People responsible for managing future crises spend a good amount of time thinking about what might go wrong and how to deal with it if it happens. The key here is actually doing something with the result of all the thinking. Consider New Orleans and the devastation caused by hurricane Katrina in 2005. Was a storm of that magnitude predictable? Absolutely yes – we might not know exactly when it might occur, but we had enough data to know that it would occur. Storms are neither good nor bad – they just are. The failure was not in our human ability to think about the situation, it was in our leadership courage to do something in advance of the occurrence to mitigate the impact of the storm.

Consider this emerging reality. Healthcare delivery organizations need to accept that electronic medical records will replace most of our paper records sometime in the future. What are their leaders doing now to prepare their organization for that inevitability? What is an emerging reality for you? What action should healthcare leaders take NOW to prepare for this reality?

11. **SHAPE** Peter Drucker, the late management sage, often spoke and wrote about the “futility of present decisions.” His position was simple – leaders never make decisions in the future; they only make decisions in the present that affect the future. We hire people today who may, or may not, be future leaders. We install large systems today that may, or may not, make us more competitive in the coming years. So, one of the ways we predict the future is to shape the future with our present decisions.

According to an eight-year study by Bain & Company, “about 24 percent more firms moved from the bottom of the pack to the top in the 2001 recession compared with the subsequent period of economic growth.”ⁱⁱⁱ In other words, they took actions during the worst of economic times to position themselves for the future. What actions, if taken today, could position your organization for the future?

12. **ENGAGE IN ANTI-ZEITGEIST:** Why are so many predictions about the future wrong? All the smart people in the 1950s predicted flying cars, and robots in our homes, and all of those Jetson cartoon things. Were they dumb, or was something else going on? No, they were trapped by the Zeitgeist bias^{iv} – that is, they looked into the future through the lens of their current reality. In the 1950s we assumed that technology would cure all problems. In the early 2000s we assumed that the price of

housing would rise forever. We don't see the world through rose colored glasses – we see the world through today's glasses.

Don't assume that the future will be like today. It may be better or it may be worse, but it won't be a carbon copy of today. Here's the challenge. Make it what it needs to be, not what we want it to be. What's the right thing to do?

ONE MORE THOUGHT: Pay attention to generational realities. Are the Gen-Zs like the Boomers? The answer is no, but yes. We use technology differently and we certainly have different tastes in music and entertainment. But we are alike in more important ways. We hit the job market at about the same age. We both need housing and transportation. We both will have failing eyesight at about the same age.

Generations have obvious differences but, when it comes to making life decisions and spending money, we have some remarkable similarities. Good planners will look at both.

ⁱ *Managing Crises Before They Happen: What every executive and manager needs to know about crisis management*, Ian I. Mitroff with Gus Anagnos, AMACOM, New York, 2001, p34

ⁱⁱ *Warfighting: the U.S. Marine Corps Book of Strategy*, Currency Doubleday, New York, 1994

ⁱⁱⁱ "Pull the right levers for your situation," by Darrell Rigby, Bain & company, downloaded from Bain.com on February 26, 2009.

^{iv} *Future Savvy: Identifying Trends to Make Better Decisions, Manage Uncertainty, and Profit From Change*, Adam Gordon, AMACOM, New York, 2009