The anticipatory leader: futurist, strategist and integrator

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A few extraordinarily effective leaders possess a set of potent abilities and intuitive instincts that enable them to readily reposition their organizations in anticipation of market change. They can see a wide range of future possibilities; they know how to take advantage of emerging opportunities while avoiding threats; and they engage their organizations to better navigate through dilemmas and challenges and toward an outcome that has positive consequences for key stakeholders.

In our experience, however, unlike the few gifted leaders, most executives base critical decisions on less thoughtful and less successful methods of deriving their “images of the future.”[1] Such executives often hold fairly narrow mental models with limited expectations about what will be coming over the horizon, based primarily on their past experience. Others may look at current trends and assume these trajectories will continue unimpeded. And still others may be daunted by the sheer complexity of future possibilities and depend too heavily on “experts” for insight.

In today’s turbulent business environment, the advantage goes to organizations whose leaders are continually scanning the external environment, engaging in organizational dialogue and participating in learning processes in order to discover possibilities, mobilize positive energy and build commitment within their organizations to achieve a shared, robust view of the future.

Anticipatory leaders

Our theory – informed by our research, consulting and managerial experience – is that leaders who are adept at positioning their organizations for future success consistently demonstrate three skills. As futurists, they inform themselves about a wide range of current events and trends. As strategists, they hone their understanding of the opportunities and threats that these shifts present. As integrators of ideas, beliefs and emotions they continually engage with the people of their organizations, identifying opportunities and aligning resources toward common objectives. We call these exceptional people “anticipatory leaders,” and these are their three key traits:

1. **Futurist** – Anticipatory leaders understand the dynamics of their organization’s environment by thinking through and beyond the obvious. They explore developments in other industries, in a variety of sciences and in worldwide markets[2] and collect ideas from both conventional and obscure sources. They discern patterns that help make sense of daily headlines. They are relentless students of emerging trends. They are skilled in understanding and explaining how the strength and interaction among external forces shape their organization’s context, and they study the interactions among forces generating these patterns and microtrends.[3]

2. **Strategist** – Anticipatory leaders are able to see the possibilities these trends may portend, particularly in combination, by weaving seemingly disparate information into
new combinations. They use their structural insight to communicate within their organizations and collaborate with their staffs to formulate high-leverage strategies that result in market-dominating products and services. Understanding the dynamics in play allows the organization to adapt to take advantage of these forces, either to create opportunities or to minimize threats. Google’s vision of the role it will play in the future of television on the web is an example of this sort of strategic insight at work.[4]

3. **Integrator** – Anticipatory leaders are more than adept observers and rational analysts. They engage their organizations in dialogue and mutual discovery of possibilities. They demonstrate genuine interest and compassion for the views and concerns of others. Knowing how to honor and weave together the thoughts and feelings of others with their own into a line of principled action, they become highly credible, while legitimizing the fresh ideas of others.[5] Articulating common bonds and shared aspirations comes easily within their organizations because anticipatory leaders truly engage people’s hearts and minds in the strategic-thinking process. Compelling organizational cultures emerge from the anticipatory leaders’ orchestration of the relationship of people, place, and policies.

Often, these capabilities of anticipatory leaders result in their organizations holding a deep sense of social responsibility. Stan Ovshinsky, the founder of Energy Conversion Devices named “Hero of the Planet” by *Time* for his innovations in alternative energy, is an example of a leader whose vision and authenticity has touched the minds, hearts, careers and fortunes of thousands of external stakeholders, colleagues and employees.[6] By understanding the dynamics of future possibilities, translating that understanding into present action, and engaging others, anticipatory leaders possess a powerful advantage in a world of turmoil and uncertainty.

**Anticipatory leadership in action**

To broaden our networks and identify anticipatory leaders beyond those already known to us, we sent a request to executives, managers, professionals, academics, and colleagues asking for their nominees based on the description above. From the names received, we narrowed the list down to those that seemed to match the profile and conducted in-depth interviews with them. Of course, there are limitations to this approach; for example, we would have preferred to have a more diverse sample. On the other hand, these anticipatory leaders do possess the qualities we are investigating. This small sample represents a starting point from which to expand our inventory of anticipatory leaders. The insights that follow are from our extended conversations with three highly successful CEOs.

1. **John Borthwick**, CEO, Fotolog, investor and advisor to several early stage ventures such as Blogger, and former SVP, Time Warner Technology & Alliances.
   - **Futurist:** “Traditional media businesses have been predicated on control of communication. In that world, you had a chasm between media (one way) and communication (two way); they didn’t interact with each other. Now, people share experiences of media...[and] those chasms are being broken down. Democratization of information manifests itself in an overarching trend toward openness.Google and FaceBook are competing for openness, but both have very closed business models. We are fitfully moving into a very different world. We are still figuring out how the endemic qualities of the web relate to the openness issues. Organizational structures and information structures won’t be the same.”

“Leaders who are adept at positioning their organizations for future success consistently demonstrate three skills – futurist, strategist and integrator.”
Strategist: “I believe in taking broad concepts and trying to bring them down to tactical steps that drive day-to-day activities. I try to carve out time every so often, depending on what stage I am in developing a business, to step back from the day-to-day to prioritize myself around what I really value vs. being reactive, sustaining the status quo and running around in circles. It is easy to prioritize yourself by what comes into the in-box rather than shaping and molding your own vision. I find meditation very helpful.”

Integrator: “Consider who you spend your time with, who you surround yourself with. Some people are wonderful human beings who are actually incentivized to protect the existing structure or business model rather than see the big picture. If you are reasonably clear about what you’re doing, it’s printed on your forehead and you attract people who have the same values and can get stuff done. It is astoundingly important to attract both like-minded people and also those who challenge you. You want to make sure that they don’t just affirm your biases. I used to surround myself with people like me. Now, I look for people who are smart, interesting, fun, principled, but not too much like me.”


Futurist: “My career has alternated between intuitive, spiritual, and rational approaches. I had the intuition that the Internet would really change things… and wrote a dissertation on how it would change politics. I didn’t want to describe what it was doing then but wanted to understand it down the line. What is the nature of something? How does it work apart from its specific form? What are its properties as a medium? Those properties do not change over time. That is different from trend analysis; it’s structural analysis.”

Strategist: “Everything you need is always all around you. I love that scene in Apollo 13 where they see what they’ve got and determine what they can do with it. What’s on the table is not random; it’s what we have to work with. Things are included or not for a reason. I throw everything out there and then see what dots connect. Through scanning and conversations, I discover white space that others don’t see. Is there something more here or is this done? What can I make of what’s here?”

Integrator: “Everything over the last 30 years has been about empowerment. People don’t want to be passive consumers of things. Employers no longer use money as an incentive. Most people participate because of their relationships. The challenge of engagement versus incentives is the employment contract of the future. Web 2.0 is about community. There is something in that about the way that leadership can be expressed.”

3. John Vivadelli, CEO, AgilQuest Corporation, a workspace-management-solutions provider, former Principal, IBM Consulting Group.

Futurist: “People don’t see what is blatantly obvious! Only 30-50% of corporate offices have people in them at any one time. This underutilization of assets means they are not functioning properly for their intended purpose – to support people doing work. If you were running an airline, and a route had only 40% occupancy, you wouldn’t fly it. The hospitality industry tightly manages room usage. Why doesn’t this work in commercial real estate? Office space should be thought about like any other expensive asset – maximize its use. It is the only industry that doesn’t measure the actual use of its assets. Darn it, we’re going to change that!”

Strategist: “Our workplaces and their operations must be agile enough to support worker productivity while optimizing costs. If the grand [office] edifice is empty, it is really hard to justify its cost. The people are gone! Now what are you going to do about it? People have already self-selected for mobility. We have to get the real estate – the workplace – to catch up to how people work. Better software does that.”

Integrator: “If this were just about the economics, it wouldn’t drive me. Think of the social impact: 40% of all the energy burned in the US is used in commercial real
estate and on any day 30 to 50% of those assets are empty. Consider the unnecessary greenhouse gases they generate. Separating work from location is good transportation policy as well. For the most part, we have enough roads. We just don’t have enough of them at 7 am and 5 pm. Giving people more freedom of choice in when and where to work helps to decrease traffic congestion.”

Sharpening anticipatory skills

While anticipatory leadership does draw on some innate characteristics, it can be developed and honed by focusing on three interdependent competencies: sensing the future, whole systems thinking, and reframing.

1. Sensing the future

Naturally curious about a broad range of developments that might affect their organizations, anticipatory leaders convene conversations that generate ideas about strategic alternatives and actions. These dialogues make forward-focused thinking part of the organization’s method of operating. The result is a sensitivity to emerging and, as yet, unarticulated customers needs that can be translated into successful products and services.

In A Whole New Mind,[7] author Daniel Pink makes the case that leaders must add creativity and intuition to analysis and logic in the development of strategy, taking account of several macro forces currently reshaping the business environment that are creating great opportunities for those leaders able to perceive them.

For example, John Borthwick, one of the CEOs we interviewed, demonstrated the ability to sense future possibilities the first time he engaged with the Internet at MIT’s Artificial Intelligence Lab. He immediately recognized it as a “brand new medium” that was going to drive change in every domain of life, particularly social exchange. Borthwick could envision a complexity of interactions and relationships switched on by the Internet. These insights led him to develop and invest in multiple web-based enterprises, including Spank, asaweb, Blogger, and Fotolog, one of the world’s largest social media networks with over ten million account holders, in addition to his being a prime mover at AOL during its heyday in the 1990s.[8]

Mark Bonchek, another of the CEOs interviewed, has adapted design methodologies associated with art, architecture, and product development to complement more frequently relied upon critical, linear, problem-focused thought processes.

2. Whole systems thinking

Systems thinking identifies cause and effect relationships between forces and uses the dynamics of those interactions to explain past, current, and future behaviors and outcomes.[9] Systems thinking is the ability to see systems – teams, product lines, organizations, industries, markets, societies – as wholes, by understanding their network of interacting forces. Because many elements contribute to the composition of a complex system, systems thinking can illuminate the impact of remote or minor factors on the totality. A recent study at Florida Atlantic University[10] found that systems thinking is the primary competency that differentiates successful organizational leaders from the less successful.

Jeffrey Immelt’s “ecomagination” initiative at General Electric demonstrates the consequences of whole-systems thinking. Establishing a target of $10 billion in ecologically related revenues ignited action throughout GE and its partner organizations.[11]

Exhibit 1 is a systems diagram of some of the forces affecting one of our anticipatory leaders. CEO John Vivadelli is focused on the effective use of commercial real estate. Our diagram synthesizes his thinking as well as some of our own research on the factors influencing a workplace strategy that supports remote work and its resulting cost savings in real-estate investments.[12] This high-level picture of the interaction of factors related to remote work has many implications for the products and services Vivadelli’s company might offer. It is an example of a visual aid that anticipatory leaders might use to depict both the range of factors.
3. Reframing

The ability to reframe the nature of an organization’s strategic challenge, both in terms of its products and services and in terms of the expectations and possibilities it creates for the people in the system, is a powerful anticipatory skill. Anticipatory leaders can reframe difficult conditions to illuminate unperceived opportunities. Where previously there may have been negativity, fear, apathy or cynicism, reframing can discover prospects for innovation and turn indecision into effective action.

Keen emotional insight into what matters to others is a key element that distinguishes anticipatory leadership from leaders who emphasize rationality and analytics. Because reframing creates new meaning for investors, customers, suppliers, and employees, it is a central integrator quality. The ability to articulate the needs, aspirations, and unspoken concerns of others is a special characteristic of the anticipatory leader.

For example, Bonchek’s work brings communities of multinational executives into sustained dialogue. To do this, he is competing for one of the world’s scarcest resources, the attention of corporate leaders. He succeeds by reframing what it takes to capture their attention. As Bonchek sees it, “Senior executives choose to participate in networks of peers only when they have real relationships with each other based on reciprocity and shared purpose.”

The checklist in Exhibit 2 points toward particular practice areas for mastery. The various descriptors used for each of the anticipatory leader’s traits are based on our own research and experience and were confirmed in our conversations with leaders for this article.

Putting it all together

We have found that anticipatory leaders, either implicitly or explicitly, engage in a particular type of thinking that combines a whole-systems mentality with scenario analysis – the art of
Exhibit 2 Anticipatory leadership self-assessment

While this is not meant to be a comprehensive inventory of an anticipatory leader’s action skills and thought patterns, it may highlight strengths already present in your way of thinking and leading. It may also cause you to pay more attention to other, perhaps underutilized, skills.

Futurist

☐ Regularly and systemically scanning and analyzing information on a wide range of topics, including those which are unfamiliar. [14]
☐ Exposing oneself to unique, perspective enhancing experiences.
☐ Willing and eager to look past what is already known.
☐ Constantly playing out how the future might unfold by thinking, writing, and talking about the subject and soliciting a variety of views.
☐ At ease considering alternative futures; not stuck on one particular version of the future.
☐ Able to describe and critique one’s own mental models of how the world works. [15]
☐ Living as if very different futures could unfold from the facts of the present.

Strategist

☐ Able to effectively leverage insights to produce desired results.
☐ At ease setting an overall direction for a group of implementers.
☐ Taking a disciplined approach to focusing attention past immediate and short-term pressures.
☐ Being surrounded by those who enjoy interpreting (and reinterpreting) how reality is unfolding and what that means for the future.
☐ Possessing the ability to discern the system of forces at work in one’s field well enough that one can foresee how events and outcomes would occur under various assumptions. [16]
☐ Creating structures—incentive and recognition systems, long-term-investment-analysis activities, workplace design, location, and policies—that support longer-term thinking.
☐ Aligning the assets and processes of one’s organization to realize one’s strategic intent.

Integrator

☐ Reframing the thinking of others so that they become aware of possibilities in a situation.
☐ Seeking, valuing and taking advantage of all the good ideas and positive energy in a system.
☐ At ease coaching and being coached; comfortable seeking feedback from others.
☐ Skillful at working through other people in such a way that desired results are achieved and they grow via the experience.
☐ Possessing a positive social vision; bringing people into alignment with one’s social vision; demonstrating how it moves them and the organization ahead.
☐ Being accessible and highly responsive to other people.
☐ Valuing others’ contributions; finding and openly admiring good qualities in others; assuming good intentions even when things go astray
☐ Open to learning from everyone, regardless of their organizational level, function, social position, or degree of recognition
☐ Taking real pleasure from the successes of others

If you have demonstrated strengths in some of these domains but less so in others, you may want to look for opportunities to practice particular competencies.
sketching vivid and plausible stories to stretch futures thinking. They dig below the surface of today’s urgency and noise to discover the dynamic structure underlying whatever topic they are focused upon. By doing this, they achieve a disciplined understanding of a range of potential future conditions. When systems thinking and scenario analysis are used together, anticipatory leaders are able to galvanize action at all levels of their organizations through their ability to articulate the thinking that informs strategic decisions and, thus, engage others in the process. Exhibit 3 shows that these are not isolated skills, nor are they used sequentially. The futurist, the strategist and the integrator are always present and always interacting at iterative levels of refinement and in the inclusion of new information.

Anticipatory leadership is one domain where developed societies like the US, Europe and Japan continue to hold most of the cards. In a flatter and flatter world,[13] where goods are manufactured and services provided at low cost by emerging economies, the developed world’s higher levels of education and access to information and communications media make it home to the burgeoning “conceptual” economy where the winners are those that can see the dynamics of the big picture. Leaders that master the art of anticipating the future through inventing and communicating the conceptual frameworks within which we live and work are the ones who will shape the dynamic era that is unfolding.

Notes

2. For an extensive compendium of information about future trends, *Future Survey*, a monthly publication of the World Future Society, is an excellent, English language resource. See www.wfs.org/fs
4. For one of many articles on this topic see www.marketing.fm/2006/08/27/google-and-the-future-of-television/
8. For detailed information about John Borthwick’s background and achievements see his website: www.borthwick.com/weblog/about/


15. F. Scott Fitzgerald: “The test of a first rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.”

16. “A good hockey player plays where the puck is. A great hockey player plays where the puck is going to be.” – Hockey great, Wayne Gretzky.