

On the Political Sensitivity of Using Visioning Tools in Corporate Settings

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3.2. Policy analysis and alignment of viewpoints across different levels of management in a multinational corporation

A second case example involves a team from a large automotive and electronic data systems corporation who came to UHCL to learn state-of-the-art tools of applied futures research. Membership in the team included an assistant vice president, a department head and several staff professionals. As we were discussing various visionary futures research tools, the group decided that they would like an experiential introduction to the method described above as Mental Time Travel. Since the group had just several hours before involved themselves in a frustratingly inconclusive discussion regarding "Third World" policy implications for their global corporation, the policy option chosen for investigation of this futures method focused on this question:

What would the future of our company and of the world look like if major 'First World' Corporations such as us [do versus do not] strategically embrace the poverty-stricken 'Third World' nations and cultures as customers (i.e., not just as the source of low-cost labor)?

Our exercise was attended by all of the corporate team members plus two UHCL futures faculty and several graduate students and alumni. Two Mental Time Travel journeys (one for each policy option) were facilitated by the author, who first described the process, then gave appropriate instructions for relaxation and focusing. Various frames of reference and time horizons to experience were suggested as the participants imaginatively journeyed through two different futures: one representing the "do" and one representing the "do not" policy options, regarding the embrace of the Third World as a strategic customer base by First World corporation.

The results were clear cut. All participants, both corporate team members and academic participants, experienced much the same thing. Our conclusion? Globally, "the chain" of human systems is only as strong as its weakest link. In the very long term, sustainable growth and well-being is dependent on the well-being of all nations, not just the ones that have a good shot at becoming prosperous. Thus, it is clear that developing a Third World customer base is essential.

The corporate team, in mulling this over came to an additional conclusion: The strategic question that should be focused on is not: Whether or not the corporation should move in this direction; Rather, it needs to be: How might it be feasible to help leaders at all levels in our corporation to experience and see this for themselves, so that meaningful progress in this direction might become feasible to achieve? Obviously, Mental Time Travel would be a way to do this, but the team members saw this as politically too risky to recommend to their corporate superiors, so the matter was dropped, and the team continued their brief experiential survey of research and forecasting methods.

4. Discussion

To the practicing futurist, the substantive conclusions reached in the above examples are not at all very startling. Of much greater interest is the fact that when most or all members of the group experience the same type of result in a facilitated "time travel" exercise in the theater of their own imaginations, an alignment of widely diverging points of view can occur, and one that feels like their

own personal experience. The corporate team in the second case example noted above, for example, spanned an ideological spectrum from economic conservative to ecology activist. And yet the conclusions reached in the exercise transcended such ideological differences, by experientially tapping “core values” common to all.

Similarly, when using this method in conventional corporate settings, all participants typically agree that the method is robust, but that a receptive political climate for its use needs to be developed early in the process so that results can be communicated in a credible way. In retrospect, it is interesting to recall how back in the 1970s, our research team at SRI chose not to cite our use of these “visionary methods” in the methodology section of our reports for fear of losing credibility with clients who already felt a bit vulnerable to criticism for embracing alternative futures thinking. The discernment whether or not such reservations exist in a prospective client community is an important part of the contracting process leading to this type of work in politically sensitive settings.

Hopefully, these brief examples give a taste of the range and robustness that Mental Time Travel offers the working futurist. But because the approach has as yet not really caught on as a way to help clients in different settings to experientially envision possible, probable and preferable futures for themselves and their clients, it is hard to say what the limits will be to which this method will ultimately be constrained. For example, with further development, this method may well come to be recognized as a form of remote viewing—a possible approach to futures research recently reviewed by Lee [8].