

Transformative Scenario Planning: Working Together to Change the Future

by Adam Kahane

Each of us must choose, in each situation, how we will approach the future. Sometimes we choose to accept what is happening around us and try to adapt ourselves to it. Other times we choose to challenge what is happening and try to change it. This is the choice that Reinhold Niebuhr pointed to in his much-loved maxim: “Lord grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

If we choose to try to change the future, then we must choose how. More often than not, we choose to push. We have an idea of the way we think things ought to be, and we marshal our resources—arguments, authority, supporters, money, weapons—to try to make it so. But often when we push, others push back, and we end up frustrated, exhausted, and stuck. Over and over we encounter such stuck situations, in all kinds of social systems: families, teams, communities, organizations, nations.

This book is for people who have chosen to try to change the future and have realized that they cannot do so unilaterally. They may be trying to change the future of their city or their country or the world; they may be focusing on health or education or the economy or the environment; they may be acting from a position in business or government or civil society. This book is for these people, who are looking for a way to work together—not only with friends and colleagues but also with strangers and opponents—and so to be able to get unstuck and move forward and



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create change.

I first got a glimpse of such a new way of working with the future twenty years ago, during the transition away from apartheid in South Africa. I was unexpectedly plunged into working with a team of leaders from all parts of South African society—black and white, left and right, opposition and establishment—who were trying to construct a better future for their country. I saw, in what they were doing and how they were doing it, a brief and clear image of this new way—like a nighttime landscape momentarily illuminated by a flash of lightning. I knew that I had seen something important, but I didn't quite know what it was or where it had come from or how it worked. I have spent the past twenty years working on understanding what I saw. This book reports what I have learned.

Over these past two decades, my colleagues and I have worked with hundreds of teams of people who are working together to change the fu-

ture. These teams have tackled some of the most important and difficult challenges of our time: health care, economic development, child nutrition, judicial reform, social inclusion, food security, and climate change, across the Americas, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and Australia. They have included politicians, peasants, activists, artists, academics, businesspeople, trade unionists, civil servants, and leaders of community, youth, indigenous, and religious organizations. Some of these teams have been local and others global; some have worked together for days and others for years; some have succeeded in changing their situation and others have failed.

Through these experiences, I have learned that it is possible for people who are in a situation they want to change—people who need each other in order to get unstuck and move forward but who don't understand or agree with or trust one another—to work together cooperatively and creatively to effect that change. And I

have learned the what and why and how of this approach.

My colleagues and I call this new way of working *transformative scenario planning*. Its purpose is to enable those of us who are trying to change the future collaboratively to *transform*, rather than adapt to, the situation we are part of. It involves a transformation of the situation—like a caterpillar into a butterfly—rather than only an incremental or temporary change. We bring this about through transforming our own thoughts and actions and our relationships with others. Trans-

formative scenario planning centers on constructing *scenarios* of possible futures for our situation, but it takes the well-established adaptive scenario planning methodology and turns it on its head—so that we construct scenarios not only to understand the future but also to influence it. And it involves *planning*, not in the sense of writing down and following a plan, but in the sense of engaging in a disciplined process of thinking ahead together and then altering our actions accordingly.

Transformative scenario planning offers us a new way to work together

to change the future. This new way is simple, but it is not easy or straightforward or guaranteed. It requires learning how to make a specific series of steps, but also, perhaps more important, making a profound and subtle shift in how we approach one another and the situations of which we are part. Above all, it requires practicing: learning by doing. This book outlines this new way and invites you into the doing. ■

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Photography by Mitch Davidowitz

This isn't some passing fad sweeping middle management, or a pilot programme dreamed up by human resources. For seven years now, a growing number of General Mills workers have been practising meditation, yoga and so-called "mindfulness" in the workplace. And what began as a side project by one executive has transformed the culture of a Fortune 200 multinational.

"It's about training our minds to be more focused, to see with clarity, to have spaciousness for creativity and to feel connected," says Janice Marturano, General Mills' deputy general counsel, who founded the programme. "That compassion to ourselves, to everyone around us – our colleagues, customers – that's what the training of mindfulness is really about."

The General Mills initiative is at the vanguard of a movement that is quietly reshaping certain corners of the corporate world. With meditation, yoga and "mindfulness," the foundational tenets of Buddhism, Hinduism and other pan-Asian philosophies have infiltrated the upper echelons of some of the biggest companies on earth.

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