

Navigating the Future With Foresight

Think Piece 31: December 2018



If the wild bird inside you could cry out
Nigel Brown, 2001

Project 2058 began in 2008 as a way of exploring New Zealand's long-term future. *Āpōpō Journal* has been published to commemorate the ten-year anniversary of the project. It seemed timely to create a 40-year journal that provides foresight tools for individuals, families and communities to use to explore and engage with the future.

Āpōpō teaches the importance of using hindsight, insight and foresight to navigate the future. Featuring life skills and practical advice, an evolving personal time capsule, historic national events and futures thinking tools, *Āpōpō* allows New Zealanders to explore life's challenges and opportunities through a new lens.

This think piece is an excerpt of an essay by Institute CEO Wendy McGuinness from *Āpōpō*. It shares foresight tools gained from studying the future and insights from participants of the Institute's youth workshops.

FORESIGHT TERMS

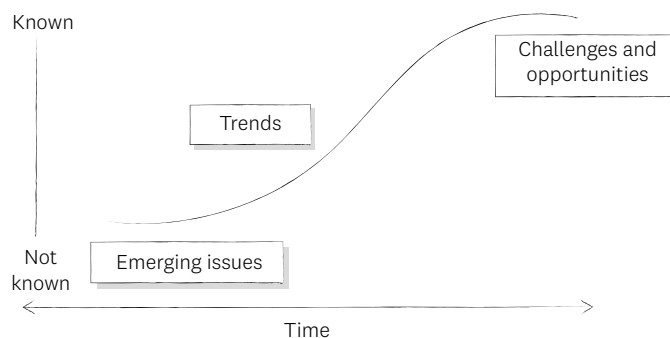
Dreaming allows us to envisage different versions of the future. Ambition enables us to select one version and consider how to make it a reality. Drawing clear distinctions between frequently used foresight terms can help make the process of achieving your goals easier.

The difference between a strategy and a plan

Sometimes it can seem like strategies and plans are the same thing, but the difference is in their focus. Developing a strategy involves exploring different approaches or options for solving a problem or taking advantage of an opportunity, whereas a plan is a list of specific actions with details such as who is responsible for which tasks and over what time frames. We often prepare a plan too early, when instead we should be putting more effort into identifying and assessing the full range of strategic options.

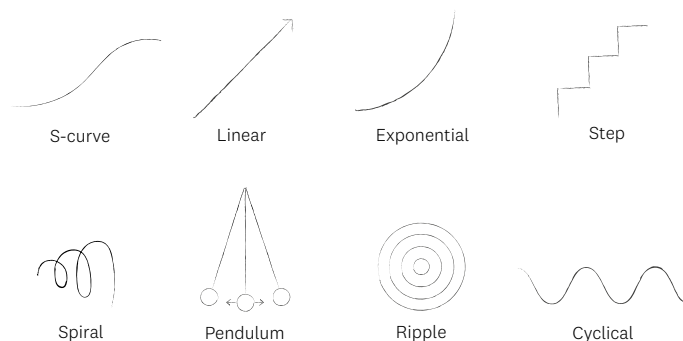
The difference between emerging issues and trends

Issues that have the potential to have a high level of impact but have low awareness in society are often called emerging issues. Emerging issues become trends when there is both further evidence that the issue is significant and growing awareness and acceptance by the general public that a trend now exists. This is illustrated in the following diagram.



To identify an emerging issue, you might observe something that indicates that something else might happen, but which hardly anyone else knows about. Alternatively, you might see a connection between one event and another that no one else sees. It is helpful to keep in mind that not all issues and trends are problems; they can also be opportunities. For example, entrepreneurs may see an opportunity to solve an emerging issue with a new product or service.

Some change can be gradual while other change can be incremental or abrupt. A few examples of patterns of change are illustrated below.



When trying to understand emerging issues or trends, these patterns can help describe the type of change you see. The S-curve illustrates change that starts slow, speeds up, but then slows down again; it can be used to discuss the process of product development. An example

of linear change might be food consumption (as the population grows, so does food consumption). The famous example of exponential growth used in futures studies is Moore's law, whereby the number of transistors in a dense integrated circuit doubles every two years. Stepped change is often the result of innovation, such as the stages in the invention of the electric car. Spiral change might be due to change in scientific thinking bringing together a lot of ideas over time from different areas of study. The pendulum can be used to illustrate the way that politics can swing from left to right and back again. The ripple might be something small that results in a big change over time and often across continents (e.g. the move away from plastic bags). Lastly, cyclical change is temporary and typically based on changes in business cycles or the seasons.

The difference between probability and magnitude

In addition to exploring existing emerging issues and trends, futurists are also interested in understanding possible events that have not yet occurred (e.g. a cure for cancer or flying cars). This is like placing an event under a microscope in order to understand how it might behave in certain environments. A futurist tends to classify these kinds of events in terms of probability (the likelihood of it happening) and magnitude (the impact it will have if it does happen). Sometimes we also look at the time frame; for example, would the initial impact occur over a few days (e.g. a flood) or a lifetime (e.g. climate change)? Futurists also like to think in terms of 'wild cards', which are unknown events (the 'unknown unknowns', in contrast to the 'known knowns' or the 'known unknowns').

At the 2016 *ForesightNZ* youth workshop the Institute hosted with the New Zealand Treasury, participants were challenged to create a set of playing cards, with each card representing an emerging trend or possible future event (see image below). The idea was to encourage people to understand not only the probability and magnitude of each card, but also how the cards might relate to each other given a certain sequence of events. This is much harder than it seems, and players initially struggle with the difference between cause and effect (and subsequent ripple effects) and with connecting the cards to develop authentic narratives. The card game is a useful tool to train your brain to find connections between events, which will enable you to engage early by positioning yourself, your whānau, your community or your business to take advantage of a range of possible events.



The difference between being fragile and being antifragile

Being fragile means being vulnerable to a range of events, whereas being antifragile means being flexible and designing systems for

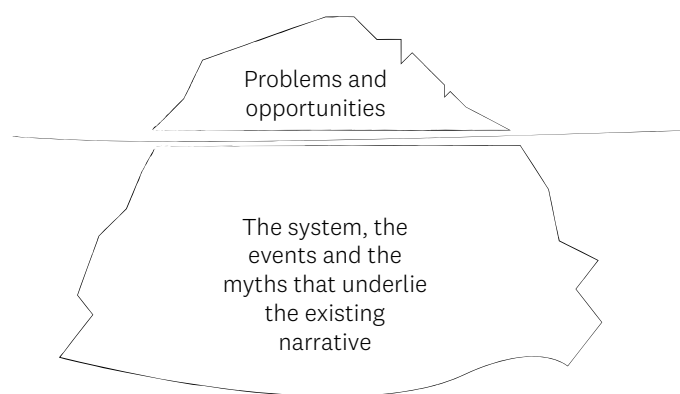
your life that enable you to deal with any eventuality. The term 'antifragile' was coined by Nassim Nicholas Taleb. He wrote a book called *The Black Swan* (2007), which discusses low-probability/high-magnitude events. He then went on to outline his antidote to *The Black Swan* in a book called *Antifragile* (2012). Examples of how to become more antifragile could include broadening your skills and capabilities so you have more options when applying for jobs, avoiding credit card debt so you are less vulnerable to increases in interest rates and diversifying your investments so you have more flexibility when times get tough.

Taleb's most recent book, *Skin in the Game* (2018), argues that better decisions are made when decision-makers have a stake in the outcome of the decision. He believes that if all parties have skin in the game, it will lead to fairness, commercial efficiency and better risk-management.

Taleb's work and thinking changed the way I manage my own life. He reminded me to aim for antifragility by keeping my options open as long as possible and being flexible. I now try to keep my battery charged (both physically and mentally) and, when considering working with others, I look to see whether our goals are aligned and whether we all have skin in the game.

The difference between superficial thinking and digging deep

Years ago a futurist explained to me how important it is to think in layers. By this he meant going deep into an issue, peeling off each layer until you reach the core. He called this 'the onion approach'. The best way to do this is to keep asking questions that start with 'why' and 'what if'. The iceberg diagram below illustrates this idea in another way. At the very bottom of the iceberg, below the surface of the water, are the unseen metaphors and the myths that underlie our behaviour. In order to transform our life, our community, an organisation, a country or even the world, we need to be aware that these narratives exist, and where possible, identify them and change them (e.g. the narrative that climate change is not affected by human activity). This is a big ask and takes time – sometimes a whole lifetime – but to move forward, we need to ensure the narratives are true and align with the problems we want to solve and the progress we want to make.



The difference between puzzles and mysteries

Gregory Treverton, a national security expert at RAND Corporation, outlined the difference between two types of problems in his book *Reshaping National Intelligence for an Age of Information* (2003). He defined a puzzle as a problem that can be solved if you have better information, whereas no amount of information will help you solve a mystery. Solving mysteries takes more time and requires deep thinking because these types of problems involve high levels of uncertainty and demand judgement. So

while solving puzzles is about information quality and quantity, mysteries are about the nature of the problem (and you may need to consider what skills or resources are needed to solve them).

The difference between systems thinking and analytical thinking

Systems thinking takes an issue or product and looks at how it fits within the wider system to understand why it works. Analytical thinking takes the same issue or product and pulls it apart to understand how it works. For example, applying a systems approach to a car would take into account the infrastructure of roads, leading to the conclusion that a car takes people and products from one location to another, at a time that suits the driver. In contrast, applying an analytical approach to a car would look at its mechanics and how each part fits together. Drawing a distinction between why and how something is done is very useful.

The difference between data and wisdom

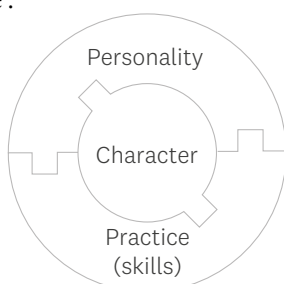
Another approach to understanding an issue is to appreciate that knowledge and wisdom take time to develop. I often revisit the idea that data collected together creates information, information collected together creates knowledge, and knowledge collected together creates wisdom. I try and aim to acquire knowledge and wisdom, but this requires always having the evidence at hand, which means I need access to data and information. We must continue to explore and be curious, because a new piece of data or information can alter accepted wisdom on an issue. Sometimes new information can be in the form of lost stories and fables which, when shared, help protect society against risks that don't repeat very often (e.g. tsunamis, recessions or pandemics).

The difference between urgent and important

I am a great believer in 'to do' lists, as they help me to bring about change or complete complex research reports. However, being able to identify what is urgent and what is important in any list is crucial. Often your natural instinct is to do what people want you to do (to get them off your back) or what you enjoy (because it's fun), but making time for important things often makes all the difference in the long term. Adding time frames to a to do list and ranking actions in order of importance can help with this. I tend to do important things in the early morning and urgent things throughout the day. The key for developing your own system is balance – a little bit of both.

The difference between character, personality and talent

From my perspective, talent is made up of three components: personality, character and skills. The most important of the three is character. How we interrelate (personality) and what we learn (skills) illustrate our character. That's why the talent circle diagram (below) places character in the centre, while personality and skills sit on the outside. The talent diagram came out of the Institute's research on what 'talent' means, particularly in the context of Sir Paul Callaghan's vision for 'creating a place where talent wants to live'.



Character is usually expressed in the way we treat others or in how we respond to the individual challenges we face. It is true that exceptional leadership comes from good character, but it is also true that what we do when no one is watching is the real test of character. Sometimes in our lives we show poor character and other times we show great character. When people say that substance is more important than form in terms of leadership, what they mean is that leaders need to be prepared to take risks for the benefit of their wider constituents (e.g. being prepared to tax or regulate corporates), sometimes in the form of short-term risks with potential benefits for future generations (e.g. transitioning to a zero-carbon economy). The most important thing to understand about character is that we need to work on it all day, every day.

In contrast, personality is what we are given – we wake up with our personality and that's simply the way we are. The other component – skills – are what we learn through practice and listening and observing others (e.g. learning an instrument or language).

To help participants of our workshops develop a shared voice, the whole group presents their thoughts and ideas to people like the Governor-General, Members of Parliament and officials at the finale event. Youth workshops are exhilarating, challenging and incredibly rewarding – but success hinges on how well the workshop groups work together. Over the years I have found that dividing participants into six groups of six on the first day and opening up to the overall maximum group of 36 on the second day works best. I put a lot of effort into choosing the initial six groups of six. I know that if I get this wrong, it will affect people's experiences and the outcomes of the workshop. As part of the process of creating the groups, I phone participants' referees and ask them lots of questions – the most important question is how the participants work with others.

The painting *If the wild bird inside you could cry out* by Nigel Brown (below) has always resonated with me because the three native birds in the painting remind me that we can be very different but still live in harmony together, much like the kārearea, the kererū and the ruru.



Characteristics of these three birds can be summarised as follows:

Kārearea (New Zealand falcon)



- Individualistic, energetic, hungry, ambitious and proactive.
- Has a shrill scream 'keek-keek-keek-keek', which is made during territorial disputes or while the nest is being defended from potential predators.
- Can reach speeds of 180 km/hr when attacking, making it New Zealand's fastest bird.

Kererū (New Zealand wood pigeon)



- Friendly and not scared of humans.
- Swallows seeds whole and is therefore an important propagator of native plants.
- Able to travel between suburbia, native forest and other habitats easily.

Ruru (morepork)



- Seldom seen and can fly in almost silence.
- Have exceptional hearing and can catch prey using just their ears.
- Able to turn their heads 270 degrees to see what is happening around them.

Each bird has strengths and weaknesses. For example, kārearea can fail to see the importance of the ruru, because ruru are quiet. However, an astute kārearea using their leadership skills will try and learn what the ruru is thinking. Similarly, the ruru might have powerful insights or a clear articulation of the key message held in their head, but they can sometimes leave a discussion without sharing their thoughts. Kārearea and ruru might not see the value of a kererū, but a kererū is essential because they often hold the team together and move everyone gently in the right direction, acting as a type of referee to make sure people are safe and the goal is achieved.

My job when creating groups for one of our workshops is to look for and manage group dynamics. When talking to the referees of potential workshop participants, I try to find out what the participant's default position is – are they predominantly a kārearea, kererū or a ruru? I make sure each group has one of each bird in it, because all three are important to optimise the group's performance. Once they arrive at the workshop, I ask participants to fill in a survey that includes asking them to self-select the type of bird they think they are. This enables me to check that my initial feedback is correct and allows me to adjust the groups accordingly.

The difference between emotions, passions and feelings

Emotions, passions and feelings are not always easy to understand, articulate, predict or manage; throughout time, trying to make sense of them has been a preoccupation of society.

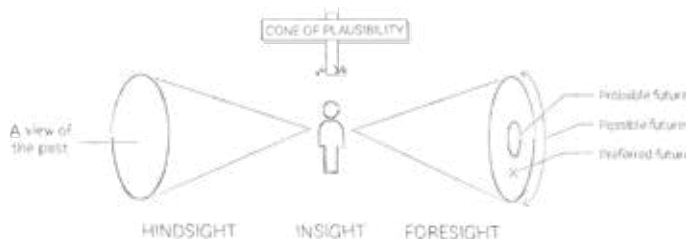
A first-century Chinese encyclopedia identified seven feelings: joy, anger, sadness, fear, love, disliking and liking. In the 17th century, Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia asked the French philosopher René Descartes, to 'define the passions, in order to know them better'. Descartes responded by suggesting there were six 'primitive' passions: 'wonder', 'desire', 'love and hatred' and 'joy and sadness'. In the 20th century, American psychologist Paul Ekman identified six basic emotions: anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness and surprise.

Māori understandings of wellbeing have long acknowledged that 'thought, feeling and emotions are invariably linked to physical and spiritual wellbeing. Māori acknowledge the vital link that thoughts, feelings and emotions have to overall health'. This forms part of Te Whare Tapa Whā, developed by Mason Durie, which represents the four components of Māori health

(taha hinengaro/mental health, taha tinana/physical health, taha wairua/spiritual health and taha whānau/family health).

A few final thoughts

Treat yourself like you would treat a child: be patient, be kind and be careful who you hang out with. When I became a parent of teenagers, I gained great strength from trying to be a good role model. It freed me to be the type of person I wanted my children to be. If you are going to push boundaries, you are likely to fail more, so when you do, take that into account. No matter how you live your life, failure will happen. So fail fast and get up quickly, shake yourself off and start again. You could also observe, reflect and try a different approach to the same goal, or change the goal.



There is always a time to pause, reflect and build wisdom and a time to probe and engage with the future. While there is a cone of foresight that looks forward, there is also a cone of hindsight that looks backward. In reality, there are many pasts and many futures. The same events in history can be viewed and understood through many different lenses. Some of these lenses are verbal rather than written, and some have never been shared.

Written words tend to dominate history, so we need to create space for voices we may not have heard. This stops us being too judgemental. In the past, propaganda was used to sway citizens and some might argue that practice continues today. Being able to get to the truth is tricky, so if you are making an important decision, seek out the evidence, triple check. There are so many good people out there who will share their thoughts, knowledge or experiences with you – don't hesitate to ask.

Lastly, there really is time for everything. You don't have to act straight away; don't beat yourself up if you don't have the time or energy to contribute to society immediately. When I was in my thirties I was both financially and time-challenged – I always seemed to need help. Then a friend said to me, 'Wendy, there is a time to give and a time to take. There will be a time in the future you can give, but it's not going to be anytime soon'. This simple statement helped me reset my expectations and develop achievable goals for that time in my life.

To close, I would like to leave you with the following whakataukī from Māori leader Dr Āpirana Mahuika:

'E tū ki te kei o te waka, kia pākia koe e ngā ngaru o te wā'
'Stand at the stern of the canoe and feel the spray of the future biting at your face'

– Whakataukī gifted to New Zealand Police by
Dr Āpirana Mahuika

References for this think piece can be found on the McGuinness Institute website at www.mcguinnessinstitute.org/think-pieces.



The McGuinness Institute is a non-partisan think tank working towards a sustainable future, contributing strategic foresight through evidence-based research and policy analysis.

McGuinness Institute, Level 1A, 15 Allen Street, PO Box 24222, Wellington 6142

Phone: (04) 499 8888 Email: enquiries@mcguinnessinstitute.org Website: www.mcguinnessinstitute.org