

Preferred Futuring

Envision the Future You
Want and Unleash the
Energy to Get There

LAWRENCE L. LIPPITT

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Envision the Future You Want and Unleash the Energy to Get There

Lawrence L. Lippitt
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Recommendation

Lawrence L. Lippitt tells you how to create a future vision for your organization. You must assess your present reality and external threats, create a plan to get to your future, and monitor the results. The book's focus on a future vision distinguishes it from ordinary problem-solving guides. Lippitt cites a few examples of groups that have used this approach successfully over the course of 30 years and emphasizes using this technique in a group session. This nicely written, well-organized book clearly and simply presents its eight-step model and offers a complete implementation guide. *BooksInShort* recommends this book as useful to anyone working on planning or managing change - from CEOs to team leaders and trainers. One caveat: Its methods seem similar to those offered in other leadership and strategic change literature. The specific steps may vary, but the basic approach is much the same. What's different is the vision thing.

Take-Aways

- Preferred futuring works toward a collective future for your organization.
- Preferred futuring leads to a more inspiring goal than mere problem solving.
- To create a preferred future, first review your organization's history.
- To examine your current state, identify your "prouds" and "sorries" - what's working and what's not.
- Identify your core values and beliefs to decide what to keep and what to leave behind.
- Your preferred future vision should consist of a series of clear images, or a set of strategic priorities.
- Once you have your vision, translate it into action goals.
- Your action plan should be series of specific, planned steps.
- Create a structure for implementing the plan, including ongoing support, monitoring and accountability.
- To create a preferred future model, bring members of your organization together to determine your common direction.

Summary

Preferred Futuring Roots

Preferred futuring traces its roots to the late 1950s and early 1960s, when social scientist Ron Lippitt sought a better way to help groups determine goals and work toward change. He found that people commonly identified their current problems, prioritized them and developed plans to resolve the most important issues among them.

However, the goal of moving away from something painful also made people feel dissatisfied and discouraged. By contrast, asking people what was working well - and what wasn't - motivated them, because it presented a picture of a preferred future toward which they could work. The ultimate result was a new standard of how to change.

“This paradigm shift has moved us from focusing on the problem to focusing on an exciting future state.”

After Ron Lippitt's death in 1987, others carried on the preferred futuring principles and developed them further. These experts created a new model that didn't rely on ordinary problem solving, but focused instead on an exciting future state.

The new model doesn't ask you to just list your organization's problems. Instead, it requires you to assess several key questions, including:

- How did you get where you are today?
- What is working and what is not working?
- What future do you want?
- How are you going to get there?

“Preferred Futuring and whole-systems thinking mean resisting the urge for the quick fix. They mean staying open to inquiry and suspending judgment - being open to having our truth (how we see the world) changed or broadened.”

Under this structure, you will realize different results than a problem-solving model would produce. Instead of ending up with a list of your problems, you will have a sense of your organization's heritage, and a realistic assessment of the difficulties you must overcome. You'll have success criteria and an action plan to create the future you choose.

In short, preferred futuring leads to a more inspiring goal than mere problem solving. Preferred futuring links to whole-systems thinking. It recognizes that everything is interconnected.

Each part of the system influences every other part, thus no part of the system can be excellent unless the whole system is excellent. The preferred futuring approach brings all the stakeholders in the organization together to choose and create the future they want.

“If you can find a way to ask people their vision about a doable future, and then listen to them and put it down, a creative image of a preferred future can begin to take shape.”

Preferred futuring is not a quick fix. Instead, as you look ahead, think in terms of the whole organization. Work together toward this future vision. You must be both holistic and forward-looking in today's increasingly complex world.

The Underlying Philosophy

Preferred futuring involves the freedom to choose your own future. In groups or organizations, it means that everyone is part of the process.

“Thinking in the future tense from a perspective of clarity about what you want becomes an act of creation in the present.”

It works well - because coming together as a community helps your organization make better decisions according to shared interests. You'll create a collective preferred future. Everyone in your organization will end up wanting to share in the process, because they

participated, and because the desire for something better is engraved deep in our souls.

Once you create this future hope and expectation, the forward vision begins to transform you. The future is always now!

In other words, when you clearly know what you want, that knowledge becomes an act of creation in the present. You are able to start working now to create change, because you know where you are going.

“In addition to Preferred Futuring helping us think in terms of the whole, it also helps us think in the future tense, something that is critically important in our changing world.”

The advantage of preferred futuring is that it moves everyone forward. Instead of resisting the future, or merely adapting to it, preferred futuring helps you invent it. Preferred futuring helps you change your department, organization, community, or yourself.

The Basic Steps of Preferred Futuring

Preferred Futuring has eight basic steps, which you need to understand and then employ systematically:

1. Learn your history well. You'll gain a shared appreciation of your organization's past. Interview your veterans about important events that shaped your organization. Use time-line graphics to highlight key events and dates from the past.
2. Identify your Current State. Know what's working, and what's not. Identify your "prouds" and "sorries." The "prouds" are those methods in which you can take pride. The "sorries" are the things that you regret.
3. Clarify the underlying values and beliefs that shaped your organization's past and present. Examine the values and beliefs you want to influence you in the future. Discuss which values and beliefs you like and want to keep, and which ones you want to discard. Establish new guiding principles.
4. Analyze various forces, events and trends affecting your organization as you move toward the future. These can include changes in technology and the marketplace, new or changed legislation, regulatory changes, and shifting internal forces, such as company policy decisions.
5. Create a detailed, understandable vision, made up of clear images or strategic priorities. Inspire a sense of investment and ownership. Make sure your superiors, colleagues and employees are clear about their own roles in this image of the future. Although this vision is for one, two, or five years in the future, everyone should speak of it in the present tense, as if it is already happening. Generally, you will end up with a vision statement with five to ten strategic priorities, with explicit descriptions of what constitutes success in achieving each goal.
6. Create action goals. Form teams around each of the preferred future visions you delineated in the previous step. Each team must make the images of the future clearer, more detailed, and action-oriented. These can include intermediate goals and the ultimate goal two to five years in the future.
7. Plan and rehearse. Implement your vision with an action plan that consists of specific, planned steps. Create planning teams to formulate not only what to do, but how it will be done, when, and by whom. Identify who will be accountable for each action.
8. Implement and follow up. To succeed in implementing your plan, you must have ongoing support and monitoring functions. Collect data on the progress of your change effort, and analyze the information. Use the results to make any necessary midcourse corrections to your overall plan. Publicize and celebrate successes along the way. Success stories and celebrations can become part of your organization's "new mythology" and can, in turn, inspire future change efforts.

Putting Preferred Futures to Work

To use the preferred futures model, bring members of your organization together. Work through the eight phases over a two or three-day period.

“To live in the future, not only do we have to prepare ourselves based on what has been and what is, we have to educate ourselves for the future. And that education must be based on not only on what has happened and what is happening now, but also on what we think will happen.”

A meeting like this could involve several hundred people (if you are creating a preferred future for your whole organization), or it might be much smaller (if you are conducting this planning program on the departmental, division, or team level).

Gather your participants in a large room and encourage them to discuss and write down their thoughts.

This process doesn't have to be high-tech. You can use flip charts, easels, scrolls of paper, magic markers, post-it notes and other such materials.

Start with a history review. A number of tools can help you do this:

- The decade call out looks at your overall milestones in development, growth, achievement and leadership at different times.
- The historical interview taps the experience of the group's most senior members.
- The time-line start up asks participants to write down significant events that have occurred since they joined the organization.
- The review of past documents looks for relevant information in annual reports, brochures, sales materials, or other documents.

“We make the best decisions when we are in community with others of a shared interest. Freedom is related to our ability to come together as a community and create a collective preferred future.”

Whatever methods you use, scan the past for relevant lessons and consequences and draw lessons from them that apply to designing your new future.

Prouds, Sorries and Values

Next, ask participants to identify your organization's "prouds" and "sorries" - the things that are working, and those that aren't. Include all of your stakeholders.

“The Preferred Futuring Process consists of eight steps: 1) History, 2) Current State, 3) Core Values and Beliefs, 4) Events, Trends and Developments, 5) Preferred Future Vision, 6) Action Goals, 7) Plan and Rehearse, 8) Implement and Follow Up.”

Encourage participants to be very honest and to speak openly. After everyone has shared the prouds and sorries, examine the implications of the sorries and consider ways you might celebrate your proud priorities.

Identify and examine the fundamental values and beliefs that have guided your company. Use two key tools to do this: 1) value forming, sharing and clarifying, and 2) scanning for core values.

Discuss what values to hold onto as your organization moves into the future. Decide which ones, if any, to leave behind.

Moving Into the Future

When you move into the next stage, have everyone think about developments that will affect your future: technology, marketplace changes and societal or global trends.

“The Historical Review creates a shared sense and appreciation of the organization's common history.”

Have participants discuss these in small groups, and write their suggestions down on a flip chart. Then, ask a spokesperson from each group to share them with everyone.

Take all of these steps - your organization's past, your core values, and possible developments and trends - and apply them to envisioning your future. Ask people to take an imaginary trip into the future of your organization.

“‘Prouds’ are things that are working in the current situation, about which we are proud, and ‘Sorries’ are things that are not working, about which we are sorry.”

Instruct them to write down what they see there. Have them share their visions and use them to list your major strategic priorities.

Finally, have everyone vote on his or her preferred priorities. The result will be a preferred future vision, which lists several strategic priorities and provides detailed images of success.

"A preferred future vision is clear, detailed, and commonly understood; this vision consists of a set of specific images, a set of strategic priorities. All participants (or at least a critical mass) are aligned to this vision, feel a sense of investment or ownership in it, and clearly understand their roles."

From Vision Into Action

To translate the future vision into action goals, ask teams of volunteers to form around each preferred image and match the goals with actions. Put task forces to work setting up methods to achieve those goals.

Develop various methods for spreading the action plan throughout your organization - such as teaching others in the organization how to use this process and sharing examples of success.

About the Author

Lawrence L. Lippitt is president of Lippitt Carter Consulting and co-founder of the Preferred Futuring Network. The son of Ron Lippitt, he has used preferred futuring techniques for more than 20 years with both large and small organizations - from *Fortune* 500 companies and healthcare organizations, to schools, nonprofits and city governments.
