

Article 4: Embodied foresight: Foundations for an ethics of practice

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Article 4

This is the final article in a series of four providing an introduction to the practice of strategic foresight. I close this series by exploring the origins and nature of an ethics of practice that I believe to be consistent with the overall way of practicing strategic foresight that I introduced in the previous three articles.

Foundations for an ethics of practice

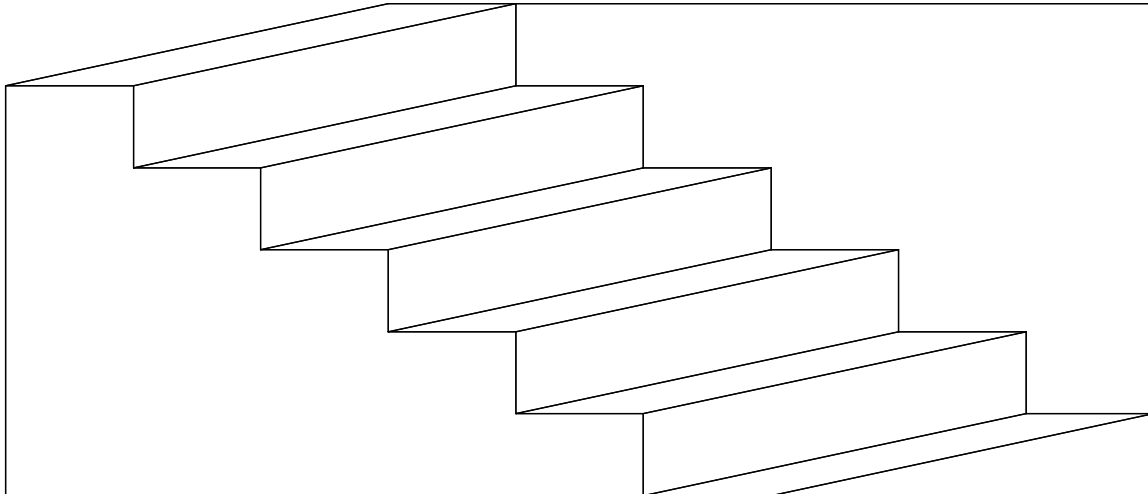
The ethics of practice that I endeavour to enact in my work is founded on the view that organisations, as collectives of human members, can best be considered as *living* entities. As living entities, organisations will perform best when their behaviour is self-organising from within, and cannot simply be manipulated via external controls. Moreover, the individual human members who together comprise the collective organisation are all sentient beings with their own autonomy—their own outlooks on the world, their own ways of making sense of the situations in which they find themselves that are internally consistent and inherently *meaningful* for them. Organisations that reflect this in practice will almost certainly perform better in objective terms, while providing vibrant, nurturing cultures in which people have the opportunity to realise their full potential, and in which work can be a source of deep personal fulfilment.

With this in mind, it's my contention that the understanding within and between people upon which decision making and action depends cannot be imposed by decree—it must be grown from within, in ways that respect the inherent dignity of all involved. The ways in which we make sense of our situations are dependent on processes of interpretation that are self-directed, and as such, unique to each individual.

A practical example can help demonstrate why recognition of this is so important. Have a look at the simple figure below.¹ The figure itself—the “object on the screen” is made up of a series of vertical, horizontal and diagonal black lines on a white background. What do you make of it—what do you see when you look at the figure?

Perhaps you see a three dimensional depiction of a staircase. If so, then consider for a moment where this “three dimensionality” comes from—is it inherent in the figure itself? If you do see a three dimensional depiction of a staircase, then is it the “right way up” version, or the “upside down” version? Or do you find yourself alternating from one to the other perhaps? If so, then what is changing here? The figure itself is static—so it isn't the figure that is changing. Moreover, people from cultures without a tradition of two dimensional depictions of three dimensional objects, or without direct experience of the objects depicted, have reported *not* seeing a staircase at all. This is a very simple example, of which there are many similar instances, including “ambiguous figures” that appear to depict one of two distinctly different objects.

¹ This is based on an example in Chalmers, Alan (1999), *What is this thing called science*, 3rd edn, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia.



The point that I'm hoping to illustrate here is that the meaning we associate with our perceptions is interpretation-dependent, rather than given from outside. While there may be a temptation to regard this example and others like it as somehow exceptional, the evidence in relation to the way that cultural background can affect whether a staircase is seen or not demonstrates that this interpretation-dependence is part and parcel with the nature of knowing itself. In making sense of the situations that we encounter, there is no getting around the active nature of all perspective-making. At some point, appreciation of this may start to make the idea of "getting around" this seem somewhat ironic in its own right.

The process of "growing understanding from within" might appear to be a messy, imprecise, uncertain and time consuming business. In fact I think this is probably a pretty appropriate characterisation. This is only problematic though within a worldview in which "mess, imprecision, uncertainty and time demand" are seen as characteristics to be eliminated or controlled. Within another worldview, these can be embraced as the essence of human endeavour. My suggestion is that embracing rather than seeking to avoid or eliminate these characteristics of organisational action can be genuinely rewarding for everyone involved.

Personal foresight orientation

Two interlinked ideas form the basis for my interest in organisational foresight work:

1. Developing the ways we think together about our possible and preferred futures produces more effective collaborative action in the present.
2. Better coordination of our organisational actions sets the foundations for the emergence of a wiser and more compassionate world—a world that works better for us all.

The future worlds that we will share have their origins right here and now in this present moment. If we have a preference for certain futures over others, then we have the choice to act today in ways consistent with our preferred futures—an idea that underpins almost all social innovation. This can be seen in the generative responses that individuals, organisations and nations are bringing to life in the face of their understandings of anthropogenic global warming. All around the world, people are acting without concern for the perceived disadvantage of being an "early mover".

This is how I understand the essence of futurist Sohail Inayatullah's concept of *anticipatory action learning*: the absence of complete certainty can be embraced as the source of creative opportunity, rather than just building defences against it as a threat. By acting *as if* our preferred futures are possible, we change the very ground from which our situations arise—we help to

create their necessary conditions in the present. This isn't intended to imply that "my thoughts create reality"—and it doesn't mean that "whatever I wish for will come true". What it means is that as active participants in the circumstances that *give rise to* the realities in which we find ourselves, rather than passive observers or recipients of such realities, the ways that we act in the present have inevitable consequences for *whatever* situations emerge. Our actions in the present can be aligned more or less effectively with the futures we prefer—we have a degree of choice in this.

Embodied foresight: ethics as skilful action

These are more than just abstract principles. Evidence for this can be seen in entrepreneurial endeavours and innovation initiatives everywhere. My own family environment growing up provided direct experience of this. In the 1970s my father developed a metallurgical processing technology for which there was little perceived need in industry at the time. Nonetheless, the technology offered a range of technical, economic and environmental benefits compared with established technologies. Today, the technology is used at over forty locations around the world, for a wide range of applications. Particularly in China, its use has provided improved workplace health and safety conditions, and enabled drastic reduction in air pollution from numerous sites. This present reality was once an implausible future for many—and a preferred future for the technology's developer. By taking action on the basis of an envisioned future different to the "official view" in the non-ferrous metallurgical industry of the 1970s and 1980s, a very different future emerged to that regarded as most plausible by many influential actors at that time.

In the end, what counts is the practical enactment, in the messy world of day-to-day living, of the ideas I outline here conceptually. Ghandi's maxim to "Be the change you want to see in the world" resonates strongly for me in this regard. To be of value the ethics of practice that I describe here must be embodied as skilful action. I believe that strategic foresight practiced as such an embodied skill—*embodied foresight*—is very closely related to what Bill Torbert and colleagues describe as *Action Inquiry*. I will close here by quoting from the introduction from their book *Action Inquiry: The Secret of Timely and Transforming Leadership*:

Action inquiry becomes a moment-to-moment way of living whereby we attune ourselves through inquiry to acting in an increasingly timely and wise fashion for the overall development of the families, teams, and organizations in which we participate.

Surprisingly, action inquiry is a virtually unknown process, perhaps because learning how to practice it from moment-to-moment is no easy trick. For action inquiry is not a set of prescriptions for behaviour that, when followed, invariably manipulate situations as we initially wish and yield the success we dreamed of. Action inquiry is not a process that can be followed in an imitative, mechanical way, learning a few ideas and imagining that parroting them back to others occasionally means we are doing action inquiry. Action inquiry is a way of learning anew, in the vividness of each moment, how best to act now. The source of both its difficulty and potential is that action inquiry requires making ourselves, not just others, vulnerable to inquiry and transformation.²

² Torbert, B., Cook-Greuter, S., Fisher, D., Foldy, E., Gauthier, A., Keeley, J., et al. (2004). *Action inquiry: The secret of timely and transforming leadership*. San Francisco: Berret-Koehler, p.2, 'Introduction: The promise and power of Action Inquiry'.