All prospects are, by definition, futures-based. The future, in its multiple possible forms, is the only possible time in which prospects could exist and the only possible period in which they may be realised. Yet the urgency of the present—ever-reducing and narrowing to today, the moment and this instant—is a powerful drawcard for attention. The insistence of the moment presents itself with now-or-never type opportunities and risks. It seduces us with short-term certainties, stopgap controls and interim, makeshift fixes which offer a semblance of efficacy. For now.

The future is admittedly best studied with some degree of recognition of a time gone by. In this instance, such retrospection elucidates the etymological origins of cattle, namely that these were once (and remains in some part) equated with personal wealth; with capital. The etymological equation with chattels in the sense of material movable personal property demonstrates the significance of these creatures in the history of the human species.

But that history is continuously being rewritten by the rapidly emerging futures. While a time gone by has taught us much, it is a time yet to come that offers the opportunity. It is in prospecting futurity that we discover prospects. Such prospects do not always reveal themselves willingly.

Concealed by the shroud of an unknown time they appear stubbornly hidden. Some argue that the past holds the keys to the future. But that would be like arguing that the previous door passed through has the same lock as the next simply because it has already been passed through. Such flawed logic is clearly not tenable.

Others propose that the basics will show the way. But the back-to-basics argument presents four significant conundrums. Firstly, one would have to identify, define and prove the basics. This requires very high degrees of social honesty and consensus. The second burden of proof is that it was indeed the basics which caused erstwhile success in the first instance. This would require after-the-fact type retrofitting and reverse engineering. Thirdly, one would have to demonstrate that the exact basics which worked in a former time (which will never be visited again) will correspondingly prove successful in a time yet to come (which has never been visited before). The fourth test is perhaps the most challenging: the need to prove the possibility of going back at all, whether to basics or to any other options.

To engage with futures-based thinking is to explore the best possible location of opportunity and growth.
Another dilemma is that, in an epoch characterised as VUCASSU (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous, Self-interested, Simultaneous and Utilitarian), the past is continuously expanding due to the nature of ever-increasing experience, while the future appears to be contracting due to the reducing predictability and the foreshortening of time windows of opportunity. So the past grows in force at a time when its relevance must diminish in reality. This perfect storm of time confusion requires alternate thinking.

As is evident from the diagram below, three broad access points may be used to advance new thinking, namely

I. **The content.** This refers to WHAT is thought about and it is stimulated by ever-broadening access to global information.

II. **The method.** This describes HOW we process our thinking, and it includes Analysis, Systems Thinking, Creative Thinking and other modalities of thought.

III. **The level, i.e. the degree of elevation of the intellectual processing.** There is an enormous need for advancement in this dimension. Short-termism, populism and positivism have presented themselves as noteworthy opponents of raising the level of thought in the public discourse.

*Figure 1: Access points for new thinking*

While the three access points may appear distinct, in reality they represent a systemic whole in which each impacts the other two.
If someone does not want to think, no one can stop them.  - Winston Churchill

In Figure 2 below, a hierarchy of futures thinking is described which may offer insight into where current thinking may be positioned as well as a possible pathway for where thinking could evolve next as developmental opportunity.

The diagram indicates that, at the most basic level, thinking is consumed with Task. This is the epitome of a short term orientation. Tasks are important for the work of the day, but thinking limited to tasks patenty fails the futures test.

Concern with a collection of tasks offers an orientation towards Activity. Although a tad broader in perspective, activity can often provide the illusion of progress through its apparent busyness. The value of the busy-ness can only be evaluated against the direction, which is glaringly absent at the level of activity.

Activities find structure within Process, where these are prioritised and sequenced. Process provides a degree of predictability, but a key risk here is that certainty over the process does not ensure predictability of the result, i.e. knowing what to do cannot be equated with achieving the intended future objectives.

A series of processes are managed in Operations. At this level the intellectual helicopter appears to have left the ground. Complexity begins to increase as processes begin to show interrelatedness and the extent of processes in series or parallel now forms part of decision-making. At this level, most thinking is concerned with how processes are best aligned and streamlined.

Operational mastery can offer insightful metrics, but may be linked to an external orientation through Tactics. Agility in the Operational domain offers the opportunity for a degree of intellectual manoeuvering that is displayed in Tactics. It is Tactics that presents the bridge between internally oriented Operations and the exterior world.

Figure 2: Hierarchy of futures thinking

While every level is significant for its own reasons, an advanced understanding of the risks and opportunities cannot be optimised without moving to the next level. The hierarchy shows three overall categories, namely

i. Personal: thinking done by an individual, normally within the control of that individual
ii. Internal: thinking focused within the boundaries of the organisation
iii. External: thinking with cognisance of the contextual environment of the organisation.

There is an overlap between categories, although the highest levels tend exclusively towards the investigation of containing systems.
If someone is indeed willing to think, no one can stop them either. – Dr Morne Mostert

Such consciousness finds more concrete form in Strategic Planning. At this level, plans are made for integrated operations. Overarching goals are set, but the predominant weighting is with inward ambitions and how they might be achieved with key stakeholders.

Planning at the appropriate multi-operational level is but one part of Strategic Management. At this level a dichotomous phenomenon occurs: while it is more externally oriented than Strategic Planning, the risk is that it collapses into simply another form of operational monitoring. For this reason, many Strategic Management units in large organisations are little more than project monitoring entities that report on business unit progress against preset targets. Thus Strategic Management possesses the distinct risk of deteriorating into strategy process reporting. And reporting often uses surprisingly low levels of intellectual agility.

For Strategic Management to enjoy any real meaning, Strategic Thinking is required. It is at this stratum (the etymological origin of ‘strategy’) that the resolution and dissolution of strategic complexity flourish as thinking shifts from behaviour to intention. The generation of multiple options typifies good practice at this level. A mind with a penchant for exploration is now required.

But even Strategic Thinking can hold a disproportionate obsession with the status quo. In order to transcend the current systemic configuration, an explicit incorporation of futurity must be engaged with, described here as Strategic Futures. The intellectual leap at this level is from linear forecasting to incrementally broadening back-casting.

The exploration of multiple possible futures and the cerebrally demanding simultaneous referencing of such manifold scenarios are now essential for top level management and leadership. A high degree of intellectual resilience is now required in order to believe in and identify the possible set of normative futures.

Such a teleological orientation is best aided with the examination of Macro Futures. Here the intellectual adventure is exclusively externally oriented. The cognitive bent is for a playful interrogation of the future convergence of current and future contextual dynamics. The risk here is to assume that the ebb and flow of the exterior world is divorced from internal ambitions, but this is where the futurist mind thrives as it weaves past, present and future drivers and disruptors into internally consistent narratives.

The level beyond is for intellectual free play. While this may seem cognitively laissez faire, the reality is that it demands enormous intellectual discipline. The intellectually languid completely disengage at this level and dismiss this important work as flights of fantasy and wistful dreaming. The glacial-scale shifts now challenge paradigms and offer fundamentally disturbing insights on redefined risk and opportunity. The reality is that extensive energy is required for the requisite curiosity, imagination and creativity demanded at this level. It is riddled with paradoxes, conundrums and circular causality. But it is also here where the most delightful insights and ideation may occur.

The pressures of the day, while essential for the bridge to tomorrow, may also entrap the thinker in a mental prison.

Wealth requires meaningful and sensitive growth. Cattle were one of the earliest forms of wealth. For that reason they were also one of the earliest forms of loss, whether through negligence, arrogance or theft. But defensiveness against loss narrows the boundaries of thought and locks down the borders of the mind. Growth demands expansive exploration of opportunity. The hierarchy of Futures Thinking offers a model for personal and organisational evaluation. It is a notion attributed to Churchill that ‘if someone does not want to think, no one can stop them’. It is perhaps reasonable to add that ‘if someone is indeed willing to think, no one can stop them either’. To engage with futures-based thinking is to explore the best possible location of opportunity and growth.

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