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## The Steps for Futuring

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## The Steps for Futuring

### Abstract

Futuring has the potential of providing Extension with options for viable change using the anticipatory techniques of: 1) scanning and monitoring the environment; 2) analyzing internal and external assumptions; 3) creating multiple scenarios around emerging issue areas; 4) developing forecasts; 5) writing issue briefs; 6) assuring program champions, faculty and staff are ready to address predicted changes; and, 7) using the results of futuring to inform continual improvement. Let's have the courage and ambition to change yesterday's logic and take a look at the steps needed to adopt anticipatory techniques for Extension.

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## Introduction

"The difficulty in times of turbulence is not the turbulence, but to respond with yesterday's logic." - Peter Drucker

If you have the courage and ambition to change yesterday's logic, take a look at the steps needed to adopt anticipatory techniques for Extension. Futuring, timely and proactive planning tied to meaningful engagement with the people in each state, will result in Extension becoming "the catalyst for connecting people to the wealth of relevant knowledge and research residing within various colleges and disciplines of the university" (NASULGC, 2002, Page 2). The authors of *The Dance of Change* warn that this is not easy. "That's because organizations have complex, well-developed immune systems, aimed at preserving the status quo" (Senge, Roberts, Roth, Ross, & Kleiner, 1999).

## Embrace Anticipatory Techniques

Extension has all of the tools needed in order to implement futuring as a viable precursor to planning and to inform ongoing program direction. Most states have the technological resources to move from merely analyzing trends to projecting anticipated futures. This kind of information synthesis can continually inform situational analysis and allow Extension educators to quickly change direction when fast-paced changes occur.

James L. Morrison and William C. Ashley in *Anticipatory Management* (1995) advise that organizations "must become more forward looking to deal effectively and systematically with an increasingly turbulent environment. . . . This turbulence has the potential to either destroy or offer new opportunities." They caution leaders to "constantly check for gaps in the way management thinks things are and the way stakeholders perceive them to be."

In *The Dance of Change*, the authors reveal that "the only competitive advantage the company of the future will have is its managers' ability to learn faster than their competitors." They report that Jack Welch of General Electric believes that "the desire, and the ability of an organization to learn from any source--and to rapidly convert this learning into action--is its ultimate competitive advantage."

Providing we wish to lead a process of change that creates a viable future for Extension, what are

the steps and techniques needed to develop anticipatory leadership and action?

## **Steps of Futuring**

Futuring is an anticipatory decision-making process that leads to planning and program development (Sobrero, 2004). It looks forward 10, 20, or 30 years, while planning looks ahead 1 to 4 years.

### **Step 1-- Scan and Monitor the Environment**

Assure that social, economic, political, environmental, and technological changes are analyzed using existing county, state, and national data centers. Data needs to be shared as easy-to-understand information in the form of past trends around real-world issues. Information needs to include projections that show what is likely to happen if future changes occur at the same rate as in the past. Scanning the environment and turning data into usable information gives the organization true data-driven intelligence that can inform scenarios, forecasts, and issue briefs.

Scanning the environment includes both observational and research-based data. Scanning should include data from counties as well as state, national, and international databases. The key to this mountain of data is to use the intellectual capacity of social, economic, technology, political, and environmental experts so that Extension will have manageable information and trend analysis in issue areas. Ongoing scanning and monitoring of the environment identifies the direction of issue-based change and the relevant events affecting changes observed.

One component that should be incorporated into scanning and monitoring is local learner and stakeholder input, including customer/learner satisfaction. Customer/learner satisfaction data adds valuable local learner perceptions to the scanning process. It can be used to document the rate of practice change reported by learners, and it can be a source for identifying emerging issues as well as the perceived value of programs.

There are Extension faculty and staff who choose to keep up-to-date by reading and observing across disciplines. They observe in a variety of settings and actively listen when involved in professional and community-based environments. These are the Extension faculty and staff who conduct informal scanning within Extension.

While this is conducted in an unstructured manner, patterns of change as well as emerging issues are noticed. They know if programming is relevant and valued. While it may be difficult to use their observations to inform data-driven intelligence, these valuable faculty and staff are likely to be the first to observe critical indicators of change. They may recognize the change first and can become leaders of change efforts, providing they have a voice and the opportunity to share their perceptions.

Scanning identifies indications of change, but it is monitoring that provides an ongoing review of the effects and impact of the change. Monitoring becomes the method for ongoing organizational intelligence that enables Extension to determine current relevance. It informs continuous improvement actions and helps the organization make meaningful shifts in priorities. In the 21st century, using technology to communicate results of the environmental scan will provide universal access to employees and stakeholders.

### **Step 2--Analyze Internal and External Assumptions**

Anticipatory decision-making considers external driving forces and internal organizational assumptions related to relevancy, priorities of targeted learners, societal trends, as well as the mission of the organization and availability of resources. Analysis of external assumptions involves listening to community-based stakeholders and learners. This means understanding the culture, or "how we do things around here." Fundamental to Extension's strength is that we take time to understand the community and culture before implementing programming.

### **Step 3--Create Scenarios Around Emerging Issue Areas**

Use data-driven intelligence and results of assumption analysis to develop four scenarios for each targeted issue area where change is likely to occur. The scenarios should range from a very desirable future to an undesirable or even catastrophic future. Develop these scenarios in a written format, and include details. It would be helpful in this step to be creative, but by the end of the session, identify the essential indicators of change that are likely to signal that this scenario is likely to occur. A succinct list is most useful.

### **Step 4--Develop a List of Forecasts with Each Scenario**

Refer to the data-driven intelligence gathered. Add recommended interventions that could change the future forecast, and attach estimated resources needed for the intervention. Forecasts, when used, will improve Extension's timeliness in providing relevant educational programming and information.

### **Step 5--Use the Results of the First Four Steps to Write a Succinct Issue Brief**

This brief should be short and compelling. A one-page abstract of the issue brief would enable greater use of the brief. Issue briefs should be available electronically for easy access by faculty, staff, and partners. Issue briefs should be searchable and permit the user to type in observations or indicators of change that can be matched to an issue brief and an appropriate scenario. Open access to issue briefs will inform program development and enable a learning organization culture of empowerment.

### **Step 6--Assign Issue Briefs with Scenarios to the Program Champion Most Likely to Notice Indicators and Signals of an Emerging Change**

This program champion should have selected key faculty, staff, and program partners who have a passion to serve on a virtual program team and are willing to take immediate action when the change is emerging. These virtual program teams would only take action when the anticipated change begins to occur.

### **Step 7--Assign Teams the Annual Responsibility of Continual Futuring to Inform Planning, Direction, Funding, Staffing, Partnerships, and Programs**

Most organizations have found that, while employees can prepare for futuring, the leaders working with a cross section of the organization must also be fully engaged. They need to fully understand the implications of futuring so that resources will be allocated when an anticipated future begins to become a reality.

## **Conclusion**

Futuring, based on a data driven intelligence system, is key to Extension remaining relevant and viable. Effective futuring will lead to:

- Higher quality decision-making.
- Shifting from reactive to proactive modes to anticipate change.
- More effective and timely framing, valuing and ranking of program priorities.
- Positioning current and future assets to address emerging issues.

The impact and consequences of decisions made today will frame Extension's viability for future generations. Let's have the courage to connect "people to the wealth of relevant knowledge and research residing within various colleges and disciplines of the university" (NASULGC, 2002, Page 2).

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