

Business as Unusual: How to Prepare for the Coming Decade

What will the coming decade look like? The honest answer is that no one knows. A glimpse, though, can be found in a promising new start-up, Oculus Rift. Eighteen months ago, Palmer Luckey was a teenager with a clever idea for a new business. Foregoing the traditional path of securing a bank loan, Luckey instead went to Kickstarter—a peer-to-peer lending platform—and, within days, raised \$1 million from strangers. This success caught the attention of venture capitalists who quickly poured in \$25 million to create a working prototype. So successful were the initial reviews of Oculus Rift’s virtual reality technology that Facebook purchased the company for \$2 billion in March of 2014.

From an idea in a teenager’s head to a \$2 billion company in less than a year-and-a-half, welcome to the future—where business as unusual will become usual.

The Big AHA

The pace and scale of tomorrow’s change begs the obvious question: How does a business leader prepare for a constantly changing future? The answer can be found in a simple acronym: AHA. It stands for: Awareness, Humility and Action.

First, leaders must become aware of the extraordinary changes taking place across today’s global landscape. For example, advances in nanotechnology are leading to the creation of new materials that can out-compete copper in terms of conductivity and steel in terms of strength. And soon, some of these exotic nanomaterials will even compete on price. Additionally, the extraordinary advances in 3D manufacturing show no signs of abating—Chinese manufacturers are already using a 12-meter 3D printer to create titanium aircraft wings and fuselages. Continued advances in wearable technology, robotics, big data and the Internet of Things also promise to transform global commerce. (In fact, the Internet of Things—also known as the Industrial Internet—has alone been estimated to be a \$15 trillion business opportunity in the coming decade!)

Yield to Humility

Quick question: What two colors are yield sign? Did you say yellow and black? If so, that was the correct answer—up until 1971. That’s right. The yield sign has been red-and-white for 43 years. If you got the wrong answer, don’t worry—most people over the age of 40 do. Nevertheless, your outdated response should humble you enough to recognize that not everything you learned in the past about your business, your customers or your competitors is necessarily still true today. Consider, for example, how recent advances in hydraulic fracking and horizontal drilling technology have changed the game in terms of global energy production within just the past few years. This startling change should serve as a reminder that the world—and even big industries—can change quickly due to

unexpected technological advances. And when these advances scale, old ideas about business models as well as customer and market expectations may have to be unlearned quickly.

Action

Once a leader is aware that the only “constant” in today’s world is change, and is humble enough to accept that unlearning will be as important as learning, what does he or she need to do to prepare for the future?

First, begin by setting aside time to think. Personally, I recommend taking an annual “Think Week.” Now, you’re probably thinking: *“I don’t even have enough time to do all the things I need to do in day! How am I going to find a whole week just to think?”* If that’s your mindset, what you’re essentially saying is that you can’t dedicate two percent of your time to think about the future. Well, if you’re not thinking about the future, who in your organization is? I’d argue that thinking is your most important job.

If one week a year is too hard, break the task down into smaller chunks. Take an hour a week, or 12 minutes a day, to read about advances on the periphery of your business in such publications as *The Economist* and MIT’s *Technology Review* and then reflect deeply on how various technological advances might disrupt your business or open up entirely new opportunities.

Another way to future-proof your company is to conduct a pre-mortem. A pre-mortem is the opposite of a post-mortem. Instead of waiting until your sales have plummeted, your old customers have left or a new competitor has ravaged your business to determine what went wrong, you take a more pro-active approach. Encourage your team to imagine it is ten years in the future and you are out of business. Then ask the provocative question: What went wrong? What didn’t we see coming? The dialogue this question unleashes will astound you. More interestingly, instead of it being a depressing question, it’ll generate a candid conversation about the threats and opportunities the changing world is creating and you can use these insights to take constructive actions to position your organization for the future.

By their nature, many of the actions are likely to be risky. I wish I could guarantee you that each one will be a success. I can’t. What will serve you well is a policy of conducting small experiments and pilot projects. In an ever changing world strategic planning is less and less helpful. What needs to replace strategic planning is a thoughtful policy of experimentation. Try new things, play with emerging technologies, and partner with different individuals and companies to exploit new technologies and explore new ways of doing business. There will, of course, be some setbacks and failures but there may also be some surprising successes. If you learn from the mistakes and build upon the small successes, your future might just be unusually successful.