

Scouting the Future

Develop this new leadership skill.



by Joel A. Barker

DURING MY 30 YEARS as a futurist, I have promoted the importance of visionary leadership because when leaders act without understanding the complexity within which they lead, they invite “unintended consequences,” two words that have evolved into a phrase: “The Law of Unintended Consequences.” The addition of the word *law* suggests that we should *expect* these unintended (bad) consequences. This creates a low-grade fear of the future, because it is full of nasty, unpredictable consequences.

Some argue that this fear is good, because it slows us down from making snap decisions and modulates reckless enthusiasm for trying anything new. I believe that because of our fear of those unknown consequences, we move slowly, prudently into the future. But that prudence means we leave open the pathway to new ideas and innovations for others more willing to move quickly.

As a leader, your key skill is to get your people to follow you to a place they would not go to by themselves. That “place” is located in the future. Finding that place and leading your team to it is your most important responsibility. If you are unsure of what is ahead and afraid of the unintended consequences, you will lead slowly. And that can put you at a competitive disadvantage. But what if you could identify those consequences before they happened and learn about the future so you could lead faster?

During the era of American wagon trains, the wagon master’s role was to lead the pioneers through dangerous territory to a safe and fertile area in a

given time. Before a good wagon master rolled the wagons, he would send out scouts to see what was over the horizon. This exploration provided him with crucial information that allowed him to make quicker decisions with higher confidence and move the wagons forward at a faster pace. What impact do you think it had on the rest of wagon train knowing their leader was scouting their future before making critical decisions that affected their well-being? Everyone’s confidence was improved.

Four attributes of scouting must be met for scouts to be successful:

- **Speed.** Scouts have to ride out, make observations, and return quickly. If they linger, their information loses value.
- **Qualitative information gathering.** Scouts can’t take the time to measure and analyze and record lots of details. Instead,

they return with observations, impressions and images that are qualified by their past experience.

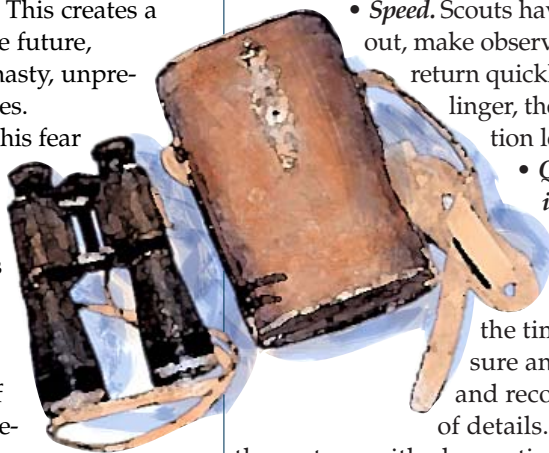
- **Many directions.** To get a broad a view, scouts have to scatter in many directions. Without a broad spectrum of exploration, they may miss the best pathways.

- **Decision-enhancing information.** The work of the scouts is used by the wagon master to enhance his decisions. No matter what the scouts report, the leader’s job is to choose a wise course of action.

With the scout’s input, the wagon master can now make decisions that reach farther into the future and make those decisions with confidence.

21st Century Scouting

Twenty-first century leaders need their own scouts to search the geography of time (the frontier of next five years), not the geography of place. To scout the future effectively, you and your scouts



need to learn “cascade thinking.”

The most important implications of any change are rarely those that spring immediately from the initiating event—be it an innovation, emerging trend, a competing product, or strategic objective; instead, they are usually found several orders out.

Shakespeare wrote: “For loss of a nail, the shoe was lost; for loss of the shoe, the horse was lost; for loss of the horse, the rider was lost; for loss of the rider, the battle was lost.” This is a cause-effect chain of consequences. Time and again, an insignificant first-order implication can lead to catastrophic results. In the real world, the cascade runs in many directions, creating complexity. Good scouting must track those multiple pathways.

To generate a real-world cascade, you begin by asking a simple question. For instance, what implications might occur as a direct result of your company introducing a new product? You might generate many possible answers. Next, look at those implications and ask: what might happen as the direct result of each implication happening? This question triggers a branching cascade of implications.

I find that you must go out at least three orders of implications to scout far enough into the future to find the big surprises. To ignore this pattern of thinking is to invite unintended consequences. By using cascade thinking, leaders can better identify the “unintended consequences” of a new idea *before* they implement the new idea. That gives them the “lay of the land” well before they roll the wagons.

Here is short list of topics for this kind of exploration: emerging trends, innovations, policy changes, new laws, strategic objectives and goals, and big events.

By scouting the future of such issues, leaders will see over the “time horizon,” gain insights into the pattern of implications, and understand the complexities ahead. This new pattern of thinking helps you to generate the cascade of consequences. Those who think this way will move more rapidly into the future with greater confidence. And that will make all the difference. **EE**

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ACTION: Scout your future.