

World of Tomorrow's Child

by Ronald Forbes, PhD

We probably all agree that conflict lessens when the parties in dispute can agree on the future they want. In saying this, we are not imagining that we can, nor should, rid the world of conflict. Our proposal is only that we contain it within bounds that will allow a desirable future for this planet and its inhabitants.

In the world today we are experiencing huge power available to individuals, simply by the ability to control a gun, a bomb, an aeroplane, a dangerous substance. This gives us no choice but to finally adopt new ways to resolve our differences and seek peace.

Conflict is usually considered to be the natural result of people pursuing different aims. Resolution has traditionally been reached by a contest of power, expressed in the final instance as physical force (via shouting, fists, arms, money, guile, or whatever means one party or the other chooses to get their way). The reality, however, is that the *aims* of those in conflict are rarely clear, and that usually they are operating from ill-defined goals that may be no better than instant gratification.

Examining this further, we find that most people in thinking about the future concentrate on the *How* – how will I get what I want? and not on the *What* – where do I want to arrive? What will it be like when I get there? How will I know when I've arrived? Mediators often have the unsettling experience of discovering that the parties they are keenly assisting are not actually in conflict - they just don't have a clear understanding of one another's aims – or their own. Conflicts are usually about *means* (what god is supreme, what political-economic regime is best) rather than *ends* (the happiness and survival of people). People cling desperately to their means as a source of power, unclear about their ends.

Strangely enough, in any dispute, when you talk to either side, you find a human being - someone with a history, an upbringing, a set of beliefs, values, lots of reasons... You find feelings that you can understand or accept and, at the same time, feelings you can sympathise with even when you strongly oppose the resultant behaviours and consequences. In the process you may observe one characteristic that appears to be prevalent among human beings, and that is concern for their children, even for the children of others. It's a value, a biological prescription, akin to the fear of death, that most people share. Quite often we observe situations where it is stronger than the fear of death. This truth supports and could possibly even explain recent research by Professor Jared Diamond of UCLA showing that the one indicator that most correlates with social upheaval and the collapse of societies over the last 30 years has been infant and child mortality. Once we see our children dying, there is little left to lose, the rules of the game are no longer obeyed.

At the global level, the resolution of conflict has to involve change. The greatest resistance to change comes from those who enjoy a degree of isolation from the hardships endured by the majority. They may not even know what is going on, or they may just prefer to keep it that way. Wealth and power can protect us in gated citadels in a kind of Winnie the Pooh world, but not for long. In *The Debt Boomerang*, Susan George showed that the bigger the gap between rich and poor in any country, the poorer the health and longevity is for *all* in that country; and

that the bigger the gap between rich and poor countries, the worse it is for all of us. In the end, we live in one community, on one planet. We have to be continually reminded that when *they* die, we are next in line. The army of rage and desperation is spawned in poverty and becomes the source of power available to the fanatic. When it breaks through the gates, terror is on our doorstep and fear is in our hearts, ruling our response.

At the same time, the human valuing of children is so widespread that if you ask people anywhere this question “what is the future you want for tomorrow’s child?” you will get a surprising (or really not surprising) level of agreement in quite critical areas. They will say things like “we don’t want war, we don’t want crime, we don’t want disease, we don’t want famine, we don’t want accidents, we don’t want pollution of our air and water, we don’t want people getting sick and dying unnecessarily...” Not bad! Despite all our races, religions, languages, differences of wealth and status, we all want the same things – or at least we all don’t want the same things! Thinking about children focuses that for people everywhere.

A world free from unnecessary sickness and death may seem like an absurdly idealistic aim, but the concept encourages us to consider ways that we might obtain some part of it. Once we agree on what Professor Roger Kaufman of Florida State University has called “The Ideal Vision of the Future” (defined as the world we want to create for tomorrow’s child) we can start to seriously consider how we could get there.

Most people hearing about this approach feel that only something as big as the United Nations could take this as its vision and do something about it. Anything smaller would be just futile effort in a world where most of us are competing for “the better things in life” and a third of us just for life itself.

We know that politicians at the UN or any other level can do little more than what people will accept. Or perhaps even worse, what they *think* others might accept. It follows that it is people themselves who must adopt the vision - meaning that they have to start using it in their own lives. They have to begin by personally contributing to the Ideal Vision. Far fetched? No, they can use it, it’s very practical. For individuals it means this: think about the Ideal Vision every time you make a plan. For organizations, private or public, it means this: think about the Ideal Vision every time you make a plan. But why should our organizations do this? Well let us ask this question “If the organization that you are part of is not contributing to the future you want for tomorrow’s child, then what is it doing?” I call this Kaufman’s question. It’s worth a thought.

How realistic is it for an organization to plan this way? We should also ask how realistic is it not to plan this way? Not to start your planning from an Ideal Vision means that you risk running counter to the real desires and direction of the community, and sooner or later will fall out of favour, possibly leading to your collapse. It means that the organization’s objectives may not link to the world of the future, so that it cannot be successful (look at the turnover in the Fortune 500 companies). It means that there may remain no society within which the organization can even continue to exist, let alone be successful. I sometimes wonder if the dining room on the Titanic was pulling in a good profit – right up to the last minute?

There are other positives in having an Ideal Vision. A company that is dedicated to the betterment of the world its employees live in receives a greater contribution from them, and more loyalty. And they become even more productive when everyone, in every part of the organization knows exactly where they are headed. Profits follow.

If you still have doubts about this being “idealistic”, lets get real. When you buy food, do you care if the manufacturer is concerned for your health and wellbeing? If you’re taking a plane, does it matter to you if the airline wants you to stay alive and well? If your child goes to school, does it matter to you if the school cares about their future? Does it matter if the builder putting up a skyscraper thinks about the safety of the people who will be inside? Does it matter if a car manufacturer produces vehicles that roll and kill people – but still makes a good profit selling them? Does it matter if a company runs focus groups to find out how to sell more alcohol to young people? Does it matter if a company makes good money exporting hard wood cut from the last remaining native forests while murdering their inhabitants? And so on. Does it matter? Or could it be, perhaps, that when we think about it, the Ideal Vision is the *real* bottom line for us all?

In practice, an organization builds its Ideal Vision and selects from it the contribution it intends to make to the wellbeing of its clients, of society and the environment – what Kaufman calls its Mega Plan. We are not talking here about the tangential contributions that industry often makes (donations to the sports club or a hospital). Valuable as they certainly are, these contributions are not the real business of the organization and they dry up in hard times. By contrast, Mega Planning is forever! It is the real meaning and direction of the organization, it can’t dry up.

What about “the customer” – the mantra of every modern organization? This is *all about* the customer. Society is made up of customers, it *is* at the end of the day, the customer. And it must be well served. And the environment? The environment is not an entity that you can separate off from human society as if we could serve one and not worry about the other. As someone has truly said: “the environment is not the problem. There will always be an environment – it just may not include humans”.

A Mega Plan is then the *only* justification for the existence of any publicly funded organization (what else are we paying for?). It is also the only reasonable rationale to license the business operation of a privately funded company. It isn’t hard to think of some companies that contribute nothing to, and only subtract from our children’s future – landmines? Tobacco? There are many others that will have to clean up their act if they are going to contribute more than they subtract – and if we are going to start measuring that.

To plan from an Ideal Vision is not so difficult. First it requires that we put our ideas together to create one, or we can use the Minimum Ideal Vision that Roger Kaufman has generated from his work in North and South America, in Europe, Africa and in Asia, and build on that. To have any impact, a vision must be measurable. If we want a world in which people live long and healthy lives, we must be able to measure their longevity and health. If we want water and air free from pollutants, we must know what the pollutants are and how to measure their presence. If we want an end to workers and other citizens dying in accidents, we must measure accident rates. If we want to increase educational opportunities and success, we must measure the levels attained.

Since much of the work has already been done, people are now well placed to review, discuss and extend the Ideal Vision. Once agreed by all parties, the organization selects that part of the Vision to which it will contribute by its activities.

It could still appear to you facile for an organization to select its Mega Plan from some conveniently chosen element of its Ideal Vision – say improved educational levels – while leaving many children behind as they raise average test scores. Or in the process of manufacturing the electronic wizardry that will assist learning, contaminate the ground water

with heavy metals. This would not be Mega Planning. Recall that the organization is now committed not just to any one element of the Vision, but to the Vision *in toto* by all of its actions. Gradually, over time, and because there is no other sustainable future on this Earth, all of our organizations will commit themselves in this way, and perhaps all of our people.

Mega Planning, a 20th century invention, is the challenge of the 21st century. It will not be costly to implement. It will be cheap, cheaper than we imagine, as individuals, companies and governments all begin to pull in the same direction. As unimagined synergies emerge among us. As pollution, wastage, war, terrorism and fruitless conflict drop away, and our Ideal Vision begins to brighten the end of a long dark tunnel, for us all.

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ronfo@leaderskill.com.au

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