

# *The Future of the Future*

## **Critical Capacities for Navigating in Turbulent Times**

**by Art Murray and Flynn Bucy**

If there's one thing about the future of which we can be certain, it's that it will be extremely turbulent. Our forecasting research indicates that the coming decades will be characterized by deep, systemic changes. That's in addition to the increasing speed and amplitude of the more familiar business and technology cycles. These changes will affect our underlying institutions – social, political, and economic. The paradigm shifts they bring will challenge our assumptions and will make our lives more unpredictable, with greater risk.

Such periods are rare in human history, and they require a very different kind of navigating capacity. KM'ers need to be on the front lines in helping build such capacities, which are very knowledge-centric. Using a river-rafting metaphor, we have been in a relatively flat, predictable part of the river. But as our raft enters the rapids which are directly ahead, our navigational approach needs to change.

In order to better navigate in severe turbulence, three critical capacities need to be enhanced: *foresight*, *agility* and *resilience*. These capacities have always been fundamental to sustaining high performance in knowledge-based organizations. But during times of turbulence, they need to be operating at peak levels.

### **Foresight**

Foresight is different from prediction. Prediction asserts the most probable scenario from a specific point of view. Foresight, on the other hand, recognizes multiple possible scenarios and charts a range of possible paths. The idea is being able to quickly sense and respond to a variety of conditions as they emerge in real time, rather than betting on the occurrence of any one scenario. In essence, foresight is the capacity to scan your surrounding circumstances as changes rapidly unfold, and to anticipate the consequences and implications for multiple possible futures.

*The value of foresight increases in direct proportion to the amount of turbulence, both present and emerging.* The greater the turbulence, the more foresight you need to understand the changing landscape and determine appropriate courses of action. Disciplined foresight requires clarity about which variables to monitor and what they might mean. Three such variables are *trends*, *cycles*, and *key events*.

Trends reflect changes in critical factors over time. Some are in the early stages, such as blockchain-based accounting. Others are coming to an end, like many types of jobs, both skilled and unskilled. The danger is that our relative period of stability over the last 50-70 years has produced a set of trend lines that make it easy to believe they will continue forever.

The reality is that we live in a world which tends to operate cyclically rather than linearly. Foresight pays attention not only to the phases of the cycles we go through, but also to changes in frequency and intensity. We can see these changes happening already in technology product development cycles, market cycles, political cycles, and so on.

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Finally, good foresight effectively anticipates the implications of watershed events. From time-to-time such events change the course of the river we are navigating. When several crises cascade in rapid succession, turbulence abounds, sometimes accompanied by widespread panic and disorientation. Increased foresight helps you recognize these conditions and anticipate alternative paths so you can plan a rational response. Which brings us to...

### **Agility**

The traditional hierarchy was designed for stability and control. However, in times of rapid and unpredictable change, desire for stability must give way to agility.

Agility is maintaining balance through *flexibility* and *adaptability*. Part of this balance is knowing your tipping point. For example, if you're navigating rapids and sense that you're getting ready to tip over, you compensate by shifting your weight and paddling in a specific direction. This is analogous in business to adjusting your tactics and rapidly re-assigning resources.

Sensing, adjusting, and adapting may need to occur in a matter of only a few seconds (such as in the financial markets). In general, systemic changes can take years or even decades to unfold. Agility not only applies in fast-moving markets, but in every sector dealing with changes in technology, public policy, regulation, climate, and consumer preferences. Being ahead of the pack can result in significant competitive advantage. But you still need one more capacity when things go badly.

### **Resilience**

Resilience is the ability to recover after being knocked off balance, knocked down, or knocked out. But it not only applies to catastrophic trauma. It also applies to overcoming a wide range of personal, organizational and cultural changes that you didn't adequately anticipate and prepare for.

If you've ever been to a site along a river bank where whitewater enthusiasts launch their kayaks, you might notice that when they first get into the water, they'll deliberately flip themselves over. This helps them get acclimated by actually experiencing what could happen if they suddenly hit turbulence so strong it turns them upside-down. Organizations can adopt this idea by introducing the practice of *scenario planning*. Something as simple as a table-top simulation is a good example of an inexpensive yet powerful tool you can use to better prepare for the unexpected.

Achieving resilience means knowing who knows what, making and communicating the right decisions, and taking the right actions. A lot of dots need to be reconnected when the underlying pattern changes.

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### **Actions to take**

In order to have the greatest effect, the above three capacities should be applied at the *personal*, *organizational*, and *systemic* levels.

By personal turbulence we mean changes that affect your life directly, including health, financial, or career challenges. Turbulence can bring up feelings of fear and confusion, which can cloud your decision-making. Learning to manage your own psychology helps you embrace even the deepest systemic changes.

Organizationally, turbulence requires rapid adjustments and adaptations. It impacts how different roles work together. Make sure you're clear about your role and how it might need to change. Are you the skipper, navigator, lookout, engine operator, or passenger? What is your backup role?

Communication is the glue that holds your organization together. Take a look at the close verbal and nonverbal communication among team members in competitive sports, especially at the championship level. Contrast that with the gross miscommunication which often occurs among various government agencies during a crisis.

When faced with systemic-level turbulence, it often feels like there is very little you can do, especially when calm waters suddenly turn into whitecaps. Living through times of rapidly-unfolding systemic transformation will challenge what you think you already know. In preparing for such times, think about how the old rules might no longer apply, and how you might create new rules “on-the-fly.”

Navigating in turbulent times need not be frightening – it can actually be quite thrilling. Pay close attention to the early warning signals (foresight). Be ready to adjust, adapt, and even change the rules (agility). Above all, be prepared to quickly bounce back (resilience). Enhancing these three capacities will greatly improve your chances of riding out any rapids you may encounter, no matter how severe.

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