

Plenary Address: Thinking Like a Futurist

Speaker:

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I had an immense advantage over many others dealing with the problem inasmuch as I had no fixed ideas derived from long-established practice to control and bias my mind, and did not suffer from the general belief that whatever is, is right.—Sir Henry Bessemer

Blake S Godkin laid out the challenge he proposed to address in the program for the CSE annual meeting: “In a time of accelerating change—when the future of any nation will be based on how well it creates and manages new ideas—we can no longer make current decisions primarily on the basis of experience. This is why it is imperative to become comfortable with the process of thinking like a futurist.”

A futurist is not a seer who can predict the future. Instead, he or she uses well-studied processes to make decisions today that will effect desired outcomes tomorrow. The key is creativity, and, it turns out, techniques to create novel ideas are also well studied. They involve combining seemingly unrelated, established ideas to create a novel idea.

Godkin cited the cellular telephone’s evolution from the bulky box that Agent Smart (of the television show *Get Smart*) communicated with to today’s wafer-thin (albeit a thick wafer) flip telephone with camera and Web access. He described the creation of two other novel ideas: the merry-go-round water pump and the water-filter straw, both of which have great potential to solve important problems in the developing world without the need for (and delay entailed by) building an infrastructure.

Godkin described three tools of the futurist. The first is brainstorming. Of course, we all “know” what brainstorming looks like. But Godkin choreographed a series of brainstorming exercises to make certain we knew. Sure, it begins with making a quick list of ideas about something, but for many of us who are editors, the first rule is the most difficult to follow: no editing, no evaluating, and no judging (not even positive judgments) during the gathering stage. Otherwise you risk suppressing ideas, among which, inevitably, are just the ones you need.

Strive for quantity and novelty during brainstorming. Godkin subscribes to the precept of Alex Osborn: it is far easier to tame a wild idea than to invigorate a dull one. The brainstorming session ended with an exercise in association because creating the novel ideas that he described involves associating at least two seemingly unrelated ideas.

A second tool of the futurist is trend analysis. It involves placing events related

to the need or problem at hand into a chronology. From this analysis, it may be possible to imagine the future event, product, or idea that we strive for. Godkin cautioned the audience about land mines, which have an uncanny way of exploding and disrupting the seemingly linear path to the future.

As for gathering ideas, Godkin cited the third tool, trend scanning, which is a process of seeing and analyzing trends among fields. It may be a challenge for editors to use this tool effectively as we become more and more accustomed to database searches that use key words and as we cancel our subscriptions to journals we once browsed. Biomedical libraries routinely offer short courses in narrowing database searches, but perhaps they will also develop techniques for widening searches to produce a catalog of useful articles among fields that is not so large as to overwhelm the human browser.

I have often asked successful scientists at M D Anderson what advice they would give to beginning scientists and “stuck-in-a-rut” scientists about how to develop ideas that will intrigue other scientists and funding agencies. I have been somewhat discouraged by the responses in that the general belief is that either you are creative or you are not. Godkin’s talk encourages me to believe that although most of us may not achieve Henry Bessemer’s ability to suspend belief about accepted ways to work iron and to invent a whole new way of making it, we can use the futurist’s toolkit to create ideas that will advance medicine and science. 