

## Thinking Like a Futurist

By Jeffrey C. Bauer, Ph.D.

As a health futurist, I am excited by the arrival of more women in the executive suites of hospitals, health systems, consulting firms and suppliers to the health industry. The realm of possibilities for the future is always enhanced when coming challenges and opportunities can be evaluated from a new perspective. Here are a few futurist's thoughts to help executives look ahead in ways that can lead their organizations to better outcomes than those to be expected in the absence of formal efforts for approaching the future.

The first step for making informed judgments about the future is identifying and evaluating the key trends that have shaped the future in the past. (The future's major characteristics are seldom defined by totally new forces, known as "wild cards" that cannot be foreseen or influenced.) If the forces that determined change in the past are stable, the futurist can simply predict the future by finding the mathematical equation that best fits the previous relationships and using it to extrapolate values for future outcomes. For example, linear regression analysis is often used to predict future outcomes when the historical relationships between key factors have tended to change along a straight line.

On the other hand, if the formative forces are themselves changing, the futurist cannot reasonably extrapolate from the past to predict the future. The formula that explained previous outcomes no longer fits the new situation. Indeed, unprecedented outcomes are possible when the underlying trends are in a state of flux. The futurist's task in this case is to forecast the probabilities of the possibilities – effectively estimating the relative chances that the future will be worse, the same, or better, or that the value of a key factor will be less, the same or more than it was in the past. Since mathematical precision is not possible when a system's underlying relationships are changing unpredictably, forecasts are commonly based on the consensus of experts who understand the workings of the system. As implied in Santayana's wise observation that those who do not understand the lessons of history are doomed to repeat it, good futurists are also good historians.

When the future can only be forecasted because different outcomes are possible, the future-focused executive is challenged to define strategies that enhance the probability of desired possibilities and/or reduce the

probabilities of undesired outcomes. Women executives in health care have a strategic advantage over their male counterparts in this regard because they are more likely to have clinical backgrounds. The shift from one-size-fits all medicine of the 20th century to individualized, patient-centric care in the 21st is arguably the most powerful force that will reshape health care in the coming years. Executives with clinical experience will be best suited to envision viable futures and strategies for success under these unprecedented circumstances.

Other future-changing trends are the digital transformation of health care, rapid cultural and racial diversification of the patient population, rising individual responsibility (both physical and fiscal), and development of new partnerships that will redefine the relationships between providers, vendors, and payers. So many things are likely to be different in the future that female executives will not necessarily be disadvantaged by their relative newness at the top of their organizations. Most of the challenges and opportunities will be just as new to male executives. Flexible, visionary and open minds will be keys to success for all leaders. Ability to deal calmly with chaos and uncertainty will be just as important to executive success.

Women are at least as skilled as men in these areas. They can be just as focused on the leadership tasks of proactively shaping a desired future, rather than reactively responding to unpleasant events that should have been anticipated and avoided. Thinking like a futurist is a critical success factor for anyone at the helm of a health care organization in today's chaotic environment. Indeed, ability to assess the realm of possibilities and act accordingly may ultimately be the leadership skill that will differentiate the best from the rest.

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