

Developing a Foresightly Perspective

BY JEFF DE CAGNA FRSA FASAE

“The future is always beginning now.” – Mark Strand

THESE PERCEPTIVE WORDS are a potent reminder that we owe it to our friends and loved ones, our employers and co-workers, our neighbors and the communities in which live, as well as to ourselves, to be more open to and better at learning with the future. Put simply, ignoring the increasing intensity and far-reaching implications of societal transformation is an irresponsible choice we must not make. Instead, we must strive to develop what I call a “foresightly perspective” to think beyond the

fear of the unknown, understand and anticipate the future and act with greater confidence to capitalize on the enormous opportunities unfolding around us. There are six attributes of a foresightly perspective that I will explain below.

> Discard Orthodoxy

Before we can begin learning with the future, we must unlearn the past. Orthodox beliefs—the deep-seated assumptions we make about how the world works—are present in every aspect of our personal and professional lives, and yet are mostly invisible to us. As societal transformation unsettles all the old

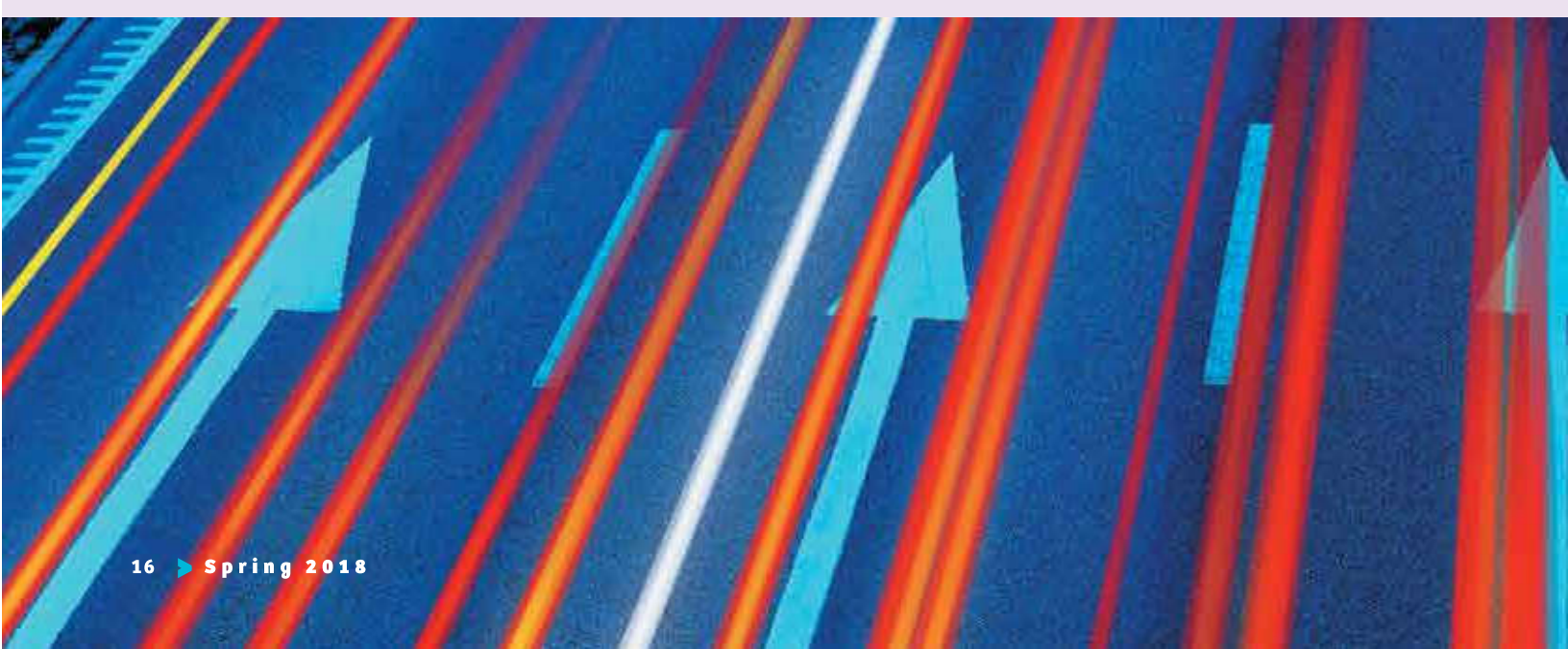
settled questions, we must surface and scrutinize the orthodox beliefs that influence our decisions and replace outdated ways of thinking and acting. Left unexamined, our commitment to orthodoxy will make it far more difficult to hear the signals on the horizon within the growing din of a world in profound and irrevocable transformation.

> Clarify Orientation

As we discard our most counterproductive orthodox beliefs, we must ask ourselves an essential question: *What is my orientation to the future?* The answer will determine whether we pursue learning with the future from a place of fear or a place of excitement. For those among us who fear what’s next, we cannot allow our discomfort with ambiguity and uncertainty to derail learning or permit anxiety to overwhelm our ability to act. For those who are excited about the future, we must be serious and guard against excessive optimism regarding potential future outcomes. We also must remember that our orientation to the future is dynamic and will shift over time as we deepen our understanding of plausible futures.

> Display Humility

One of the most powerful phrases in the English language is “I don’t know.” It is a short and simple



phrase, and yet a very difficult one for many of us to say aloud. Smart, experienced and successful people often view “I don’t know” as a dangerous admission of weakness that undermines their personal or professional standing with others. In a world experiencing transformation, however, displaying humility is an edge, a necessary precondition for pursuing truly meaningful learning with the future. Recognizing that we know considerably less than we think we do opens our minds to learning far beyond our current perspectives.

> Nurture Curiosity

As we learn with the future, we will confront a wide variety of novel issues and challenging questions. Many of those topics will excite us, while others will fail to capture our imagination. Nevertheless, we must remain resolute in our quest to learn, and it is our ability to nurture curiosity that will sustain us over time. Even when the subject at hand is complicated and tedious, we must find ways to keep the learning process moving forward. Curiosity is the energy source we must be able to access to maintain our motivation to learn and keep the focus of our attention on the future.

We all must work together to build our associations, and the entire association community, to thrive in a time of relentless societal transformation.

> Pursue Discovery

If curiosity is what powers our learning, then discovery is what we do to make learning happen. Learning with the future is about much more than gathering, consuming and processing raw information resources. Since we “don’t know what we don’t know,” when we’re learning with the future, we must endeavor to discover and deeply understand plausible futures. We also must collaborate with our personal and professional connections to make intellectual sense of what we’re learning, make meaning around its human implications and make decisions today that will influence the long-term direction of our own lives, and perhaps the lives of others as well.

> Embrace Serendipity

Serendipity is a misunderstood word, one that is often used as a euphemism for good luck. When it comes to learning with the future, however, a more helpful way of thinking about serendipity is the idea of “finding something when looking for something else, thanks to an observant mind.” Many of

the most compelling opportunities to create a more vibrant future will present themselves indirectly through the unexpected connections we make in our learning work. It is imperative that we recognize these connections in the moment so we can explore them more fully and take steps to bring the most promising possibilities among them to fruition.

We must always remember that the future will not cooperate, it will not negotiate and it will not wait for us. Everyone who cares about the future of associations, regardless of position, role or title, can and should cultivate these six attributes and strive to develop a foresightly perspective. If Mark Strand was right, and the future is always beginning now, then now is the time to act. We all must work together to build our associations, and the entire association community, to thrive in a time of relentless societal transformation. It is our shared responsibility to one another, to our current and future stakeholders and to ourselves. <

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