

THE ART OF THE LONG VIEW: Paths to Strategic Insight for Yourself and Your Company.

Peter Schwartz

Currency/Doubleday 1991 (hardcover), 1996 (paperback)

In my limited business- world reading I'd come across numerous references to THE ART OF THE LONG VIEW, so I knew it was considered an important book. It wasn't until I held the paperback edition and saw the tagline that captured its message _ far better than the clunky subtitle, in my editorial opinion _ that I realized how important.

That tagline is:

“Planning for the future in an uncertain world.”

Ah. Yes. Now, that's important. The ability to plan for the future in an uncertain world sure is a skill every writer can use.

The proof of how well the concepts of LONG VIEW have clicked is that these days there's an entire field of study devoted to the same topic it explores: Futurists and scenarioists are at universities and working for consultancies and in governments around the globe. NINC's conference in San Diego in March 2007 includes a session with a futurist, with plans for horizon-broadening, imagination-stirring discussions of the possibilities the future of publishing might hold.

With an original publication date more than 15 years old for LONG VIEW, author Peter Schwartz's examples can feel dated. (Though it's interesting to check them against what actually happened, since his future then is our past now.) But there is no expiration date on the concepts Schwartz expounds. Even more than the specifics of the scenario-building, the value of LONG VIEW is in encouraging us to kick down the walls of our narrow mind-sets, to keep a variety of potential roadmaps in front of us and to stay balanced on the balls of our feet, ready to move in whatever direction we need to in the future.

Schwartz, co-founder and chairman of Global Business Network, emphasizes that scenario-building is not *predicting* the future. It's certainly not picking one projected future and betting on it. It's about exploring possibilities responsibly and thoughtfully, connecting them into coherent wholes, then keeping a sharp eye on the world for indicators that the future is headed more toward one scenario than another.

He likens this to rehearsing plays for a repertory theater company until you know each well enough to perform. But you don't know which play you will perform until you walk on the stage one night. And then the only clues to the night's play are the scenery and props around you.

To take his image a step farther, scenario-building is like first writing the plays you will then rehearse and rehearse ... before you find out which will be performed.

Schwartz advocates lots of research before starting this writing project. He divides his information hunting and gathering into two elements:

What to look for:

- Science and technology. Especially those that can change lives or spur businesses.
- Perception-shaping events. He tells of reports of global warming starting in the 1970s, but not gaining much traction until testimony before Congress by a NASA scientist in 1988 during an exceptionally hot August. On an otherwise slow news day, it caught the attention of the media, was widely reported, and began to change perceptions. Mass media both reports and shapes perceptions.
- Music. He says television captures what people are perceiving, music conveys what they are feeling.
- The fringes. Yes, he acknowledges, there's no telling which fringes will become something more, but picking up a sense of what's out there now will give you a head start when one of those ideas that looks wacky in the present turns out to be the new trend in the future. To Schwartz fringes include people, ideas, music, culture, technology ... just about everything.

Where to Look:

- Remarkable people. Listen to lectures, read interviews, indulge in conversation and pay attention to their idiosyncratic ideas.
- Seek out sources of surprise. Particularly in books. Read widely beyond your area of expertise or even comfort. Try the local U.S. Government Printing Office for some rarities. He especially likes popular science books. (He writes that he loves to read novels but rarely finds them useful in scenario-building because the ideas are not surprising enough.)
- Get recommendations from those remarkable people above.
- Through filters. These are sources that help weed through the mass of information, to start focusing on what from the fringes might move toward the mainstream. He starts with magazines, advocating delving periodically into a broad range of specialty magazines, as well as citing

The Economist as the single best source of information on the world. Also, check out speeches and symposiums at universities (just seeing the subject matter can help keep you abreast of new concepts.) Talk with friends, talk with strangers. Listen to your own instincts (as long as it's not a knee-jerk reaction based on a rigid mindset.)

- Immerse yourself in Challenging Environments. Travel. Don't stay in the Four Seasons. Talk to the natives.
- Networked Sensibilities. Share with others doing information-gathering.

If I hadn't already been interested, Schwartz would have won me over with the sentence: "Don't worry about your files, worry about your perceptions." Take all of this in, let it seep into your thinking and broaden your field of vision. No need to keep neat files - that's my kind of research.

But what do you do with all this information? Scenario-builders faced with a specific question (for instance, say, what's the future of fiction publishing?) would start working with what Schwartz calls the building blocks of scenario-building. Blocks might not be the best image since he emphasizes that they actually merge, overlap and converge.

Driving Forces. (The things we know we care about.) What we know we care about might not be what someone else knows s/he cares about. Schwartz said that's one reason he does scenario-building in teams: to draw in more perspectives. He always checks for social, technological, economic, political and environmental driving forces, but there can be other categories, too.

Predetermined Elements (What we know we know.) Slow-changing phenomena, things in the pipeline, inevitable collisions (infrastructure being built or population shifts, as examples.)

Critical uncertainties (forces of hopes and fears) "You find (critical uncertainties) by questioning your assumptions about predetermined elements." The example Schwartz gives is particularly apt for us:

"The readership population is mostly predetermined - it depends on demographics. Increasing competition from electronic media is also predetermined, Literacy is also a crucial element - but it is far from predetermined. It depends on decisions made about education during the next few years. Thus the quality of education now will influence the print media market in the next twenty years. Yet how many book publishers have bothered to invest in improving education in any significant way?"

Working from these elements Schwartz's scenario-building teams compose plots never just one, but several plots. There are frequently other plots (as well as having plots intersect and overlap) but they almost always hit three main ones:

Winners and Losers: The world as a zero-sum game, with no sharing in the middle.

Challenge and Response: This should be familiar - Schwartz says the concept comes from script-writing and the histories of Toynbee - as the obstacle-reaction of novel structure.

Evolution: Slow change in one direction. Think technology over the past decades.

Again, the idea is not to bank on a single prediction. It's to familiarize yourself with the possibilities so you recognize how the future is shaping up, which allows you to be prepared and nimble in your response.

One of the strengths of scenario-building is that it forces you to recognize possibilities in the future that you might not want to see.

This has been a quick and rough recounting of what is a creative and skilled undertaking. Saying that you hunt and gather information, check with remarkable people, widen your perceptions, then take those pieces, throw them together in a plot or three and you have scenario-building is rather like saying think up a few characters, have them do a few things, and you have a book.

I hope you will read the book, and open your mind to the possibilities for our future.

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