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ANTICIPATE, INNOVATE AND COMMUNICATE ABOUT THE FUTURE

If past predictions about the world of today had been accurate, we would now be living on the moon or in capsules under the sea, we would fly from place to place using wings attached to our backs, and our food would come in the form of tablets. Predictions have a bad habit of going wrong, and that's why we futures researchers openly admit that you can't predict the future. The fact that it's not possible to predict the future, however, does not mean that the future isn't worth thinking about. I personally see three important functions for futures thinking: anticipation, innovation and communication.

So you can never know for sure what tomorrow will bring. The future is worth anticipating – in other words, it's worth considering different possibilities in the future. This is known as scenario thinking.

Scenario thinking involves forming imaginary but possible future courses of development linked to a certain period of time. The objective is to

form different futures and then consider what action needs to be taken today if events seem to be leaning towards one of the specific scenarios. Scenario thinking may sound exotic, like something to do with business management, but it is in fact the way humans naturally view the world. People who think in this 'what if' way keep an umbrella in their bag, have a few painkillers in their pocket and buy insurance. Because you can never know what will happen in the future...

If anticipation is one way of approaching the future, another is innovation. It is good to realise that every individual, organisation and nation can influence the future and innovate a new and better future. In Finland we naturally tend to play down our own resources: "What can we ever hope to achieve?" However, it's important to notice that the future is created – even at the individual level. There are plenty of stories about individuals like that in the history books. Even recent history provides examples of Finns who – as individuals – have made a difference: Martti Ahtisaari has brought the message of peace to many different conflicts, Linus Torvalds developed Linux and turned the spotlight on the concept of open source.

A third way of approaching the future is to enter into a dialogue about it with stakeholders. From the corporate point of view this means opening up to the public with regard to speculation about the future. It's worth bouncing ideas about the future around – with customers, for example. This provides a valuable, external viewpoint for purposes such as product and strategic planning. My favourite example of this type of communication is Finnair's Departure 2093 project, which presented different images of flying in the future. The project raised a lot of interest both in the press and among ordinary people, who could visit the project's website to communicate their ideas about the future of flying. Even those behind the project were surprised at the amount of attention it attracted.

We cannot predict the future. That's a good thing because, I guess, life would be really dull if we knew what tomorrow would bring. My own motto is that in the face of the future you have to be humble, but not overly so. It's worth preparing for different changes and sequences of events, but it's also good to keep a firm hold on the reins. Finally: we are the ones who create the future.

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