

How to think like a futurist

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Want to reframe your view of what lies ahead? Innovation consultant Ari Wallach shares three transformative ways of thinking that could help us tackle our toughest problems.

I've been a futurist for 20 years, working with businesses and nonprofits to try to anticipate and meet impending challenges. When I first started out, I'd sit down with people and say, "Hey, let's talk 10, 20 years out," and they'd reply, "Great." But gradually I've seen that time horizon get shorter and shorter, so much so that I recently met with a CEO and he said, "I want to talk about the next six months." I call this kind of thinking "short-termism," and it has pervaded every nook and cranny of our society, from our homes to our businesses to our government policies.

We are facing huge problems in the world today, civilizational-scale problems. However, we cannot solve them using short-term thinking. Short-termism prevents a CEO from buying expensive safety equipment because it will hurt the bottom line, so we get the Deepwater Horizon tragedy (TEDxMidAtlantic Talk: **Short-termism is killing us**). Short-termism prevents teachers from spending quality one-on-one time with their students, so **students drop out** of high school. Short-termism prevents us from putting money into shoring up national infrastructure, so what we get is the I-35 bridge collapse over the Mississippi River. If we want to move forward into a different future, we must adopt what I call the “**longpath**.” We need to shift over to using three ways of thinking to approach the major problems we’re tackling.

1. Transgenerational thinking. When we think about doing good in the world, almost all of us think about doing it sometime between our birth and our death. But with transgenerational thinking, you can expand how you think about problems, your role in solving them and the consequences. Here is a personal example. Every once in a while, my wife and I go out to dinner with our kids. We have three children under the age of seven, so it’s never a peaceful, quiet meal. My usual inclination is to resort to a short-term strategy — to go into my pocket, take out my phone, and let them play a game. Putting on the transgenerational thinking cap means asking, “Okay, I can do that, but what is it teaching them?” Instead, I might bring paper with me so we could draw together, or I could try to engage them in conversation. No matter which of these I choose, it won’t be as easy as giving them my smartphone. But it will connect them with me and my wife in the present, and it will also set them up to affect how they may someday interact with *their* kids. Which could shape what they do with *their* kids, and so on.

2. Futures thinking. Take a moment to close your eyes and envision the world, say, 10 or 15 years from now. What you’re imagining, it’s quite likely, is a lot of new technology. In general, I’ve found that when we consider major world problems like poverty, climate change or cancer, we optimistically think about a techno-utopia that solves them. There’s nothing wrong with that, but we have to move away from looking at the future in just this one way. I do everything in my power not to talk about a single future but to talk about *futures* instead. Open yourself up to considering all kinds of possible scenarios and all kinds of solutions.

3. Telos thinking. *Telos* comes from Greek, and it means “ultimate aim” or “ultimate purpose.” This entails asking yourself one question: “To what end?” As we try to solve a particular problem, we also should think about what will come after we solve it. Physicist and philosopher Thomas Kuhn, who created the term “**paradigm shift**,” said, “People don’t shift unless they have a vision of what it is they’re shifting to.” That was the power of what Martin Luther King, Jr., did in his “I Have a Dream”

speech. He went through the list of contemporary problems and issues, but then he gave a strong understanding of what his dream was and what would come after.

In our short-term society, we often feel like we don't have control over the future, that it's this thing we're just waiting to wash over us. But that isn't true. We do have control, but it requires strategic thinking and action on our part, imagining many possible futures, and thinking beyond our own lifespans. We should all try to push past our own lives — it may make us do things that are a little bigger than we thought were possible.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ari Wallach is the founder and CEO of Synthesis Corp, a strategy and innovation consultancy. He is also an adjunct associate professor at Columbia University.