



# Leaping Into Your Future with the Real-Life Mr. Spock

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## [Source](#)

*This post is one of a series of powerful, eye-opening interviews from Jensen's ongoing research on **Leadership into the Future of Work***



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## What shaped your journey into futures studies?

“Clearly it was from my parents. My father worked in the field of economic and social development, and challenged the conventional paradigms. We lived in Geneva, Malaysia, Islamabad, Peshawar, and New York, and he would always have interesting people coming over

for tea or to play chess. I'd be sitting there listening to people like **Orlando Fals Borda**, one of the founders of **participatory action research**. And every lunchtime there'd always be a discussion about world politics.

“My mother was the opposite. She was this **Sufi mystic**, praying five to eight times a day. So I was raised with two different ways of seeing the world.”

## **So you are Spock?!**

*Father: logical, structured thought... Mother: Emotional, mystic, soulful.*

“Perhaps! For my father, prayer returned us to a problematic past. Which meant the landlords were in charge, and that people were oppressed. My mother saw how much everyone was busy being important, but missing out on important human connections.

“How I've incorporated that into my futures work: I study how the world is changing (the logical, studious part of me), and then I search for and find the narrative to help address the change (the storytelling, human connection part of me). **I'm helping people understand and integrate the external world with their internal world.** Every tradition has something to offer. Every way of knowing has something to offer. **I help people become universal citizens of the world, with responsibilities to their future.**”

## **How Futures Thinking Helps Us All**

“**Most conversations reinforce our current views.** Usually, leaders of organizations, cities, and countries want some kind of proof and certainty that would cause them to change. And they want specific advice on what to do. They try to seduce me into the expert role, where I have the answers. I try not to frame futurism as predictions or forecasting.

“Instead of giving clients that kind of advice or certainty, **I frame conversations for a learning transformation journey. I help them challenge their assumptions, which are locking them into certain ways of thinking and acting.** Often, I use storytelling and narratives — like *The Day Tomorrow Said No*<sup>[\*]</sup> — to help them come to new conclusions, and change their strategies and behaviors.” [\* See new book offer below.]

“We in the futures field have research, methodologies, insight — but we don't really know more than anyone else. **We help people challenge their own assumptions and unconscious views of reality, particularly the future,** whether it's in which data they select and how they interpret it, or in how they see into their own biases and ways of

thinking. We do this first by questioning or confirming their strategic assumptions — wrong assumptions lead to the wrong strategies — and then in how narrative creates understanding.

**“Most great senior executives get this. They have integrated their data-self and their story-self. Otherwise they wouldn’t be where they are. Many CFOs and pure-numbers people feel that ‘If I just master the data, I’ll be successful.’ Data-driven leaders know how to optimize today. Great leaders *also* know how to optimize alternate futures and preferred futures.”**

## The Ultimate Definition of Success

**“My KPI is when the angels enter the room.** [Key Performance Indicator.] When I’m successful, beyond ahas, there’s a really deep presence in the room. Through conversation, a shared moment where everyone realizes ‘We’re entering a different space now.’”

“For example, through my work at UNESCO, we were having a conversation about conflict between nation states. Forty-five minutes into the conversation, someone asks, ‘What would the conflict look like in a different future; what might it look like 50 years from now if we do not resolve it today?’ Beyond the intellectual expansion, there’s a feeling of community and even spirit in the room. That’s my KPI.

**The Ultimate Failure:** “At the times I have messed up, or not delivered that KPI, it’s when one of my selves became too prominent, or I was unclear about it. Unwilling or unable to integrate either my data-self or my story-self or other selves fully into the conversation. When I fail, so does the group.

“I recently ran a workshop with 30 senior leaders. I was excited to work with them! But right at the start they wanted to know when we’d end so they could go do other things, and they were all on their phones. I quickly realized that they were being rebellious teenagers. So I said, ‘How about: If I keep you excited, we play together. And if I bore you, you can all go to your phones or do something else? But, there’s a basketball game I’d really like to watch right now... *If you bore me*, I’m watching the game. Deal?’ I was playful, but also serious. They quickly shifted from rebellious teenager to ‘We’re going on a journey together. Let’s have fun.’”

## Facing Future’s Challenges

“The continuous challenge is to how to get movement around crucial issues where we know what we need to do long-term, but we’re just not doing enough, fast enough. It’s **the transition’s tension between Defend/Defend/Defend the past or what we’re still doing, and Embrace/Experiment/Innovate.** We need champions with enough passion, drive, and power, where they can push for systemic changes — creating incentives for everyone’s shifts.

“It’s helping people to see the difference between our current future — the path we’re on now — to a reimagined future that we can make real. In small organizations, this can be done more easily. For example, I’m working with a school district who have done this: They’ve got their new story. They’re on a new path, creating a new future. The challenge is how do we move from ten schools to reimagining the education system for an entire country?”

“And it’s not just financial. For example, with climate change: It’s not just ‘I’ve got billions of dollars invested in outdated energy solutions. How do I make that shift?’ It’s also emotional. So many people have emotional energies invested in solutions and approaches that will not serve them well in the future. **Often, financial objections are actually tied to emotional shifts that people aren’t yet ready to make.**”

## **How Do You Help Leaders Make the Changes They Must Make?**

“Before I ask leaders to face their tough choices, I ask them the legacy question. ‘It’s now 2040, what’s the legacy that you’ve left behind for your business, for your citizens?’ In every workshop, I ask these leaders to close their eyes, go to their preferred future, and meet their future self. And that person gives them a message. Creating a temporal link between now and the future. And that message is ‘Here’s what you need to do.’

“That gives them the inner confidence and sense of purpose that they need.

“Then there’s the contradiction question: ‘If I go there, what do I do with what I’m doing now, with what makes me successful now?’ (How they currently make a profit, for example.) When they ask that question, I try to help them face consequences of action or inaction. ‘Here are the consequences if I do nothing. Here are the consequences of just marginal change. Here are the consequences of going radical in my transformation.’

“Then **they have a personal stake in the outcome.** (What their future self told them to do.) As well as a rational way to discuss the consequences of action and inaction. With both of those in place, the possibility of change is much higher.”

## **The Role of the Time/Space Continuum**

“Time always plays a part in these changes. I began working with one company in 1992. They finally just implemented some things we discussed way back then. They heard their own future-focused stories and consequences back then. They just weren’t ready. They chose to face the consequences of inaction.

“There are also consequences for jumping too quickly. After some of my workshops, leaders rapidly implement their new visions. And employees came back to them, ‘We haven’t finished

implementing your *last* disruptive idea!’ Those leaders need to do more work in getting people aligned and creating experimental spaces.”

## Breaking Down Space/Time to Manageable Chunks

“After envisioning their grand legacies — let’s say what they want to achieve by 2040 — I do ‘backcasting’: breaking that down into smaller timeframes to get them to define successes on the way to 2040.

“So they might say, ‘By 2021, we had a successful pilot program. By 2025, we reorganized the business; by 2026, we completely reimagined how we approached innovation,’ etc. And then I ask people to walk to the spot that most excited them, and they most identified with. I point to an imaginary timeline on the floor. ‘If 2021’s pilot program excited you the most, stand here.’ And so on. Within a few minutes, everyone is standing in the spots on the timeline that energized them.

“Then I ask them if those timeframes still felt right to them. Most leaders begin shortening the timeframes for implementing changes. And they’re able to communicate to others, ‘Here’s where I need to stand to make the shift into the future.’

“Getting people to do things like standing in physical places and turning their data into stories is crucial. I used to do this cognitively. I’ve come to realize that **future-planning needs to be in their body, in their emotions, and that their data and stories need to come to life for them.**”

## The First Steps After Futuring

“There needs to be a stealth futurist, a trained- and skilled-facilitator that keeps the futuring conversations going, and keeps people focused on what was decided. The senior team are the champions, but there also needs to be someone who’s sole focus is on building those future-focused stories into the culture of the organization.

“Finally, it’s institutionalizing this process into the organization, for ongoing changes and disruptions: Something like a Center for Foresight. A Center (within the organization or that’s outsourced) that is funded, that does ongoing research, and generates new future-focused conversations.

“That is **building an organization that continually supports, and is focused on, continuous transformation.**”



Jensen [Site](#), [Twitter](#), [FB](#). Bill's upcoming book, **The Day Tomorrow Said No**, is a powerful fable about the future of work. A fable specifically designed to revolutionize conversations about the future between leaders, the workforce, educators, and students. [Go here to download a FREE copy](#) of the final pre-press draft of the book.