

How to Future

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*Leading and sense-making
in an age of hyperchange*

Scott Smith with Madeline Ashby



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*For Rowan and Sabine,
who endured.*

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About the authors

Scott Smith is a futurist, writer, speaker and educator whose work focuses on guiding large organizations towards better futures. He is also founder and managing partner of Changeist, a futures research and consulting partnership established in 2007 in the United States, now based in the Netherlands.

Scott has consulted for a range of global institutions, including SWIFT, UNICEF, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the Royal Society, Nesta and the Dubai Future Foundation. He has also led engagements with some of the largest and most-respected global financial, retail, telecoms, technology and media brands, such as the BBC, *The New York Times*, ASOS and Comcast. He has designed and delivered futures projects, talks and workshops in over a dozen countries and facilitated projects and workshops in multiple languages.

Scott helped create and lead the Strategic Foresight programme for Dubai Future Academy, and lectures in the Innovation & Future Thinking programme at IED Barcelona, a course he designed. He has written for international publications such as *The Atlantic*, *Quartz*, *WIRED UK* and *How We Get to Next*, and has spoken at major events as diverse as the Next Web, Lift, Helsinki's Flow Festival, South Australia's Open State, Atlantic Council Energy & Economic Summit, Oxford Futures Forum, EPIC, SxSW, Sibos, FutureFest, FutureEverything, NEXT14, 15 and 19, and Frankfurt's me Convention. He has also contributed work to pieces featured in several cultural exhibitions, including the BIG BANG DATA exhibition at Barcelona's CCCB in 2014, and the 2017 Vienna Biennale.

He has more than 25 years' professional experience in forecasting and has lived in three countries during that time. He currently makes his home in The Hague, Netherlands, where his

spare time is currently devoted to developing fiction and documentary projects.

Madeline Ashby is a futurist and science fiction writer based in Toronto, Canada. She has worked with the Institute for the Future, SciFutures, Nesta, Data & Society, the Atlantic Council, Strategic Innovation Lab, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and others, and has conducted workshops with Engineers Without Borders Canada, United Way Canada and the Ontario Media Development Corporation.

She lectures on science fiction and design thinking at OCAD University in Toronto, where she graduated with a Master's in Design from the Strategic Foresight & Innovation programme. Madeline is also a guest lecturer at the Dubai Future Academy.

She is the author of the *Machine Dynasty* series and the novel *Company Town* from Tor Books, which was runner-up for the Canada Reads prize in 2017. Her fiction has been translated into Japanese, German, Italian and Romanian. Her work has been published in *Slate*, *MIT Technology Review*, *BoingBoing* and *The Atlantic*.

Foreword

There's an old joke among academics that goes: 'He (or she) who can, does; he (or she) who cannot, teaches.' Sadly, many futurists today try to do both, but struggle to do either very well. This may sound harsh coming from the Futurist-in-Chief of the Dubai Government, arguably one of the most forward-looking, foresight-friendly cities in the world, but between Brexit, Coronavirus, cyberattacks, political assassinations, the burning of the Amazon, the melting of the ice caps, and the general, ongoing upheaval of just about everything, readers could be forgiven for asking if all this futures stuff really works at all. The world has been thinking about the future for decades now and yet we keep getting blind-sided, disrupted and disoriented with increasing frequency and severity.

The reality is that most futurism doesn't 'work' in the traditional sense, at least if your definition of 'working' includes making a difference in decisions that really matter. Unfortunately, this realization isn't new. A study in the *Journal of Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, one of the field's best and longest-running academic journals, reviewed over 50 years of foresight studies and found a disturbing pattern. As early as 1972, foresight professionals were bemoaning the 'growing wave of disillusionment and questioning'¹ about the efficacy of strategic foresight practice, but like addicts and alcoholics everywhere, we chose to blame our clients and employers instead of asking if we might be doing anything wrong. A decade later, a major US utility company found that not a single one of their five-year forecasts over a 20-year period was accurate. The entire process, they concluded, was 'worthless'.² Finally, a more recent study of 77 different companies found that fewer than one-third who engaged futurists gained any value from the exercise at all.³ The truth – both then and now – is that the practice of foresight is often ineffectual both

because it is poorly practised and because it is ‘decoupled from the planning process’.⁴ With a track record like this, who could be blamed for thinking futurists are basically self-interested sales-people telling managers what they want to hear, with relatively little real impact on the world?

What’s a committed change-maker supposed to do?

As the world gets weirder and weirder, it’s natural for people to seek better tools for understanding what is going on. One could even argue that it is our responsibility to try to understand the future, as hard as that may be, and do our best to figure out what to do about it in a way that translates meaningfully into organizational action. As Bruce Sterling is quoted in the opening chapters of this book, ‘People need a motivating vision of what comes next and the awareness that more will happen after that ... the future is a process not a destination. The future is a verb, not a noun.’⁵ This is especially true in the context of our current experience of social, political and economic upheaval.

So where do you turn if you’re an executive, a civil servant, an entrepreneur, an activist, or just someone who wants to do something that makes a difference? Here’s where I tell you: ‘This time it’s different’ – and if you’re reading this book, that really might be true.

The good news is that while most corporate consultants and old-school futurists have been labouring away with the same old tired techniques, outdated mental models and utopian sales slogans, a new generation of designers, futurists and practitioners have been slogging away in the trenches, day after day, figuring out what actually works, how to make futuring valuable, and what impact it can actually have. The book you hold in your hands is the result of many years of hard work towards that end, compiled by two of the field’s most highly respected practitioners.

If corporate foresight is aspirin and Band-Aids, this book is amphetamines and hand grenades. If corporate strategy is about making sure everyone agrees and no one gets upset, this book is

about hard truths, midnight sprints and incendiary possibilities. This book is about what to do when your boss calls at three in the morning and needs a strategy for pandemic response by the end of the day. It's about how to sell dangerous ideas that can really make a difference, even in a hostile environment. It's about the hacks, tricks and unexpected alliances that are required to actually lead change in a fast-moving, uncertain and anxious world. In short, this is the *Fight Club* of futures books. It is the *Anarchist's Cookbook* of foresight books. It is an honest accounting of what actually works and what doesn't – a necessary survival guide for the post-modern world, if that world is a burning platform. If that doesn't speak to you, then I've got an MBA to sell you instead.

The difference between the perspective and experiences in this book versus others lies in what firefighters, nurses and emergency responders call 'naturalistic decision making'.⁶ Naturalistic decision making focuses on how people actually make decisions in the real world, not in the ivory tower, and develops professional practice based on those facts. Like nurses or firefighters, Scott and Madeline are acute observers of how real people behave in real organizational environments, of how people make real decisions, and of what you can do to deliver projects that matter. With this book they've compiled a functional model based on years of hard-earned lessons, boiled down into one of the most practical, useful, no-nonsense foresight books I've ever had the pleasure to read.

This book offers tested tools for change that will help you understand how to set up foresight projects, how to deliver them, and how to work with sources of power to actually get things accomplished. I know this from first-hand experience, working with Scott, Madeline and a handful of these next-generation foresight ninjas over the last 15 years – here in Dubai and elsewhere – on projects that really matter. The results speak for themselves.

If you care about the future, or you care about genuinely making an impact in the world, I can't recommend *How to Future* highly enough.

*Dr Noah Raford
Futurist-in-Chief and Chief of Global Affairs
Dubai Future Foundation*

Acknowledgements

In some ways, this book is over a decade late, and in others, it's bang on time. People and companies that fall into the 'consulting' box usually produce some form of thought leadership book early on in their history, to use it as a business development engine. I'm possibly all too familiar with this, as one of my first professional assignments was writing about the phenomenon of management theorists writing blockbuster books in the early 1990s. Since then, I've watched many in my cohort write an opus, then another, and another, while my colleagues and I quietly churned away at our own craft, not stopping to document the work or process, save for the occasional reflective blog post. As non-academics, we've happily lacked the need to publish or perish, and have rarely had the time to step back and consider the progress we might be making, methodologically or otherwise.

The past dozen-plus years of experimentation, working at the edge of several disciplines, and compounded by a decade of teaching various mixtures of futures, design and strategy, finally pushed us to write it all down, both to create the guiding text we'd been missing during that time and to get on paper some of the ways we've learned to communicate a complex topic to a very wide spectrum of audiences. This pivotal moment in time felt like a critical opportunity to take our tools and approaches out of the classroom and conference room, and set them loose on the street. Here they are.

Two important factors, and a handful of very important humans, made this possible. First and foremost, immense credit goes to my partner Susan Cox-Smith, for her initial confidence that we should take the leap, and her tireless work as first-line editor and unnamed contributor. She was able to make sense of and vastly improve the text that came at her when the dam broke.

With her support in co-developing the approach and tools herein, and her intelligent facilitation in classroom and workshop settings, her active role and presence made this work *work*. I'm deeply grateful to her for many years of encouragement, collaboration and creativity.

Likewise, this book couldn't have happened without the assistance of Dr Alf Rehn, the dark-humoured and sharp-witted innovation thinker, writer and fellow traveller who generously introduced us to the wonderful people at Kogan Page, and in particular our commissioning editor Géraldine Collard. Working with Géraldine has been as painless, productive and collaborative as any relationship we could have hoped for. Her advocacy for this book, and that of Helen Kogan and her team, was a massive boost of confidence from the outset.

Of course, my writing partner here and elsewhere, Madeline Ashby, deserves great credit for helping to distil the idea of creating this particular work, putting us in a place to write down the core idea for it, provoking new ideas and sparking recollections, and helping to put into words the many experiences – unusual and mundane – that we've had as practitioners.

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*My job is not to arrive at a final answer, and just deliver
it. I see my job as holding doors open, or opening windows.
But who comes in and out the doors, what you see out
the window, how do I know?* URSULA K. LEGUIN¹