



## THE BEST WAY TO PREDICT THE FUTURE IS TO CREATE IT

### Bio

Paul Vittles is Director and Executive Coach with TNS Social Research. Paul has 24 years experience in leading consultancies in Australia and the UK and on the client side. He is a Fellow of the UK Market Research Society and a Full Member of AMSRS, also serving on the AMSRS NSW Committee.

At the 2005 AMSRS Conference, Paul won the Tony Wheeler Best Paper Award for his compelling story “Research as a Life Changing Experience” demonstrating the impact that research can have with numerous case studies that included breakthrough thinking. Paul spoke at the 2006 AMI Government Marketing Conference with a talk entitled “Community Engagement: Where There’s a Will, There’s a Way”. He was invited back in 2007 as a keynote speaker on the subject of “The Challenges of Change, Innovation and Engagement”.

In addition to being an experienced researcher and holding director level positions in the research industry for the past 15 years, Paul is also a pioneer in the field of coaching and its application to personal and organisational change. Paul was a speaker at the AMSRS Advanced Course in Customer Satisfaction Research on 8 April in Sydney and he ran a day workshop for AMSRS on 8 May on “Unlocking Human Potential through Coaching”.

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This paper explores the concept of 'desired state planning' and its practical application in all areas of our lives and our work. It is designed to provide insight into future featuring tools and change models. It is also intended to challenge our thinking and the way we approach our work.

It is becoming more common to receive briefs which explicitly ask for a 'visioning exercise' but some of these exercises are being carried out by inexperienced practitioners within the research industry or by management consultants without the research skills that can add value to the process. Equally of concern is the number of research programmes that do not have a visioning component when they should have so the research is static with no dynamic for change. This paper will address both of these issues.

Mapping out our desired future works on all levels – individual, team, product, service, policy, programme, organisation, industry, sector, city, state, country, region, and planet. Indeed, I have used it on all of these levels.

As researchers, we can use tools like desired state planning to assist our clients in mapping out their future. We can also apply them within – within our own organisations, our teams, and ourselves.

At the very least, we can ask simple questions like:

- What kind of product or service do we want to provide?
- What kind of organisation or team do we want to belong to?
- What do we want our industry to be like?
- What kind of city or state do we want to live in?
- What do we want our planet to be in 50 years' time?
- What kind of person do we want to be?

How effective these questions are in helping us to map out the future depends on our mindset at the time we are considering the question – another reason why we need to understand the dynamics of desired state planning – but it's a step forward if we are even asking the question.

In every case, it is possible to create our future rather than just sitting back and waiting for it to be created for us. In some cases, we have more influence over events than in others but it really is a mindset. Some people believe that they are unable to shape their own lives whilst others believe that they can change the planet.

## The Leadership Challenge

Within the research industry, there are probably still more 'victims of change' than 'instigators of change' but those who are striving to be consultants rather than data providers are finding that they increasingly need to see themselves as change agents, assisting clients in 'managing the future'.

In my 24 years in the industry, I have met more researchers who think they can **predict** the future than researchers who think they can **create** the future. It's something I find rather curious. At one extreme, there are a few overly-optimistic fortune tellers with dubious extrapolations. At the other extreme, many overly-pessimistic fatalists who see their research as a very small cog in a very large wheel with themselves having very little influence over outcomes.

Business leaders, management gurus and executive coaches often use the phrase 'the best way to predict the future is to create it', and this phrase is challenging both for the fortune tellers and the fatalists.

We often receive briefs from clients wanting us to tell them what the future holds. The demand for 'social trends' has never been greater. Clients will pay a premium on clever predictive modelling. They will buy into tried and tested services that help them to increase their chances of a successful product launch. They all want to know what the future will hold in 12 months, 2 years, 5 years, 10 years.

But there are two fundamental problems with the traditional approach to predictive research (which is grounded in current state thinking):

1. the future is uncertain and becoming more uncertain so it's increasingly difficult to predict the future with any degree of accuracy
2. we can shape our own future. It's actually up to us to create the future we want so we need to stop 'externalising' by asking someone else to predict our future and start 'internalising' by mapping out the future we want (or our clients want or our clients' clients want) and then delivering it

Effective leaders in business and government today tend to fall into one of two categories. Either they have a very clear vision of where they want their organisation or team to go and they engage with the key stakeholders in a

disciplined process of taking the organisation towards the vision. Or they use the stakeholder engagement process very effectively to create a shared vision that everyone is inspired by and committed to deliver.

Ineffective leaders and ineffective organisations are characterised by a lack of a coherent vision, lack of a shared vision, lack of an inspiring vision. They might have lots of woolly mission statements or motherhood and apple pie goals but nothing that constitutes a clear vision for their future.

Effective leaders with clear visions are great to work with because our research becomes an effective tool in helping them to achieve the vision. Ineffective leaders are not so great to work for of course.

As research-based consultants and change agents, we should be working with clients to help them develop and deliver their visions.

## Desired State Planning

As we are increasingly being asked to assist in helping clients to map out the future, we need more tools in our toolkit, greater competence in areas like facilitating visioning exercises, and greater confidence in undertaking such assignments.

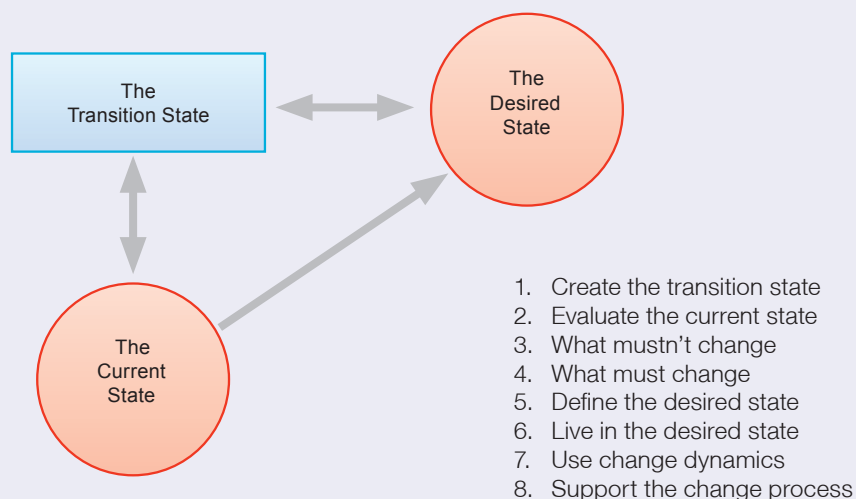
Desired state planning is a simple and effective tool for assisting in the process of mapping out the future and managing the change process, but it is also a complex discipline that needs to be better understood by practitioners.

At first glance, it all seems a bit too simple. Define the desired state and then realise it! Go on then, off you go!!

The first problem we encounter though is that most people and most teams seem to have great difficulty defining their desired state never mind realising it. They live buried in the current state which psychologists and coaches often refer to as the 'problem state' or the 'busy state'. The current state is a day-to-day, week-to-week existence that is full of problems and characterised by busyness. Colleagues ask "How are you?" and everyone replies "busy" and that's the end of the conversation. We find that much activity is directionless busyness but they're too busy to notice they aren't pointing anywhere.

To be able to get into a position to define the desired state, we need people to be able to 'stand outside their situation' and look in. We need them to look at their current state in a detached manner which then enables them to also look into a future desired state.

The chart below highlights the desired state planning model including the three thinking states and the key steps to a successful visioning and transition.



After creating the transition state, eg via a structured desired state planning workshop, it is important to look into the current state first and evaluate that state. There is a human need to explore the current state and without an appropriate exploration of the current state, it is extremely difficult to get minds truly focused on the desired state.

We are effectively seeking change here but there are two factors preventing an easy projection into the future. One is that we need to have a good reason to change before our hearts and minds allow us to fully embrace an alternative future. The other is that we fear change, we resist change as a result, and this is partly because there are aspects of our current state we don't want to change. All of these factors must be explored before the projection can begin.

When the foundations have been laid, we can then undertake the visioning exercise to map out the desired future state. This needs to be a carefully managed process. The desired state must not be an idealistic place or abstract aspiration. It has to be a realistic, specific vision of an achievable and desirable future state.

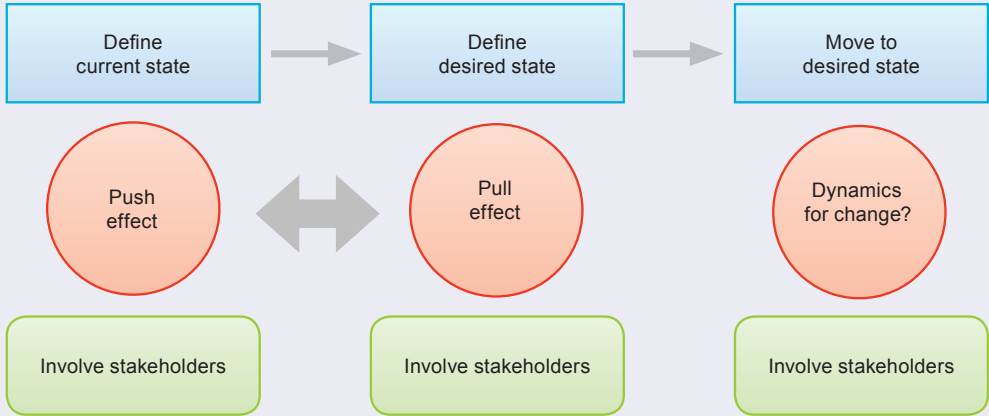
One of the ways in which we help people to attain their desired state is to help them 'live in' their desired state. If they can make the mental transition and imagine they are already in their desired state, the physical transition follows and it can follow very quickly. So, this process needs to be replicated in the initial visioning exercise.

## A Simple Change Model: Push-Pull-Involve

Even if we have been able to define the desired state, there is still much work to be done in realising this desired future state. People are creatures of habit, they don't like to change their routines, they are not even conscious of much of their habitual behaviour, and they often resist change, consciously or unconsciously. There are many factors holding back the change from the current state to the desired state and the desired state has to clearly represent a tangibly better future that is worth any short-term pain or cost from the change.

The process of change can be complex and difficult which is why it is even more important to try and keep it simple where possible. The model outlined below is one I have used for many years in many different situations and I call it the Push-Pull-Involve model. It incorporates desired state planning in helping us understand where we are now, where we want to get to, how to get there, and how to know we're there.

When we examine the dynamics for change, we need to focus on the factors that are pushing us away from the current state and pulling us to the desired state, and we make sure that key stakeholders are involved in the process of change.



The two main reasons why change doesn't happen are lack of perceived need for change and lack of positive incentive to change. If there is no dissatisfaction with the status quo, then there is no 'push' effect to stimulate change. If there is no compelling vision of a better future, then there is no powerful 'pull' effect. Where both push and pull exist, considerable change can occur and it can happen very quickly.

Also involving key stakeholders is often crucial to the process because involvement generates the necessary commitment to make the change happen.

## Researchers are Pushing but Not Pulling!

Research often plays a crucial role in defining the current state, undertaking situational analysis, working with conscious dissatisfaction with the status quo (often the reason for the brief) or generating the necessary dissatisfaction through initial baseline research which kick starts the push effect. Sometimes, our presentations of the initial research to managers and stakeholders are a key dynamic for change as they understand and take ownership of the problem.

It is becoming commonplace these days for interactive presentations or workshops at the end of a research project with wider involvement of key stakeholders within the client organisation. As researchers, we have these opportunities to create and consolidate the push effects.

Where we are less successful, however, is in our contribution to the pull effect. We need to work more effectively with clients to define the future desired state. We need to help them articulate the inspiring vision that will pull forward the process of change. We need to help them define the 'finishing line' they are trying to reach. Researchers do not have a good track record of contributing to the visioning process and the same can be said of many research managers who themselves live buried in their own current state.

We still get briefs from clients saying they want to make changes and they want us to monitor the changes without any clear articulation of what the end point looks like. It is remarkable how often this key component is overlooked. Surveys go ahead with arbitrary measures of where we are at any point in time and where we have come from with no future context in terms of where we are going.

Whilst workshops are becoming much more common at the end of a research project to fully understand the results and their implications, it is still quite rare to have workshops at the beginning of research projects to map out the future context of the research. Making the case for getting key stakeholders to attend the post-research workshop is relatively easy – still difficult but relatively easy. Making the case for getting key stakeholders involved in the pre-research workshop is much, much harder, despite this being the key to success as the vision can be set out at this early stage.

We have a three-pronged problem. First of all, researchers themselves often do not realize the value of mapping out the future vision at the outset. They are buried in their own current state and have just taken on another project. Now they are busy immersing themselves in their client's current state. Secondly, the research manager on the client side is often buried in their own current state and does not realise how important it is to map out the desired state. And thirdly, the client's clients are not always thinking forward. They too can be wrapped up in the short-term problems that need to be solved rather than the bigger picture and longer-term visions.

Moving away from the current state (the push effect) can be built into the research model, especially if there are high levels of baseline dissatisfaction but this push effect usually starts to wane and the inertia kicks in. We need to make sure that there is a suitable pull effect which means a clear picture of where we are trying to get to.

## Is There a Future for Customer Satisfaction Surveys?

A lot of 'customer satisfaction' and 'employee satisfaction' monitors need to be challenged in this regard. Although they can begin with a push effect, they often lose this impact quickly and have no pull effect.

Some of these surveys have absolutely no dynamic for change built into them whatsoever, and some even have built-in inertia. Whilst it may be valid to simply take a snapshot of customer or employee perceptions, it is so much more useful to do so in a context of what you are trying to achieve, and even better if it is in a framework for moving forward towards defined goals.

We have curious dynamics such as continuous improvement programmes that actually lead to stagnation, inertia, and decline. The focus is often on the past and the present, breeding satisfaction with past improvements and contentment with marginal improvements around the core model. This ironically becomes a status quo model and when the world changes around this inert delivery model the whole service is threatened.

Transformational change is not always a guaranteed success either but desired state planning roots the current changes in a defined future that can be transformational or incremental. Once again, there is context from the future reference point.

Many of these surveys are just 'box-ticking' exercises to generate big numbers to put into a performance report and get a pat on the back. It is easy to see through the cynicism and it is always exposed eventually. But even where there is a genuine attempt to seek service improvement, the dynamics of performance monitoring approaches is often rooted in 'current state thinking' and this limits the potential of the organisation, service, team.

If the satisfaction levels started at 30% and have risen to 90% through systematic efforts to improve a service then that is a good result – but what now? Organisations often start to bask in the glow of a high satisfaction rating but they need to find a new dynamic for change or they will stagnate. This might mean re-defining the customer base or the baseline measures to create a new push effect or it could mean creating a new vision and a new pull effect.

There are many surveys out there being carried out on a regular basis generating large numbers such as 90% satisfied which have no dynamic for change. The vast majority of customers are satisfied but so what?

We hear managers saying that measures are improving but **to** what? Last year, 75% of customers were satisfied. This year, 80% are satisfied. Yes, it's an improvement but on an arbitrary baseline and so it can be meaningless and it can even be dangerous by building in a false sense of achievement.

Benchmarks are often seen to be the solution. We are told that 80% of our customers are satisfied compared with 70% of our main competitor's customers that are satisfied so that is interpreted as a good result. It could also be interpreted as being two organisations that don't know where they're going!

Benchmarking can be useful but only if it builds in a dynamic for moving forward, avoiding the defensiveness that can be created by output benchmarking. One useful approach is to benchmark on acknowledged excellence in a particular sector. The organisation aspiring to improve sets itself goals based on the outcomes from the market leader and models through the processes that appear to create excellent performance.

Indeed, desired state planning has its origins in excellence modelling. But one of the key reasons why desired state planning evolved was because of the limitations of excellence modelling. There are limits to how far you can go in modelling on organisations that are direct competitors. Also what happens when the performance standards start to close, where is the dynamic for change then? And what about if there is no recognised model of excellence around or you aspire to be different?

The most useful benchmark of all is a clear aspirational benchmark, the future finishing line, and this is where the philosophy of 'the best way to predict the future is to create it' plays a vital role. This is where vision is needed. This is where desired state planning can play its part. If we create a clear vision of where the service or organisation is going and express it as precise measurable goals, standards, behaviours, etc we can monitor performance to the desired state not just from the current state. The research even becomes a dynamic for change in its own right.

## Is There a Future for Employee Satisfaction Surveys?

Employee satisfaction surveys suffer badly from the lack of an organisational vision and therefore lack of pull effects in the change process. They can also lose their push effects and become particularly useless and yet still be commissioned year after year. Here's an example to illustrate.

A brief is issued for an employee satisfaction survey, the title even saying 'employee satisfaction survey' and the objectives explicit in wanting to know what % of employees are satisfied. The client insists on questions around satisfaction with the job, satisfaction with the employer, satisfaction with training, satisfaction with communications, etc. And the brief says that there must be benchmarks against other employers to be able to put the results into context, which means that these precise questions must be asked.

The results are reported back and 80% are satisfied with their job, 90% satisfied with the employer, 90% satisfied with training, 60% satisfied with communications. Everyone slaps themselves on the back at the high satisfaction levels overall and there is no dynamic for change, perhaps with the exception of the communications score. Then it is reported that the norm for similar employers is 55% satisfaction with communications so 60% is above average, and managers conclude that there is no need to do anything.

It sounds blunt and some might think harsh but this scene is played out regularly in employee surveys for commercial firms and government organisations. Then eventually someone challenges this inert approach and wants to change and they consider the alternatives.

One alternative is asking more specific questions about different aspects of the job, the employer, training, communications, etc to try and drill down to where the problems are. This can be quite successful as a push effect for change. Asking about training opportunities, the quality of training provided, ways that training is provided, etc can sometimes identify particular issues that need to be addressed but it is still limited as a dynamic for change and it is still rooted in current state thinking.

Another alternative is to ask whether employees feel they are fulfilling their potential. This can cause a big push effect when the headline figure shifts from 80% satisfied to 20% fulfilling potential. And, incidentally, the best way to help employees to fulfil their potential is to work with them on creating new desired states where they start by understanding their potential before moving on to set goals.

Another alternative is undertaking qualitative research to probe deeper into areas of dissatisfaction. This is often an effective strategy, and it can have a powerful push effect but it still lacks the pull effect and it is still a current state thinking approach.

What is missing is the 'desired state', the compelling vision that creates the pull effect. What about the organisation's vision, the desired values, the goals they are striving to achieve? Does this not exist at all or has it just been divorced from the research?

If there is a clearly articulated vision for the organisation, we can build it into the survey so we are measuring to a defined future finishing line which in itself creates a powerful dynamic for change. If it does not exist, we can help to create it by undertaking a visioning exercise.

Employee surveys in particular have become slaves to standardised current state approaches with rigid, defensive benchmarking. Many are desperately in need of new life via inspiring visions.

## Personal Change: Creating Our Own Future!

As highlighted earlier, the desired state planning model works on all levels and this includes for individuals. You can map out your own desired state and work towards achieving it just as you can assist a client in their desired state planning.

As an Executive Coach, I spend a lot of time these days assisting my coaching clients with their own process of change and there are a lot of similarities with the organisational change process. Of course, organisational change is effectively a series of personal changes so it is hardly surprising that there are such similarities.

We create problems by not focusing on creating our future. We get locked into 'current state thinking' or 'current state analysis', we don't look ahead, or if we do look ahead we limit how far.

I regularly come across executives who have self-limiting beliefs, who live in the past, or who drift in the present. A conscious choice to 'live in the moment' can be a positive but I'm talking about someone who has no future reference point to place a context on their personal and professional development.

As highlighted earlier, people are creatures of habit. They live in their current state and find it difficult to see beyond their busyness and immediate issues. They don't take enough time out for reflection. Lack of real dissatisfaction with their current state means that there is no compelling reason to change, no push effect. By not having a compelling vision of a better future that they own and reference constantly, they do not see the benefits of change and there is no pull effect.

At the point at which a busy executive or manager decides that they are dissatisfied with their current state, a process of change can begin but this process has to be recognised and followed. Remaining in the current state without defining the desired state and taking steps to move to the desired state means that the current state will prevail. Death by habit!

I use a range of goal-setting and visualisation techniques in one-on-one and team coaching, including desired state planning. Other tools are from the school of 'the future is here now', creating the future via helping people to make small changes to their current habits, purely through being able to stand back and reflect. Replicate what works and change what doesn't work. The desired state crystallises very quickly when they can just get off the treadmill.

A commonly used coaching technique is to create an action plan around the four key questions:

- What one thing do I want to do more of?
- What one thing do I want to do less of?
- What one thing do I want to start doing?
- What one thing do I want to stop doing?

It is a tried and tested model for individual behaviour change and it can be used with teams or across organisations. It is deliberate in its focus because we can only change so much at once. It is also deliberate in pairing more with less and starting with stopping.

One of the great barriers to change is that people think it is going to result in them having more to do. This is partly because this has been their working experience – new systems introduced without the old ones being discontinued, new responsibilities being taken on which are all additional responsibilities. On a personal level, people feel that all of their time is committed and they cannot take on anything else so they resist change due to its association with 'more'.

By focusing on changing one or two things, and by emphasising that these changes can be time neutral (or even time saving), it helps to make change more appealing and effective.

When using such tools initially, it is typical for the individual to be very much in a current state thinking mode and they do not look too far ahead. With continued use of such tools, it is typical for the individual to start looking further ahead.

Undertaking this simple change exercise within a desired state model adds so much more. The desired changes are now with greater purpose, not just driven by dissatisfaction with the status quo. The desired state provides excitement, impetus, greater motivation, and a sense of achievement.

## Conclusions

As researchers, we will still delve into the past to learn from the past, and we will still spend much of our time analysing the present, but we do need to be much more future-focused in order to meet the needs of our clients.

The best way to predict the future **is** to create it, and we can use tools like desired state planning to help clients map out the desired future. Where clients have clear visions, our job is to monitor success in realising the vision. Where they don't have a clear vision – which happens with frightening regularity – our job is help them create the vision.

Too much research is grounded in current state models. It may be helping to analyse the current state and even helping to move away from the current state by identifying the dissatisfaction with the status quo. But to what? Where is the pull effect? Where are we heading?

Bringing more vision into our lives and our work can be transformational and trend-setting. Less worry about the future, less pressure to predict the future, more focus on creating our desired future.

The future is the future!

**Paul Vittles is Director and Executive Coach with TNS Social Research.**





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