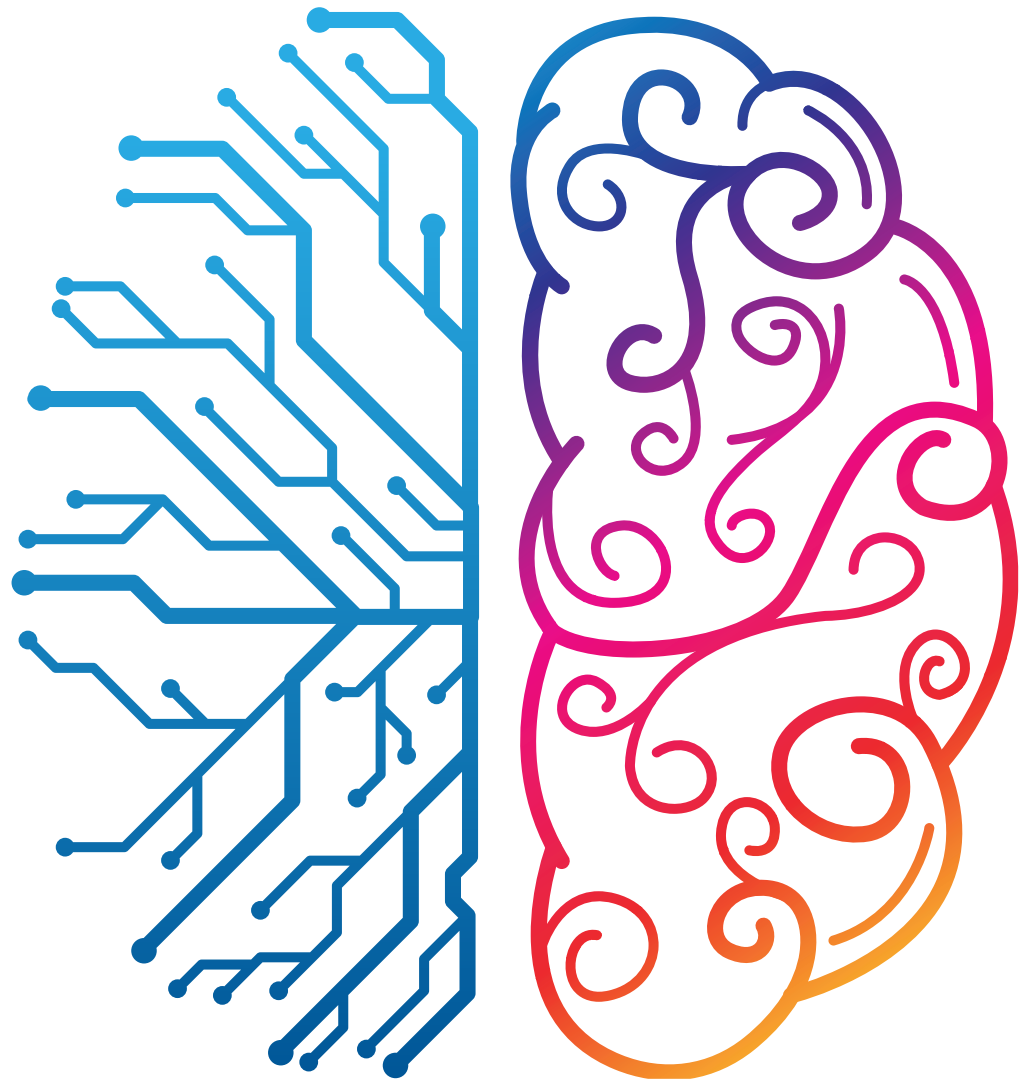
"Clearly explains key principles and defines a structured process that can help anyone learn to see what's coming next."

—Trip Hawkins, Founder, Electronic Arts



THINK LIKE A FUTURIST™

HOW TO PLAN AROUND UNCERTAINTY AND FUTURE-PROOF YOUR BUSINESS

BY

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BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF MAKE CHANGE WORK FOR YOU™

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Lead and Succeed Despite Disruption

So much for the idea of "status quo." While modern executives are no strangers to change and disruption, it bears reminding that things only get more topsy-turvy for working professionals from here. In fact, according to recent surveys by researchers at today's top management consulting firms, no two days on the job will ever be the same again. That's because across every region of the world, and every commercial sector, market leaders explain that the only consistent theme you can count on in coming years is unpredictability.

Think you've got a handle on how fast today's business world moves? Think again. As we ourselves were shocked to find while researching recent book Lead with Your Heart, uncertainty is now the only certain at work; the next 10 years will bring more change than the prior 10,000; and – thanks to rapid advancements in technology and communications tools – the one thing organizational leaders can count on going forward is that they'll only be hit with more unforeseen disruptions harder, faster, and from more angles than ever before. So what's a forward-thinking executive to do if they want to help their enterprise stay ahead of the curve? Simple: Apply a simple accelerant, and learn to think faster, by changing up their leadership and management style to make leadership a concept that scales. In effect, by providing workers the insights that they need to make smarter decisions on the fly, and equipping staffers will all the tools that they need to stay better attuned to the now near-constant signals that the marketplace is sending them, it's possible to become much faster about addressing and adapting to these emerging developments in turn.

Bearing this in mind, and that business and cultural trends are now evolving at an unprecedented pace, it's no surprise that business leaders around the world note that strategic priorities for any organization hoping to get ahead in coming years must also evolve. Among the concepts they say it's now vital to champion to your staff if you want to think and move faster as an enterprise are the need to:

- Develop and maximize a globally-aware and -influenced pool of talent
- Foster a culture of employee engagement and continuous learning
- Put productivity, not process, at the heart of your operating strategy
- Dare to consistently disrupt your operations before outside forces disrupt them for you
- Make a commitment to ongoing organizational improvement

But most importantly, they also note that the best way to get ahead in uncertain times is to always be doubling down and reinvesting in your people – and that doing so can pay off in huge ways, because people are your most important asset today.

Taking this into account, today's most effective leaders realize that here and now – while things are going well, and you can most afford to take chances – is the most opportune time to start making a host of smart investments in initiatives that drive constant learning and growth for their organization. And that it's also the best time to start encouraging staffers to get behind the idea of making more insight-driven decisions, and educating themselves through a running process of trial and error that involves constantly brainstorming and testing a variety of new strategies and solutions.

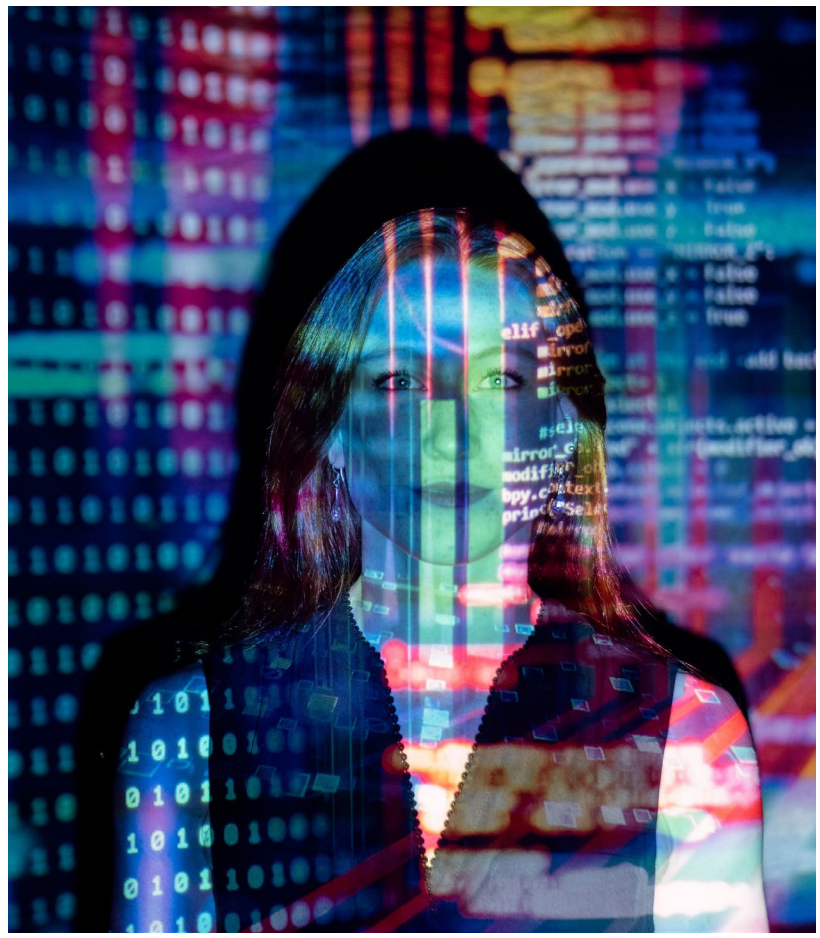
Because in uncertain times, as we discovered by speaking with hundreds of market leaders, the irony is that you've got to take more risks, not fewer if you want to get ahead. However, these risks have to come in the form of small, smart, cost-effective bets designed as ongoing learning experiments that can help you quickly gain deeper insights into the shape of changing operating landscapes and make better and more informed choices as you become more knowledgeable. Likewise, to stay relevant – let alone ahead of the curve – organizations also have to start being more deliberate about putting systems and programs in place that can help frontline staffers quickly surface great ideas (whether suggested by customers, partners, or colleagues) and take on more of an ownership role in helping drive workplace decisions. Again, if you want to think and move faster, you've got to streamline your organizational structure to act as a springboard for growth – and remove the day-to-day roadblocks that often get in staffers' way.

That's because, ironically, studies of the world's most innovative firms repeatedly show that end-users – everyday customers, strategic partners, the various internal/external stakeholders that we serve, etc. – are the #1 best, most reliable proven source where organizations get successful new ideas. Given that findings also show that most of these ideas can be implemented in 30 days or less to boot, it also demonstrates that if you want to think and move faster as an enterprise, you need to stay well-attuned and responsive to these incoming signals as well. And yet, at the same time, research also tells us that less than a third of organizations have effective systems in place for capturing this feedback and using it to create winning solutions. Keeping this in mind, the real question you should be asking yourself as an executive leader going forward – and encouraging your coworkers to ask themselves – isn't "do we have what it takes to compete" at your organization. It's "are you doing everything you can to give your people all the tools and resources that they need to be listening to the signals the marketplace is constantly sending you, and promptly and intelligently responding to them in turn?"

For example, Dell EMC is a market leader in the field of IT and big data. It has over 60,000 employees worldwide. But when it has a huge, hard problem it just can't seem to solve? It aims to accelerate problem-solving by routinely putting the challenge to its employees in the form of an Innovation Contest. In effect, to quickly and cost-efficiently scale its ability to come up with winning business ventures, the company puts up a website where workers are invited to suggest ideas for innovative new solutions – and can comment on these ideas, give colleagues feedback, and vote on which of these concepts are turned into real-world prototypes and products. Ironically though, it turns out that many of the firm's most successful ventures are happening when employees worldwide are independently teaming up on their own time to bring new ideas that they found online to life – many of which weren't technically contest winners.

Likewise, you can see a host of government agencies doing a similar end-run around traditional bureaucratic and budgeting hurdles, and employing like-minded solutions for accelerating and scaling innovation, at Challenge.gov – a website where institutions like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and U.S. Army put up contests asking the general public and members of the private sector for help with tasks like designing better healthcare programs or building better underground bunkers. Prizes for winning solutions can often exceed $1 million – but it's often a small price to pay by these organizations, comparatively, for creating platforms that allow these agencies to radically multiply the number of winning ideas, insights, and solutions that they're able to surface.

Long story short? When it comes to getting ahead despite disruption, and finding ways to successfully navigate through change, even as an experienced team leader, it often pays to find more ways to step back and let others take the lead. The more you look to make leadership and innovation concepts that scale, and put programs and platforms in place to rapidly transform ideas into reality – say a running series of 48-hour hackathon events (in which participants must create working product prototypes in less than two days), or a six-week company-wide design contest that crowdsources concepts for new business opportunities to explore? The faster you'll be able to think and move, and more successful you'll be, no matter what the future brings.



The New Tools Leaders Need to Stay Ahead of the Curve

Succeeding in hugely disruptive environments isn't about avoiding risks. In actuality, it's actually about taking more risks—albeit calculated and controlled ones. If you study leading innovators, you'll notice something interesting: They never stop innovating, and are always exploring an array of new business strategies and ventures. That's because staying ahead of the curve and making smarter decisions in disruptive environments is largely a process of controlled speculation: Being risk-averse, not risk-free.

Essentially, market leaders actively manage innovation the same way you would manage a financial portfolio. Diversify. Monitor. Consistently readjust. This means placing multiple bets. Some of these gambles will be high risk, high reward. Some will be low risk, low return. Not all will pay off. But by pursuing all, you help grow your organization's learning and capabilities, and gain deeper insights into changing markets.

Consider that Starbucks is the world's largest chain of coffee houses. It famously describes itself as "in the people biz serving coffee, not the coffee biz serving people." The company would be crazy to upset its customers, right? But it constantly puts its Arabica beans on the line. Starbucks is routinely rolling out new business strategies and programs, such as new store concepts, products, and payment options, even before most of these concepts are finished and error-free. Why? Because it understands the power of moving faster, and says it would rather be first than flawless, make mistakes than miss an opportunity, and fall flat than fail to be swifter to establish market beachheads than rivals. And it makes a point to train its people in a simple, but hugely powerful principle that sets the business up to succeed time and again: In the face of ongoing change and disruption, the only thing to truly be afraid of is not changing as well.

Identifying Tomorrow's Leaders

Tomorrow's leaders will possess only two defining characteristics: The ability to solve problems and create results. Accordingly, it's vital to instill more bootstrapping values (for example, a culture of ownership, entrepreneurship, and accountability) in employees, and teach them how to more effectively think dynamically and solve problems in context.

Case in point: At Intuit, a personal finance software maker, senior management says its sole role now is "to remove the speed bumps in experimenters' way." To this extent, its employees are routinely encouraged to think like business owners and experiment like mad scientists, bringing new products and projects to market as fast as possible, learning from these efforts, and sharing their insights with the broader organization at large.

Workers are then encouraged to come up with still more new ideas, and use online collaboration tools to secure resources, support, and insights from peers. They then go to market with real-world prototypes as fast as possible. Intuit's employees can now do this without getting the management or legal team's approval (yet more speed bumps removed), and dozens of revenue-generating products and features have resulted.

Skills For the Future

The capabilities and tools needed to succeed in business today and tomorrow look very different from those that were needed to succeed yesterday. Below are the skills you should be teaching employees in a world where systems routinely break down, variables are constantly changing, and uncertainty is the only certain.

- **Make smarter decisions.** Time, effort, and energy are finite resources, meaning that every decision comes with two costs: Opportunity, as well as financial. Teach employees how to factor both in when making decisions and considering which ventures to pursue. The more they consider where efforts are best focused from a long-term perspective, the more successful they'll be.
- **Manage time.** Common wisdom says that "busy is good." But truthfully, it's only good if you're spending this time steadily working toward achieving your stated goals. When deciding where to focus, teach employees to concentrate on accomplishing tasks that directly move them further toward achieving your organization's overarching objectives, and avoid becoming distracted by busywork or lower-priority demands that often cause us to lose focus on the big picture.
- **Maximize effort.** Successful leaders always find ways to win in every scenario besides pure profits. That way, they're always able to benefit from any given choice, and use what they've gained from the undertaking as a springboard to fuel continued growth and advancement. For example, by taking on a new project or client that helps you push your company's capabilities in new directions, you may gain invaluable new connections, insights, and experience into promising new avenues of growth or opportunity.
- **Focus on long-term goals.** Rather than simply concentrate on the here and now, train workers today to also be purposefully seeking out the tools, talents, and resources they'll need to succeed tomorrow. Perhaps transitioning a lower-ranking or lower-paying job role isn't such a bad idea if it gets them invaluable training and experience into emerging areas that will be in demand in the future. Likewise, maybe spending less time trying to sell more existing products and focusing on successfully launching innovative new ones is a better investment in your organization's growth capabilities as well.

- **Think fluidly.** Leaders need to learn to make firm business decisions despite uncertainty. The simplest way to do so is to exercise "strong, but weakly held opinions." Teach leaders to do their homework up front and gather as much business intelligence as possible, then act. And, after assessing the results of their choices, they should adjust their approaches to be more successful based on the insights gained from these efforts.
- **Embrace failure.** Modern successes consistently experiment with new business strategies and solutions, and aren't afraid to fail. Think of failure as the price of getting an education—a price that you can control. It's alright to fail as long as you're failing quickly and cost-effectively, and learning from mistakes and using the insights gained to improve future tries.
- **Future-proof.** To keep themselves, and your business, ahead of the curve, teach employees to prioritize ongoing education and professional development. Train them to regularly stop and ask themselves: What types of talents, training, and educational experiences will be in demand tomorrow? Then have them purposefully seek out the opportunities they'll need to get these assets right here, right now today. That way, both your organization and its workforce will be ready to greet the future long before it comes knocking.
- **Fix problems.** If your organization finds itself dealing with the same issues over and over, there's probably a larger underlying issue that keeps causing them. Encourage workers to purposefully seek these challenges out, and to stop curing symptoms and start solving problems. Instead of struggling with side effects, you will all find that it's better to fix what ails you once and be done with it.

The biggest challenges we face when it comes to getting ahead faster in business are, ironically, the same ones we often face in everyday life: Teaching ourselves and our colleagues to be more open to change, and more flexible and diligent about responding to it. So instead of fighting change, teach employees to prepare themselves to greet it more effectively, and be more amenable to rolling with the punches.

Be bold. Be creative. Be open to new perspectives. And be willing to take some smart risks. The more you can teach this formula, the more you'll give employees all the tools they need to stay in tune with changing times and trends, stay on top of their field, and stay ahead of the curve as well.

Characteristics of Future-Proof Leaders

Today's business leaders must remain focused on what's next. Here is a list of attributes those best equipped to succeed in tomorrow's working world should embody.

- **Crave curiosity.** If we want to think like futurists, it's more important to ask "why?" than "what?" so that we can dive into the root cause of an issue and understand the value shifts driving today's trends.
- **Act courageously.** Human beings are wired to reject change, and the future is synonymous with change. A good futurist must recognize that the insights we share will make others feel uncomfortable, but it is in that discomfort that growth occurs.
- **Think outrageously.** The ability to think provocatively is paramount to being able to see ahead of the curve, and react faster. To expand our thinking (and that of our leadership and stakeholders), we must stretch our minds beyond our comfort zone.
- **Connect the dots.** It is not enough to collect the dots (or trends). A forward-looking executive also must connect them to uncover patterns. To understand what's next, we must analyze the intersection of trends and make sense of the patterns they form.
- **Think in multiples.** As future-focused leaders, we must be able to think in simultaneous, multiple futures rather than the traditional, single, linear forecast. Being able to consider myriad paths beyond the official future allows us to create robust and resilient strategies that will be successful no matter which future emerges.

About the Author

Hailed as The Master of Innovation by Fortune magazine, and the World's Leading Business Strategist, award-winning professional speaker Scott Steinberg is among today's best-known trends experts and futurists.
A strategic adviser to four-star generals, government leaders, and a who's-who of Fortune 500s, he's helped craft dozens of business strategies and product designs for the world's top brands, and is the bestselling author of 14 books including Make Change Work for You: 10 Ways to Future-Proof Yourself, Fearlessly Innovate, and Succeed Despite Uncertainty, The Business Etiquette Bible, and Millennial Marketing: Bridging the Generation Gap. The President and CEO of BIZDEV: The Intl. Association for Business Development and Strategic Planning™ and founder of critically-acclaimed travel + lifestyle trends magazine SELECT: Your City's Secrets Unlocked™, his website is www.AKeynoteSpeaker.com. Named one of America's top futurists by the BBC and a "top trendsetter to follow" by the Fortune 500, this leading business insider and analyst has covered consumer, business, and lifestyle trends for 600+ outlets from CNN to Rolling Stone.

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