

Review of The Possibility Wheel

Richard A Slaughter

It is a pleasure to introduce a handy new book to the futures field that is characterised by conceptual clarity and methodological simplicity. The authors are highly experienced practitioners, but they have resisted the temptation throughout to talk down to their readers. Rather, they take us on a fascinating journey into the complex, cross-cutting issues of our time. In so doing, they outline a straightforward method for making good decisions in manifestly challenging circumstances.

A couple of helpful conceptual choices provide a clear framework that makes this book easier to grasp and use than would otherwise be the case. For example, the authors identify ten '*forces for change*' that represent 'the visible, paradigm- changing outcomes of economic growth over the past two centuries.' This is an astute and highly appropriate choice. Roughly a third of the book addresses each of these forces in turn, and in each case the authors provide helpful '*glimpses of the future*' that add texture and detail. They also identify '*four major threats*' that represent disruptive forces at work. Three of these are well known: global heating, breakdown of international relations and the collapse of global health. It is the fourth threat, however, that sets this book apart from others. Namely, what the authors refer to as '*fractured backbones*.'

This timely and insightful metaphor refers to the way that 'systems and rules are breaking down ... in the emerging world order. In this view 'backbones are agreed upon sets of rules which support the way that things work. They are based upon the rule of law and shared assumptions.' The weaker and more problematic such backbones become, the harder it is to resolve the many difficult issues of our time.

The authors refer to themselves as 'pragmatic optimists' and recommend this outlook. More generally, it refers to those who 'are the ones with the ideas for progress, the energy to take these ideas forward, the self-confidence to try and the willingness to learn.' Finally, two distinct ways of responding to threats are outlined. One is '*mitigation*', the process of reducing harmful or unpleasant consequences. The other, '*adaptation*,' is

'the process of changing to suit different conditions once the effects of the threat have happened.'

Having explored the main threats and forces for change, the authors provide a table showing how each of the four threats interacts with specific forces for change. This is clearly not set in stone but a highly flexible way of demonstrating how the Possibility Wheel can be used.

The wheel is described as 'a tool which allows you to assess the impact a threat may have for a potential decision in a possible future,' It is also designed to 'encourage a conversation about possibilities.' In summary, the wheel is intended to be useful for:

- providing a structure to prioritise threats,
- identifying and mapping connections, causalities and impacts,
- creating a deeper, shared understanding of how threats and impacts on events and trends may play out, and,
- exploring impacts and consequences of particular threats.

The final section of the book presents four iterations of the Possibility Wheel in relation to each of the four major threats outlined above. This section is particularly useful as it shows how the tool works in practice which, of course, includes answers to questions that each team chose to work on.

The one reservation I have about this excellent and highly usable book is that the text accompanying some of the otherwise excellent illustrations was, for me at least, almost unreadable. If, or when, a new edition is under consideration it would be helpful if this defect was corrected. A brilliant text does, after all, deserve equally high-quality graphics.

What I most appreciated about the book is the clarity of expression and flexibility of the model. The former makes it accessible, while the latter makes it eminently useable. Different organisations can readily tailor the model and process to reflect their own particular needs and circumstances. Used well, The Possibility Wheel is a welcome addition to the futures toolkit and will, I trust, rapidly become established as such.

Richard Slaughter, Foresight International, Brisbane, February 25, 2025.