

Three Horizons and working with change

by Bill Sharpe

How can people with widely varying backgrounds, expertise, and worldviews come to a shared vision of the future? How can we work constructively with the problems our society faces that defy analysis and demand that we learn our way together into the future respecting both our knowledge and our ignorance of what to do? Over the last few years the Three Horizons framework has emerged as a way of helping people with these challenges.

Three Horizons is a way of working with transformational change, drawing attention towards systemic patterns rather than individual events or unexamined trends; it frames the discussion in terms of the shift from the established patterns of the first horizon to the emergence of new patterns in the third, via the transition activity of the second.

A simple linear way of thinking about change places us in the present moment looking towards how we want things to be in future – placing the future outside the present moment, something that might or might not happen, and appearing in the guise of the unknown or unknowable and the risky. Yet we act with future intent all the time, linking what we are doing now to future outcomes. The central idea of Three Horizons, and what

makes it so useful, is that it draws attention to the three horizons as existing always in the present moment, and that we have evidence about the future in how people (including ourselves) are behaving *now*.

By making these qualitative distinctions between the three horizons in the present, a lot of dynamics of change come into view quite naturally, and we are led to explore them in terms of the patterns of behaviour of those who are maintaining or creating them. This leads to the additional benefit, that we can reflect on our own intentions towards those patterns in the process of exploring the behaviour and intent that is revealed in each horizon.

Three Horizons thinking offers a way to find and shape our own intentions more clearly as we look over the first horizon of the known towards the second and third horizons of innovation and transformation towards the future. It transforms our perception of the future potential of the present moment by revealing each horizon as a different quality already existing in the present, and which might develop depending on how we choose to act – to maintain the familiar or pioneer the new. The outcome of Three Horizons work is a map of transformational potential which

enables us to act with more skill, freedom and creativity in the present, both individually and together.

H1: The first horizon

The first horizon describes the current way of doing things, and the way we can expect it to change if we all keep behaving in the ways we are used to. H1 systems are what we all depend on to get things done in the world. Throughout the day we make use of a myriad societal systems – shops, schools, banks, hospitals, transport – and most of the time we don't want, or need, to think about them too much; we all help perpetuate the system by taking part in it.

While we talk a lot about the pace of change, it is worth remembering that lots of things must stay the same for daily life to go on. Innovation and change in our H1 systems is happening, but it is about sustaining and extending the way things are done now in a planned and orderly way; uncertainties and risks are to be eliminated or prepared for – the lights must be kept on.

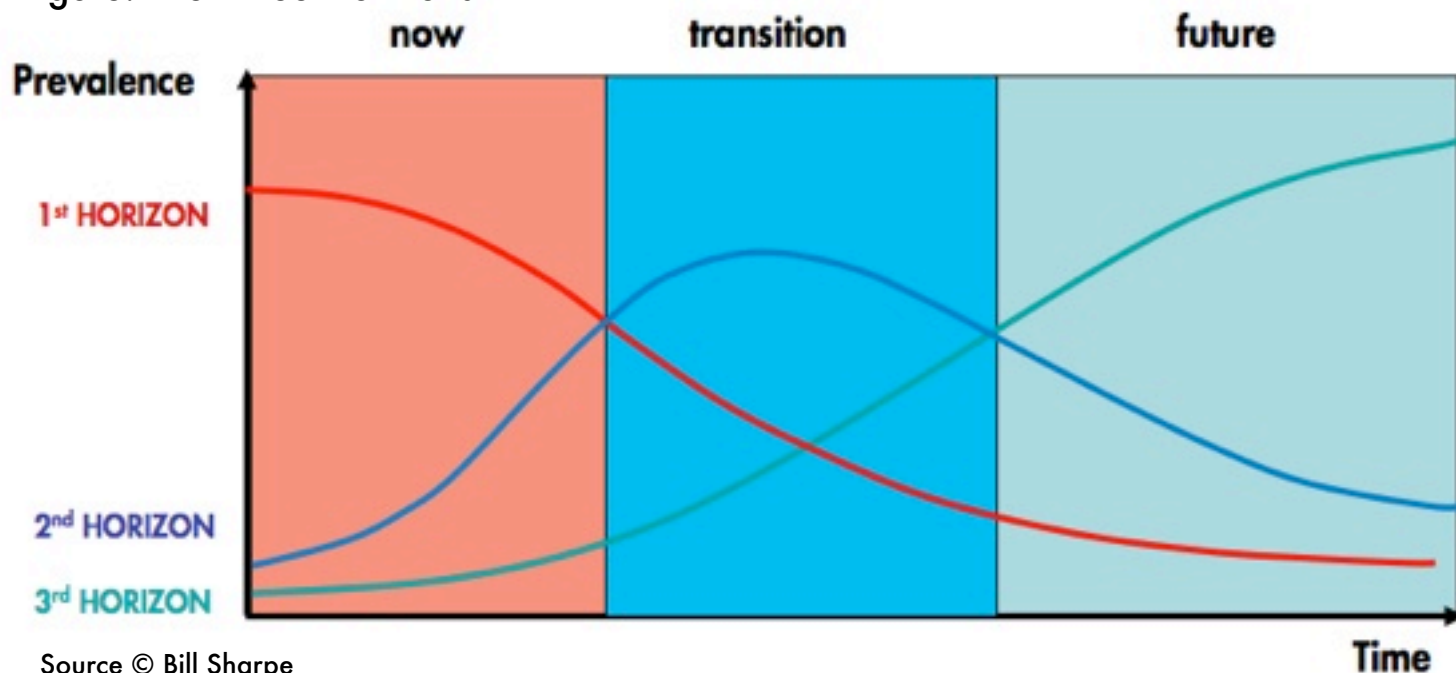
Nothing lasts forever, and over time we inevitably find that our H1 ways of doing things are falling short – no longer meeting expectations, failing to move towards new opportunities, or out of step with emerging conditions. More

This summary of Three Horizons makes use of material from Bill Sharpe's book, 'Three Horizons: the patterning of hope', by permission of International Futures Forum.

The first published version of a three horizons model was in the management book *The Alchemy of Growth* (see the references at the end of this article for more information). The idea of using the three horizons as three orientations to the future in the present was introduced at the Intelligent

Infrastructure Futures project. The evolution of the approach presented in this book, and its relationship to other futures techniques such as scenario planning, is described in a paper by Andrew Curry and Anthony Hodgson, commended as a Most Significant Futures Work last year. Their paper provides a good list of references for those with a technical interest in the futures field.

Figure: The Three Horizons



Source © Bill Sharpe

than that, we have a sense that our HI methods of improvement and innovation do not ever get us where we want to go and are just sustaining the old approach with its failings; that approach is losing its 'fitness for purpose'.

H3: The third horizon

The third horizon is the future system. It is those new ways of living and working that will fit better with the emerging need and opportunity. H3 change is transformative, bringing a new pattern into existence that is beyond the reach of the HI system. There will be many competing visions of the future and early pioneers are likely to look quite unrealistic – and some of them are. As we build our own Three Horizons map we bring our own vision to bear and take a view on how it relates to the visions of others and the trends that are playing out for all of us.

H2: The second horizon

The second horizon is the transition and transformation zone of emerging innovations that are responding to the shortcomings of the first horizon and anticipating the possibilities of the third

horizon. New ways of doing things emerge in messy ways, brought about through some combination of deliberate action and opportunistic adaptation in the light of circumstances.

Entrepreneurs must judge the moment, and bring together ideas and resources to try a new way of doing things here and now. They live in an ambiguous territory where the old ways are dominant but the new is becoming possible; they can look to the past and fit in with familiar patterns of life, or try to become the seed that grows into the new. Entrepreneurship is hard and most attempts to do new things fail; it is much easier to serve the old systems, and established HI players typically dominate.

Convening the future

So, from this simple Three Horizons framework we get three things:

- a way to look at the processes of change that encourages us to see deeper patterns of systemic change beneath surface events
- a way to make the future accessible in the present in the form of the intent and actions that are bringing it about

- a way to bring all the voices of continuity and change into play as part of the discussion, as expressed in their intent towards the patterns.

Three Horizons is a way to think about the future that recognises deep uncertainty but responds with an active orientation. It allows us to understand more clearly how our own and other people's actions might shape the future we are exploring. This is especially important when we look at issues of broad societal concern, where we are all actors in the future. Here we are particularly concerned to find ways for the many different constituencies in society to come together to unlock the future from the dominance of old ways of doing things – ways that are no longer working for us.

Over the last few years many people have started using the Three Horizons framework as a way to work on their issues and in the International Futures Forum we've been talking to them about why it works. All of them speak of the way it separates things out in a helpful way and improves the dialogue, because people can see where they are and can avoid

What makes Three Horizons useful is that it draws attention to all the horizons as existing in the present

unnecessary confusion and conflict between the three horizons. It turns out to be quite natural, in almost any situation where people are working on some complex issue, to gently bring out the three 'voices' of the horizons:

- the managerial voice that is concerned with the first horizon responsibility for keeping things going
- the entrepreneurial voice of the second horizon that is eager to get on and try new things (some of which won't work)
- the aspiration and vision of the third horizon voice that holds out for commitment to a better way and the opportunity that can be imagined in the mind's eye.

The Three Horizons approach is aligned with these three forms of awareness which everybody can adopt towards the future. By default, many people inhabit just one horizon in their work, and view other horizons with perplexity, misunderstanding or hostility. However, everyone has a natural capacity to work with the other horizons, and the core of Three Horizons practice is the flexibility to work with all three modes of awareness at the same time.

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Once different groups are able

to see which horizon dominates their thinking they can also see how it relates to the others. For example, a passionate H3 advocate for renewable energy may easily forget what it feels like to have H1 responsibilities for keeping the lights on, and in return the H1 thinker, dominated by current concerns, can regard the H3 protagonist as simply irrelevant to their pressing needs. The H2 entrepreneur may be drawing their inspiration from the third horizon, but is also having to judge when the time is right to challenge the H1 organisations for dominance, or instead to work with them.

This is the core idea of Three Horizons – to shift from our simple, one-dimensional view of time stretching into the future and instead adopt a three-dimensional point of view in which we become aware of each horizon as a distinct quality of relationship between the future and the present. We call the move into this multi-dimensional view, and the skill to work with it, the step into *future consciousness: an awareness of the future potential of the present moment*.

As people make this step individually they can also make it together – developing a shared culture of future consciousness that in turn opens up a greater freedom of action. International Futures Forum is working to bring about the emergence of such a culture through the provision of resources and expertise to support Three Horizons practice. **C**

References

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Three Horizons: the patterning of hope, by Bill Sharpe, from which this extract is taken, is available from Triarchy Press.

Maree Conway reviews the book on page xx of this edition of *Compass*.

There is also an extended case study of the use of Three Horizons in education in *Transformative Innovation in Education: a playbook for pragmatic visionaries*, by Graham Leicester et al, also from Triarchy Press.