



Stuck in the Present: Why Most Leaders Are Unprepared for the Next Wave of Growth

By Dev Patnaik

As inflation retreats, most leaders know they need to think about what's next. The bad news is that most won't be able to. The problem is in our heads. In this article, Dev Patnaik emphasizes the urgent need to become future-focused and outlines how we can do so, starting with rewiring our brains.

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And ... breathe. It looks like we've avoided a recession.

Yes, some economists still think it's a coin toss, but that's a major improvement from the middle of last year when they put the chances at two-thirds or higher. Things are moving in the right direction as inflation retreats and consumers and employers prove surprisingly resilient to high-interest rates.

This is great news for corporate America after a year in which it's largely been in survival mode, tightening budgets and focusing on day-to-day operations in preparation for a storm that never came. It's the start of a new period of growth. To take advantage of the opportunities, leaders can move beyond the present. They can start to focus on their companies' future.

The bad news is that most leaders won't do that.

Regardless of the reality, the vast majority of leaders will continue to manage for today. And that's too bad because this failure to focus on the future is the single biggest reason most companies fall into mediocrity or fail over the long term. When you look at classic stories like Kodak and Blockbuster, it's not that they didn't run tight ships. It's that they failed to pay sufficient attention to longer-term shifts in the market. As Google's Larry Page once put it, "What did they do wrong? They usually missed the future."

Most leaders get that the world is changing. They know they need to focus on the future. So what's getting in the way? The problem, it turns out, is all in our heads. It's neurological. And to be more future-focused, we have to rewire our brains.

The Pull of the Present

Most leaders recognize the need to focus on future growth, but they nearly always get dragged back to the present. There's another fire to put out, another quarterly earnings target to meet, and another operations meeting to attend. Dealing with the present tends to feel easier than figuring out the future, and it gets rewarded—at least in the short term—by the market.

This behavior is normal. Psychology researchers have found that only 16% of people are truly future-focused—meaning they see how things are changing and act on it. Those are the leaders who've stopped wondering about whether AI will matter and started putting it to work in their businesses.

Another 14% of people are past-focused. These are the people who are actively resistant to change and skeptical that new trends will succeed. It's those folks who thought Uber would never replace regular taxis or scoffed at the idea that staying in strangers' homes instead of a hotel would ever take off.

And then there's most of us in the middle: the 70% who are present-focused. When you point out that the world is changing, their reaction is inevitably, "You're right. But we need to focus on this quarter." And that's the worst of the three options. At least with the past-focused people, you can disprove their beliefs. The present-focused people end up talking like the future-focused people and acting like the past-focused people. It's like they've accepted your premise and they've decided to drive over the cliff anyway...

It's Not About *a* Future, It's About *the* Future

That's not to say that a future-focused leader has to be a modern-day Nostradamus. This isn't about predicting the future—it's about preparing for different versions of it based on the changes you see today. It's about preserving optionality.

Jeff Bezos was an archetypal future-focused leader. Running Amazon, he was notoriously intolerant of anyone who showed up with a plan for the next quarter and no vision for the next five years. He's said that he prefers to think on a five-to-seven-year timeline because there's much less competition for ideas that far out. That's how Amazon has gone from selling books to selling everything to building a cloud computing business approaching \$100 billion in revenues.

A future focus doesn't necessarily have to be about the next big technological innovation. It can be as simple as spotting how things are changing on main street and choosing to do something about it.

That's the real story of how Bud Light was recently dethroned by Modelo Especial as America's best-selling beer. The media may have jumped on the conservative backlash to Bud Light's transgender marketing campaign, but the quiet, steady rise of Mexico's Modelo in the United States was years in the making.

Over a decade ago, little-known Constellation Brands was future-focused enough to notice that Latino culture was going mainstream. Salsa had overtaken ketchup as America's favorite condiment. Middle-class Anglo-Americans were having parties on Cinco de Mayo. With a little foresight, Constellation decided to buy Grupo Modelo's U.S. beer business from Anheuser-Busch InBev in 2013. The future was coming.

Four Ways to Rewire for the Future

Clearly, it pays to be future-focused. But equally clearly, most of us simply aren't. So what's a well-intentioned business leader supposed to do when their own brain is fighting their best intentions?

Luckily, our brains don't have to be forever fixed on a particular time horizon. You can actually rewire your brain to respond to new circumstances and start focusing on the future. Neuroplasticity is a beautiful thing. Here are four ways to start moving your mindset from the now to the next.

1. **Track your time.** If you want to lose weight, start tracking what you eat. If you want to shift your attention horizon, start tracking how you spend your time. This can be as simple as color-coding your daily calendar according to whether a meeting is mostly about debriefing the past, dealing with the present, or figuring out the future. And if you're a retail executive thinking about sales this holiday season, that's basically the present. Don't be surprised if you find you don't have any future-focused conversations at all. Remember: that's most of us.
2. **Expose yourself to new ideas.** Somewhere in the world, the future is happening right now. Go there. A few years back, a colleague of mine took a group of bank executives to explore the future of money in Shanghai. They noticed homeless people begging on the streets. And they were dumbfounded to see that those people wouldn't take cash— they only accepted AliPay digital payments on their phones! Of course, you don't have to travel the globe— just pay attention to what kids in your town are interested in or read more widely and notice what's changing around you. Sure, your brain may tell you that new things are weird and irrelevant, but, if you pay attention, they contain the seeds of the future.
3. **Feel guilty.** If you don't feel guilty for neglecting those "crucial" present-focused duties to focus on future projects, you're not doing it right. That guilt is just your mind playing tricks on you. Larry Page said he felt guilty back in 2005 for "wasting time" on a little future-focused side project at Google. That was Android.
4. **Spend time with future-focused teammates.** It's critical to spend time with at least a couple of senior colleagues who are truly future-focused. They're the ones who are constantly annoying you about how the world is changing. Resist the urge to assure them. Most leaders are accustomed to telling their people that they have a plan and that everything will be okay. But that's not the point. And sometimes, everything will *not* be okay. It's critical that you surround yourself with people who aren't afraid to upset with distant early warning signals from the future.

As we emerge from more than a year of recession anxiety, it's a vital time for leaders to remind themselves that people are counting on them to be obsessed with the future. If you're not among the few who are wired that way, it's time to open up your mind and start rewiring it.

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