

A view from the future, to navigate COVID-19.

Kendra Rogers

Insight & Strategy Director

kendra@pslondon.co.uk

0207 375 6465



It's our job to help businesses imagine new futures. At PS London, our vision is simply "Problem, Solved."

Yet last month, we, alongside the rest of the world very quickly entered into a new dimension with a seemingly uncertain future. This sounds scary, until you realise that no future is ever certain...



We're hearing these are "unprecedented*" times. Times of isolated experiences and collective trauma; anxiety and fear as contagious as the virus. And we should not discount the entirely valid personal and professional emotions that have been triggered by the pandemic.

COVID-19 is a tragedy and a challenge. But we must fight the urge to pine for the past or hold on to the "business as usual" as a beacon. What brought us to today may not be what helps us thrive tomorrow.

We can't ever predict precisely what the future holds. But in the absence of hard data, we still have a critical tool - the power of imagination.

In the absence of hard data, we still have a critical tool - the power of imagination.

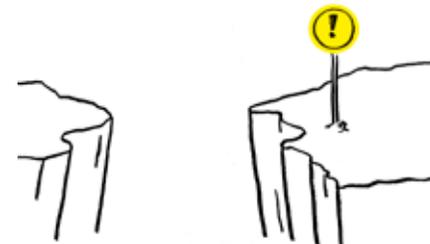
Dismantling old dysfunctional truths

At PS London, [The Merlin Factor](#) by Charles E. Smith is a touchstone of our business (you can read it in its entirety on our website). This change management bible has long been praised as a jumping off point for new futures. We used it to leap toward **FutureThinking** - the process we use to think the unthinkable and help our clients connect the dots by living

backward in time. The very first step of **FutureThinking** comes from dismantling old dysfunctional truths. As we reflect on our pre-COVID-19 world, it is apparent that there were a few too many old dysfunctional truths laying around. This collective pause allows a moment to take stock, step away from what has become a 24/7, short-term-response -metrics driven world, and begin to think about what could be.

Historically, the imprints left on the world post-crises are universally felt and generally harken a new, often brighter, era. The Black Death in England is credited with ending feudalism and serfdom to usher in the Enlightenment. The AIDs crisis saw the advent of public

health programmes. Behavioural science tells us of the "fresh start" mindset, and we see this taking hold in real-time. People are reflecting on their lives in big-picture ways and finding. If we apply this science of a fresh start to business, the temporal landmark of COVID-19 presents a rare opportunity to cleanly disconnect your past, current and future brand from one another to get to the bottom of what's working and what's not.



"Things that most people don't think are possible, become possible because it's already there before you find the way to get to it. To get to it, you have to shed the humanness that ties us and stops us from taking the risk."

Dr. Robert Barthelemy

* It's interesting to note that Google searches for the word "unprecedented" grew by over 5000% between March 22 and 28 in the UK alone. Unprecedented growth, even! ?

* **FutureThinking** is our unique methodology for creating a compelling future brand vision.



Clarity in Crisis

I read somewhere “whatever you are using this time for, there’s value in it” – and there’s beauty in the simplicity of that.

Many are looking for a clear set of instructions for navigating this crisis; they want a checklist with a clear set of steps that will guarantee success. We take a different approach. **FutureThinking** tells us “a bridge to the future narrows possible actions because it always begins with an apparent “first” step.”¹

Most spend so much time defining the perfect first step that they don’t start moving at all. The laws of physics are clear on this - it’s hard to start moving again once you’ve lost momentum. It’s more beneficial that we see value in the myriad of ways that you are using this time, instead of pausing all action in hope of some magic solution. **Incremental movements toward better is better than idle perfectionism.**

We start simply by identifying what is necessary and what is unnecessary. Ask yourself, point blank: “Why am I doing this?” The peripherals quickly begin to float away and indecision will be replaced by the desire to make intentional, simple movements toward a new imagined future. Clarity comes from two surprising places: Imagination and Play.

Permission to imagine

Cambridge Dictionary defines Imagination as:

- 1 the ability to form pictures in the mind
- 2 something that you think exists or is true, although in fact it is not real or true
- 3 the ability to think of new ideas

Imagination breeds change. It brings about new ideas, allows us to manifest things that aren’t currently real, true or possible, and expands our capacity for growth.

BCG Henderson Institute has published four “Rs” to navigate the crisis: “Reaction, Recession, Rebound and Reimagination.”⁶ While we like alliteration, we think this could use some further thought. “Re-” implies doing it again... and we are, after all, imagining new futures here. We could argue that reimagination occurs when we weren’t thinking big enough in our first imaginations. Reaction is needed when our initial action and passion wanes. If we are continuously imagining and continuously bounding towards new types of success, would we have the same fear of recessions? Or would it just be simply be a new future to imagine?

We applaud our friends at Harvard Business Review for hitting the nail on the head: “We believe imagination — the capacity to create, evolve, and

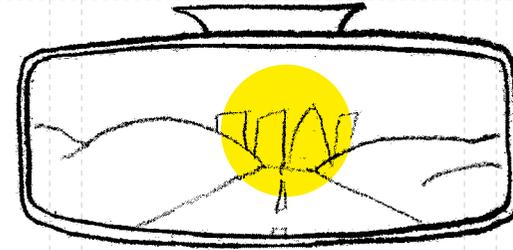
exploit mental models of things or situations that don’t yet exist — is the crucial factor in seizing and creating new opportunities, and finding new paths to growth.”⁷

We’ve seen a world embracing imagination and creativity – from the countless new skills and talents being taught and learned in quarantine to the vivid “lockdown dreams”³. We’ve imagined new ways to celebrate, with birthday parties via car parades and at-home dance parties. We’ve imagined new ways to work together, with organisations who saw Digital Transformation as a 5-year plan becoming digitised in mere days and virtual happy hours allowing us a sneak-peak into the living rooms and kitchens of our colleagues. By taking away everything that we felt was “normal”, COVID-19 has forced us to imagine new ways to work, play, share and learn.

At the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York City, the psychiatry and neuroscience brains of some of the most brilliant, including

Daniela Schiller, are focused on “threat extinction” – which relies on triggering areas of the brain involved in perception, memory, learning and imagination in order to process fear sources and neutralise them⁸. When it comes to the threat faced as a result of COVID-19, what extinction tactics can we borrow from Mount Sinai? Certainly, engaging our teams in an exercise of perception, memory, learning, and most of all imagination is a good start.

In our **FutureThinking** workshops, once we’ve defined the context and future vision, we talk about how we’ll be remembered - we encourage teams to complete a 100th Anniversary Commemorative plaque. Nothing is outside the realm of possibility, as we have 100 years from today to shape a totally different future. Our plaques sum up the new future we’ll be applauded for ushering in. **We’ve included the plaque at the end of this document, for you and your team to begin imagining.**



Permission to Play

“A new cultural reality is created by speaking and behaving as though it were an established fact.”¹

We tend to want to rationalise the world by starting with objective, scientific measures. But if you’ve come this far, you know that those don’t always translate, and often even reduce our ability to imagine new scenarios and find new paths to growth.

The Merlin Factor puts it simply: “No Quest, No Magic.”¹

How can we give ourselves permission to move outside of the objective, scientific measures into a space where new ideas flourish? By giving ourselves, and our teams, permission to play. At our most playful we are our most creative – get the glue, scissors and paper out and begin crafting. Create collages, participate in improv, build your

own adventure, and get a bit messy. This is the time for hands-on, tactile experimentation and a no-mistakes mentality. That is embodied in a “constant process of experimentation, entailing unexpected reverses and opposition”.¹

The quest is the search for something – in our perception of quests as the noble pursuits of heroes, it’s worth adding an element of Sancho Panza into the mix: Don Quixote’s squire who employs unique, earthy wit and playful common sense in the face of mad idealism. In order to separate the practical difficulties from the unthinkable future, we must allow room for experimentation, humour and failure.

That’s it. Sort of.

Read the consumer behavior studies. Build the demand watchtowers. Embrace digital transformation. There is real, clear value in building out the change management strategy you’ve been staring at for months. But there’s also value in taking a step back from the computer. In calling up your team, exchanging ideas, connecting the dots, inspiring and being inspired.

We were **Future**Thinking long before this crisis and we’ll be **Future**Thinking long after it. We do not and cannot know exactly what will happen next.

The future may be unknown, but it’s not unimaginable.

We can think the unthinkable – there is room to believe in possibility.

What Problem can we help you Solve?
If you feel like seeing the world differently in just one afternoon with your team, join us for our **Future** Thinking workshop. It’s free, fun and can be done from the comfort of your home. Arrange yours at info@pslondon.co.uk

References:

1. Charles E. Smith. The Merlin Factor: Creating Ambassadors from the Future. April 2005.
2. Canvas8, Pandemic Culture Report. April 2020.
3. The Guardian. Is coronavirus stress to blame for the rise in bizarre ‘lockdown dreams’? April 2020.
4. BCG Henderson Institute. Reaction, Rebound, Recession, and Reimagination. March 2020.
5. Harvard Business Review. We need imagination now more than ever. April 2020.
6. BCG Henderson Institute. Sensing and Shaping the Post-COVID Era. April 2020.
7. Harvard Business Review. We need imagination now more than ever. April 2020.
8. Reuters. Your Imagination could help you conquer your fears. November 2018.
9. Google Trends. “Unprecedented” Search Interest Over Time. April 23 2020.
10. Dai, Milkman & Riis. The Fresh Start Effect: Temporal Landmarks That Motivate Aspirational Behaviour [The Wharton School Research Paper No.51] 2013.
11. Cambridge Dictionary. Imagination. April 2020.

**Our FutureThinking
'Blue Plaque' –**

print it out and have
a go for yourselves...

