

FUTURE INDICATIVE

Futurist Sohail Inayatullah challenges managers to create structures which allow you to respond to what you can't foresee. ANNA SMITH reports.

It takes a different sort of futurist to say you can't predict the future. But Sohail Inayatullah is up-front about the perils of gazing too intently into crystal balls.

"I believe you can predict trends, I've seen that time after time. But no-one can get the specifics right. And if they get it right once, it was that they were lucky. If you look at [Alvin] Toffler's stuff he got a few [trends] right, the rest he didn't."

The irreverence of Pakistan-born Inayatullah, who was in New Zealand in June to conduct a workshop for the Futures Trust, is refreshing. He's worked with the likes of Toffler and John Naisbitt but would probably class himself as less of a popularist.

He is also honest about the times he has got it wrong himself. Along with seven other futurists, he was invited by Hawaiian electrical company Hawaiian Electric to a two-day workshop with senior managers. Each talked for an hour about the key trends which would affect the company in the future.

The one event they didn't take into consideration was the likelihood of a hurricane. A few months later the company took a loss of US\$300 million when a hurricane

left it overexposed to a local insurance company.

"The real challenge," Inayatullah says with hindsight, "is to ask how do you create structures which allow you to respond to what you can't foresee?"

Perhaps because he was born in Pakistan and educated in Malaysia and Hawaii, Inayatullah looks at the future through the eyes of different cultures. Businesses would do well to do the same, he suggests.

He dismisses linear forecasting as just the early phase of futures thinking, but he has done his share of it. For four years he worked for the Hawaiian state judiciary and in 1980 concluded, to people's disbelief, that the next big trend for the state would be Hawaiian sovereignty.

Ten years later he was proved right leading him to conclude forecasters can get the general parameters of the future right.

"But the issue for us was frustrating. We were trying to tell people what the future was when deep down we knew that really the future was mysterious," he says.

Coupled with that, every time a market forecaster becomes famous, he or she starts to change the market and people change their behaviour as a result, Inayatullah adds.

"If the future is interaction between our actions, our beliefs and our images then the issue becomes less what will the future be like and more what do we want, what's our vision of the future?"

Enter the business schools

with corporate vision workshops and mission statements.

Inayatullah, who is currently based at the Queensland University of Technology, believes vision workshops can be useful as long as managers do not use them simply to gain allegiance from the troops. Used properly, they can help define a "preferred possibility".

"The future becomes a possibility to create different types of businesses and different types of people," he says.

The best businesses are the ones that know who they are and in a crisis can go back to their basic sense of identity.

Take IBM's line that it is in the business of providing solutions. "That is saying we cannot forecast the future but we have a sense of what people really want at some deeper level and that becomes a way to create the future," he says. "There's always uncertainty so you have to have an organisation which uses metaphors of itself which are flexible and fluid."

Myths and metaphors are among Inayatullah's favourite mechanisms for making sense of the future. The Japanese, for instance, draw on old Confucian metaphors of harmony. "It's therefore obvious to them that if you live in harmony you have state and business working together."

Other metaphors include the idea of a fork in the road giving you two directions to choose. Or there's the dice — you can't predict the future so you may as well just roll the dice. Or there's the American idea of total choice — the future is an ocean and a company can go wherever it pleases. Or take Toffler's idea that the future is a stream with hidden rocks to be watched for.

All of these are culturally specific, Inayatullah says, and must be derived from how people inside an organisation see themselves.

"The key [for a company] is to find out what their own metaphor is and to ask whether that helps or hurts their mission." If there is a mismatch, a company is destined to failure. **M**

