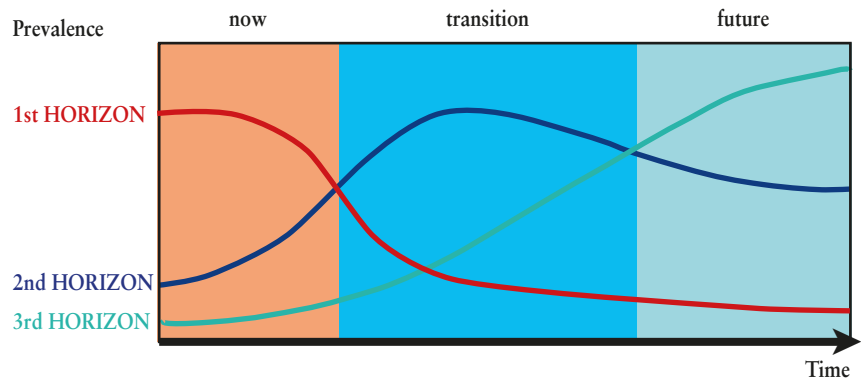# Three Horizons: Patterning of Hope

Bill Sharpe

For over 30 years Bill has been involved in finding ways to think about the future, first as a research manager in the computer industry, and for the last 15 years working independently as a futures practitioner across all sorts of areas from sustainable transport to the arts, and the future of healthcare. The Three Horizons practice has grown from his work with the International Futures Forum (IFF) that seeks to foster practical hope and wise initiative in the most complex issues facing our society. Bill is speaking at the conference on Transformative Innovations for Health at the University of Westminster on November 18.

Summary

In every area of professional life, I meet people facing an existential crisis: as the complexity of the issues facing society grows, the organisational structures seem less and less able to cope; attempts to transform the system seem to work for a little while and then get defeated by the overwhelming pressure to sustain the present way of doing things; people experience a growing gap between their personal values and aspirations and the organisational life they must inhabit. In this context, Three Horizons is offering a way for people to restore hope and pursue the need for a transformational response in a practical way.

Three Qualities of the Future in the Present

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 complex problems our society faces that defy any definitive 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 (Sharpe, 2013) has emerged as a way of helping people with these challenges.

Three Horizons is a way of working on transformative 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 transitional 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 than that, we have a sense that our H1 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 H1 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 H1 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 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.

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 responsibilities, 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.

Future consciousness and the patterning of hope

As people appreciate the positive contribution of each horizon they can move from holding 'their' horizon as a fixed mindset and instead use all three as flexible perspectives on the future. This is the core idea of Three Horizons – to make the 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. Just as a sports team or a musical ensemble practise together to develop their collective skill, and in doing so enhance their personal potential as part of the whole, so we can develop our capacity for transformative change by seeing future consciousness as a collective practice and skill rather than purely individual.

Through our shared understanding of the patterns and where 'we' are within them we can act with shared hope, creativity and commitment, holding together as we navigate from the familiar to the new.

Three Horizons in practice

International Futures Forum is supporting the emergence of transformative culture through the provision of resources and expertise to support Three Horizons and related practices (www.iffpraxis.com). IFF's experience of Three Horizons has grown up over a decade of use; extended accounts of what has been learned are available in *Transformative Innovation in Education* (Leicester et al., 2013 - second edition) and *Humanising Healthcare* (Hannah, 2014). For those with an interest in futures techniques the background to the development of Three Horizons, and its relationship to other approaches such as scenario planning, can be found in (Curry et al., 2008).

Bill Sharpe *is an Independent Researcher in science, technology and society, Member of International Futures Forum (www.internationalfuturesforum.com) and Visiting Professor, Digital Cultures Research Centre, University of The West of England. Reprinted from the Journal of Holistic Healthcare.*

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