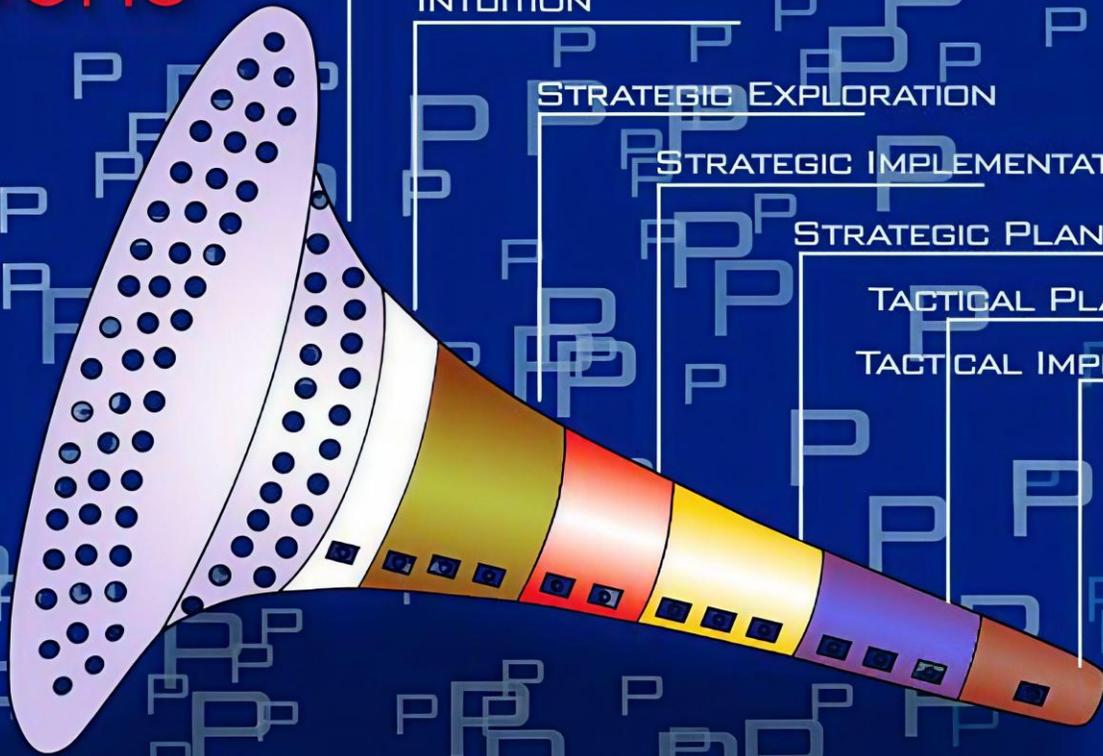
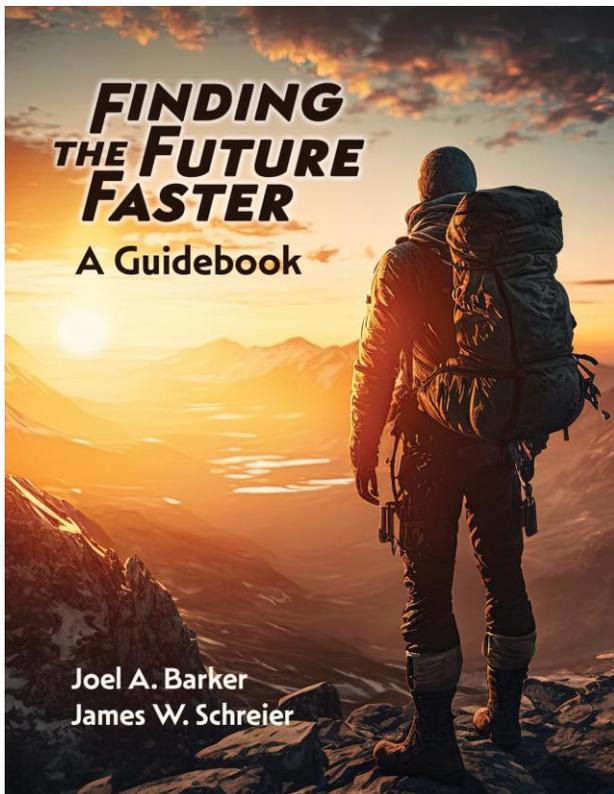


The POSSIBILITIES Cone™



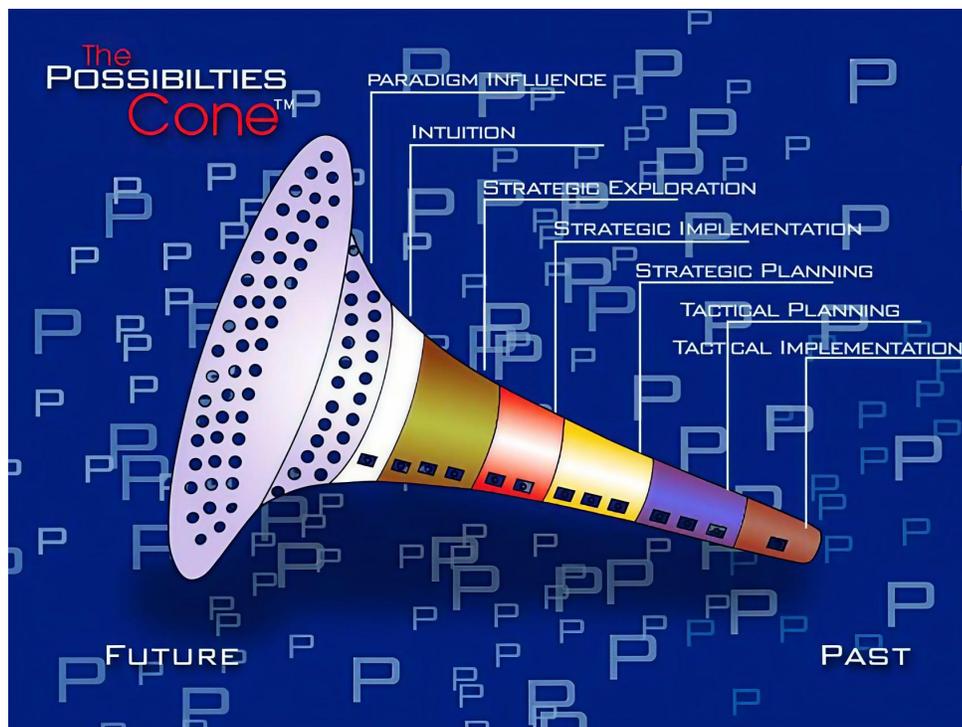
FUTURE

PAST



Joel Barker's
“Possibilities Cone”

*A Special
Selection*

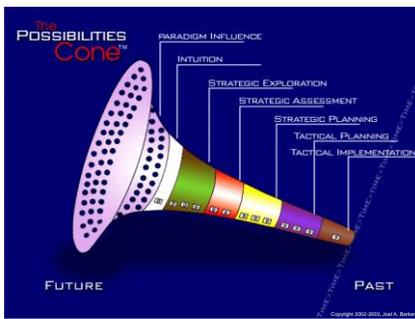


Joel Barker's

“Possibilities Cone”

In many of Joel's presentations on the Strategic Exploration Tools, he began with an exercise demonstrating “the wave of time.” He would then, frequently, present “**The Possibilities Cone**,” a visual dynamic showing how possibilities pass through **paradigms, strategic exploration**, then strategic planning and tactics.

When we began planning for the “**Finding the Future Faster**” Guidebook, we discussed adding an updated version of a paper Joel wrote on “**The Possibilities Cone**.” It appears as an Appendix in the Guidebook.



The Possibilities Cone

*You will only catch a new idea
if it aligns with your paradigm.*

In Chapter 2 of **Finding the Future Faster**, I provide an overview of a metaphor for thinking about the future, a visual way of picturing the process of bringing an idea into reality. I call it the **Possibilities Cone**. The following is a discussion on the Possibilities Cone related to the Strategic Exploration Tools discussed in **Finding the Future Faster**. Exploring this idea starts with the easily proven assumption that we travel through the universe on a wave called time.

The Beginnings of a New Idea

To start this discussion, let us first examine how new ideas become reality. **When is the best time to get involved in a new idea?** Is it at the beginning, at 0% of its birth, or is it at 50% when the idea has been clearly formulated but not yet delivered or executed? Or is it at 100% when the idea has been brought to action in the organization or in the marketplace? Most of us would agree that the general answer to this question is that the earlier, the better. Why? Because the earlier we are involved in the generation and execution of ideas, the more we can be a part of the development of the idea, influence its development, and benefit from its implementation.

And yet, what do we want to **make good decisions?** The simple answer, often clearly demonstrated by the behavior of managers and senior executives, is data. Sometimes, leaders make clear statements that they want overwhelming evidence that indicates the correct direction of their decisions. A leader in a major transportation company stated: *“What I need is an exact list of specific unknown problems we might encounter.”*

There is a contradiction between these two positions. It is equally clear that leaders, pioneers, and people at the edge of the wave of time must learn to balance these contradictions by becoming strategic explorers.

Discovery versus Invention

The second element is the question of discovery versus invention. Do we, as human beings, invent or discover new ideas? Looking at the definitions, to invent means to create something that has never existed before. To discover means to find something that already exists and bring it to attention, to make it available for consideration, and sometimes even to make the idea useful. Discovery implies a potential idea that is waiting to be found and applied.

I have asked thousands of audience participants whether they believe we invent or discover new ideas, and perhaps not surprisingly, the reactions are mixed, with about half saying we invent ideas and the other half saying we discover new ideas.

I believe the universe is filled with many potential ideas we discover. The laws of this universe impose limits on the number of possible ideas. Humans do not invent ideas. We discover, understand, and apply new ideas.



The Real Universe and the Conceptual Universe

The real universe is one we live in. We are physically here, bounded most powerfully by time. In the real universe, you cannot move forward or backward in time. We are trapped in the moment that moves like a wave. We cannot escape it. In a metaphorical sense, we are surfing on a wave called time.

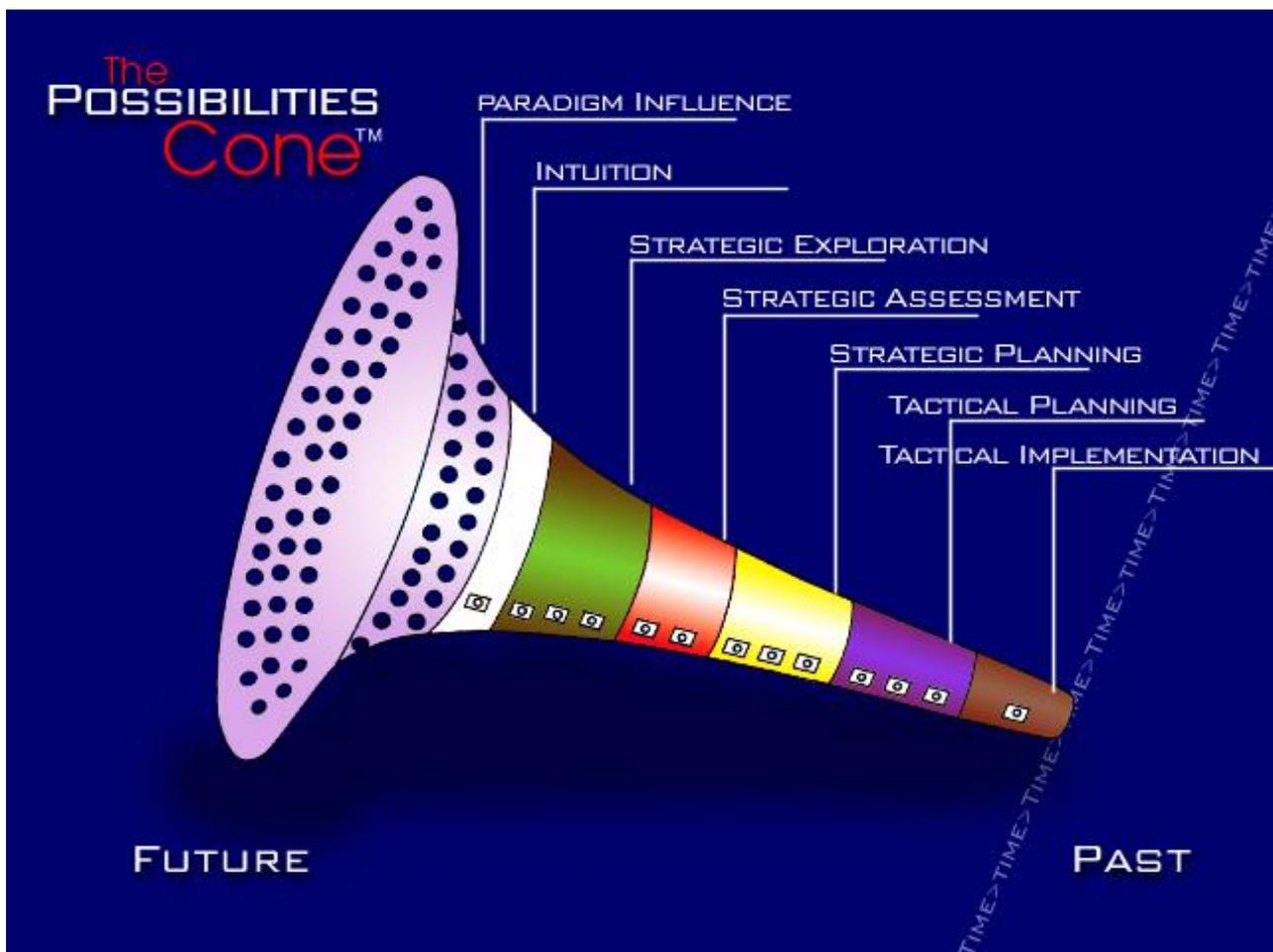


The conceptual universe is timeless. It comprises possibilities, great ideas for literature, art, music, scientific paradigms, new potential for tools and technology, new languages, and cultures, and so much more. So, the critical question is how do humans accept the conceptual universe since we are trapped in the physical universe riding the time wave?

There are two ways. We will run into new possibilities as we ride the wave of time in the present. Or, with our minds, we search out and discover. It is our minds, not our brains, because our brains are physically located in the real universe. We reach forward and discover new possibilities. To put it another way, we overcome time through our minds. Not only do we discover forward, but we remember back in our minds. We have both a past and a future. This leads to the Possibilities Cone.

The Possibilities Cone

The Possibilities Cone is a metaphor for how we access the future as individuals and as organizations. It represents the mind's research, leading to research in the real world. There are seven sections to the Possibilities Cone. In almost all cases, a new idea must pass through all seven sections.



The Seven Sections of the Possibilities Cone

Section 1 – The Paradigm Bell

Your personal paradigms or the paradigms of your organization form the first section of the Possibilities Cone. Unless a possibility aligns perfectly with the cone's deeper opening, you will only catch a new idea if it aligns with your paradigm.

Imagine a new idea, a new possibility in your future. Imagine the plot for a novel you might write or an idea for a new kitchen gadget. You will only become aware of this possibility if it aligns with your paradigm. This is the outer ring of the Possibilities Cone. It is where the new ideas will be caught. There are several essential characteristics of this outer ring. There is no fixed size. This outer ring is variable and can differ for each of us and vary for different organizations. The surface of this outer ring is not solid. The organization's or the individual's paradigms determine the texture of the surface. What might get easily caught in one Cone may pass right through the other. This explains why some organizations miss new ideas that, to everyone else, seem obvious. The size of the outer ring is determined by the openness and tolerance to new ideas, which is determined by the paradigm flexibility of the individual or the organization.

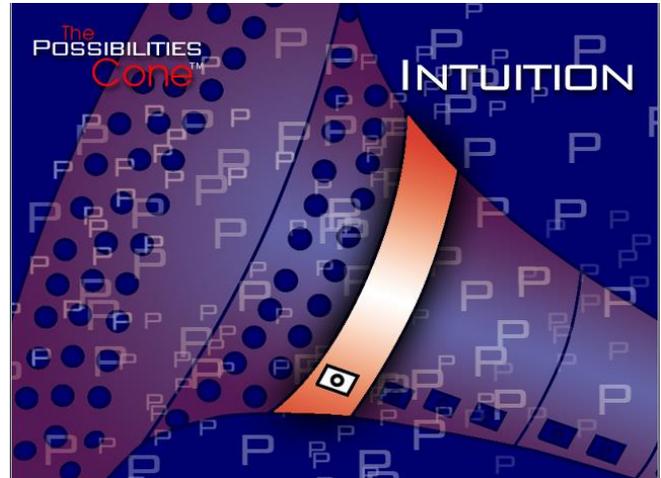


This is a very easy principle to demonstrate. For example, think of one of your paradigm filters. It may be a hobby, sport, a mode of transportation, or a type of TV show or movie. Once we have formed that paradigm, it becomes much easier to see other examples and possibilities within that framework. For example, if you are a devoted fan of legal mysteries, your attention will quickly be drawn to commercials or ads for these programs or publications.

Section 2 – Intuition

The next section of the Possibilities Cone is intuition. Intuition is the ability to make good decisions with incomplete data. Your first conscious contact with a new idea is through your intuition. You have a feeling that intrigues you.

“...mmm that's interesting!” No data exists to inform you of the quantitative nature of the idea. Intuition allows you to focus on something sooner than it deserves. Without intuition, you will miss the idea, and since it receives no attention, it will probably go out the first of many doors on the cone.



The strongest work in this area of intuition is Dr. Marsha Emery's “Intuition Workbook,” an expert guide to unlocking the wisdom of your subconscious mind. The “Intuition Workbook” is a practical hands-on collection of exercises that can strengthen your intuitive muscle, enabling you to concentrate your mental energies, increase your receptivity to mental imagery, interpret those images, and allow solutions to proceed farther through the Possibilities Cone.

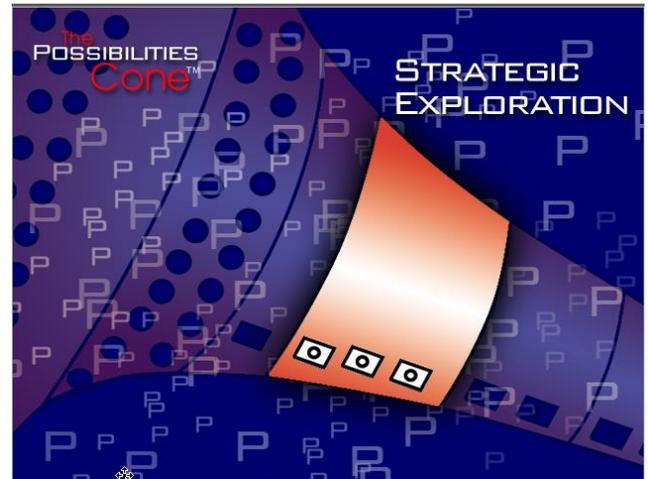
In Dr. Emery’s workbook, she quoted the following from Joel’s video, Paradigm Pioneers:

A leader has to bet, and the bet is that the leader’s intuition is active enough, informed enough, and perceptive enough that he or she can get the company safely and successfully through the business window of the future for every company and organization that will be the back of the 21st-century.

Section 3 – Strategic Exploration

Finding the Future Faster provides detailed information on the concept and the tools I have developed to make this process functional. So here I will give the key points on strategic exploration and make the connection to its place in the Possibilities Cone. In the next section of the Possibilities Cone, a new idea can pass through the strategic exploration questions successfully and then move on to the next section. The key points related to strategic exploration are that the process is highly qualitative and begins to involve more rational thinking.

Filtering the idea through four questions is the basis for strategic exploration.

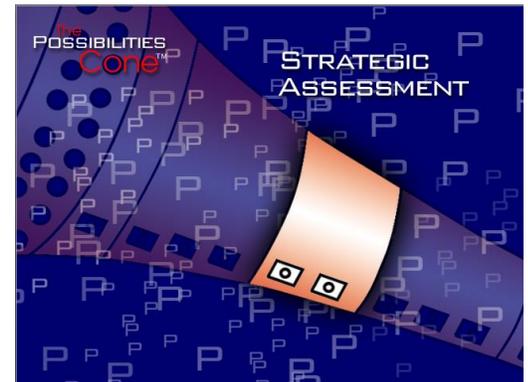


- **T.I.P.S. Tracking:** Am I paying attention to the things I should be watching – and not being distracted by the overwhelming data and sources of the 21st Century?
- **Strategy Matrix:** How would the new idea affect what I am already committed to?
- **Implications Wheel:** What are the long-term implications of this new idea, both positive and negative, and how likely are they to occur?
- **Vision:** Can I develop a story, a scenario, which lets me envision what this new idea means to me and the world around me?

The remaining sections of the Possibilities Cone, addressing strategic implementation, are represented by a plethora of models and tools. This is not an issue to be analyzed here. In numerous situations over the years, I have seen organizations take information deliberately processed through the first three sections – then carefully guided to implementation by various approaches. Because of the variety of tools in these areas, I will cover the final sections of the Possibilities Cone with some general points for each.

Section 4 – Strategic Assessment

At this point, the quantification of numbers and resources begins. Strategic implementation begins by discussing what other factors must now come into play. As the idea itself proceeds down the cone, it looks at critical questions like whether the approach to implementing the idea is comprehensive enough. Have threats to the idea been dealt with? Have you correctly and completely characterized how the ideas are going to get to the customer? Do you understand what it is that is going to help the customer accept the idea? Outside and inside forces are examined and measured for their impact on the idea. Prototyping of the idea begins.



Section 5: Strategic Planning

In the strategic planning stage, numbers come fully into play. Questions about time, cost, human resources, market forces, development, and manufacturing quality all come into play. Quantification, at this point, becomes a key driving force. If you cannot generate useful information, useful numbers, the idea is at risk.



Section 6 – Tactical Planning

The next section, Tactical Planning, means getting ready to implement the idea. Real dollars are beginning to be spent at very high levels, including hiring, building plants, requisitioning materials, and training sales staff. The door for throwing out the idea is still available, but it is an extremely hard door to open at this point in the cone because of the level of commitment.



Section 7 – Tactical Implementation

Tactical Implementation is the final section of the cone. It is the moment when what was originally nothing more than a possibility hits the wave of time and becomes a reality. It is simple: **Just Do It!**

This leads directly to the end of the cone. Out pops the new idea into the universe. This point also begins the history of the new idea. While the reality of the new idea rides on the time wave, the idea itself begins to grow obsolete and falls behind us in time. *While it falls behind us, it leaves in the time wave for implications of its effect, and then those implications create implications.*



Monitoring

While Strategic Exploration and the Strategic Exploration Tools occupy a specific location in the Possibilities Cone, they should not be forgotten for the remaining steps to implementation. There are several occasions in the final sections of the process where the information has been proven to play a key part.

- a. When the Implications Wheel is used early, it filters information and “possibilities” for the decision-making for strategic implementation and tactical planning. The decisions informed by the possibilities occur on the wave of time, so the Implications Wheel becomes a way of monitoring the accuracy of the information.
- b. The Strategy Matrix provides an ongoing monitoring device and process for evaluating changes. In the 21st Century environment of fast-changing trends, technology development, a heightened focus on innovation, and the need to adjust initiatives and set new strategic objectives, the Possibilities Cone is an ongoing feedback loop.
- c. Even the Vision process has a role in ongoing monitoring. While an organization’s mission may change only slightly – or rarely, its vision is subject to the same environmental changes just noted.

Cone Shaping Forces

I have presented the Possibilities Cone in a consistent shape so far to illustrate the sections of the cone. The shape of the cone can vary dramatically in different organizations. Organizational culture, paradigms, and leadership are three major forces that can shape the Possibilities Cone.

The reality is that paradigms can have a broader overall impact on the dynamic of the Possibilities Cone and can influence what happens in each section. Finally, leadership is such a significant factor in determining the workings of the Possibilities Code that I will discuss leadership in more detail in the two following sections.

Shapes That Arise from These Forces

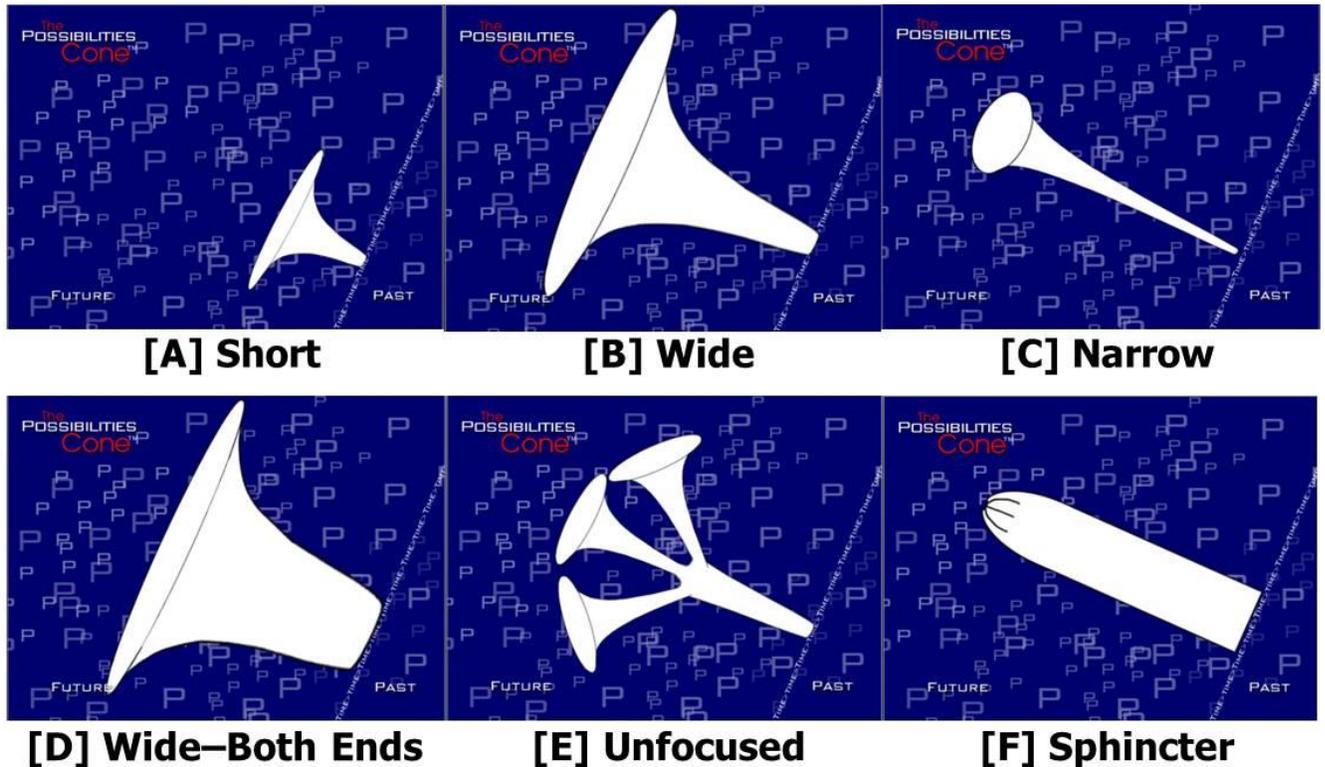
These forces can dramatically shape the Possibilities Cone, as shown in the following diagrams. An organization may have created a Possibilities Cone that is too short [A]. The organization is unwilling to take the time to look far enough forward. If the cone is too wide at the top, it will catch more ideas than you can deal with, creating jamming of the cone farther on down [B]. An organization may create a Possibilities Cone that is too narrow [C], reducing the range of new ideas accessible.

An organization may create a Possibilities Cone that is too wide at both ends [D]. Every idea passes through without being developed, overworking all functions in the organization, and creating excessive failures that will make successes more difficult. Another organization may create a Possibilities Cone that sees ideas in so many different areas [D] that it is unable to focus on ideas consistent with its mission and vision.

Most of the organization's Possibilities Cone can be consistent with the conceptual design but still suffer from one of the problems identified here. Perhaps the worst case for Possibilities Cone is a sphincter opening [F] which is squeezed tightly at the opening and only opens in the case of a crisis.

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Cone Gradients



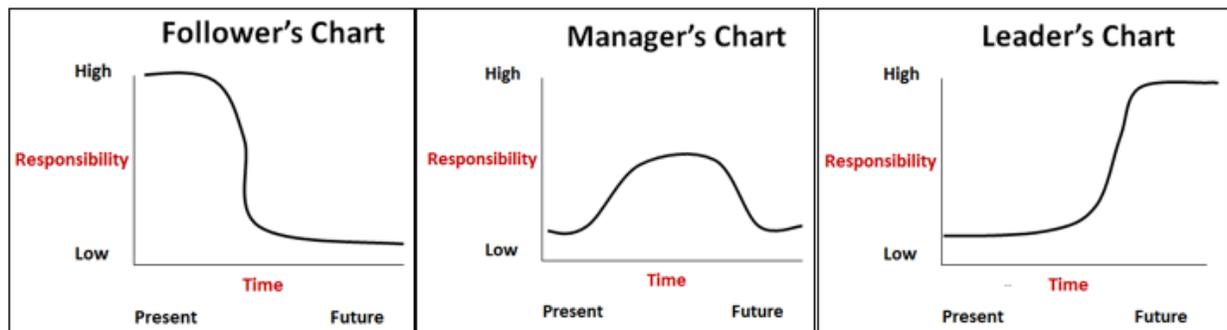
Leadership - Management

One of the most interesting insights from an overall look at the possibilities: is based on the fundamental comparison between leadership and management. Professor John Kotter's classic definitions for leadership versus management defined leadership as requiring alignment to the organization's vision and mission. Kotter said that leaders influence others towards achieving goals, act as change agents by example, and develop other leaders. On the other hand, Kotter defined management as coping with day-to-day operations, bringing order and consistency to the organization, and establishing systems and structures that get results. Kotter clearly recognized the value of both:

When organizations have high competencies in management and leadership, they're able to meet challenges today as well as tomorrow. However, most organizations are usually lacking one or the other. When management exists without leadership, the

company is often unable to change. And when leadership exists without management, the company is only as strong as its charismatic leader. Most of the time, organizations are overstaffed with managers, but lack enough leadership to help them deal with constant change. (Kotter, 2012)

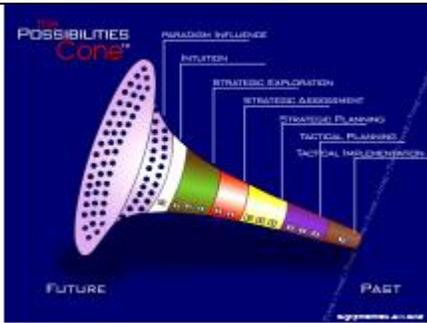
In my video, **Leadershift (1999)**, I defined a leader as **“Someone you choose to follow to a place you would not go by yourself.”** That place is the future. I further recognized that a leader will **“Find, Recognize, and Secure the Future.”** This creates a fascinating identification of the dimensions of leadership versus management in terms of the Possibilities Cone. In **Leadershift**, I also defined how the responsibility of followers, managers, and leaders changes from the present to the future.



The detailed research of Canadian Organizational Psychologist Elliott Jacques has validated this perspective. He documented the Time Stratum (Time Span or Horizon) of different levels from his extensive work with both industry and military positions. Levels I – VIII are relevant here:

- Super Corporation CEO (5 Star General): 50 – 100 Years
- Corporation CEO (4 Star General): 20 – 50 Years
- Corporate EVP (3 Star General): 10 – 20 Years
- Vice President (2 Star General): 5 - 10 Years
- Department Manager (1 Star General/Colonel): 2 - 5 Years
- Unit Manager (Major, Lt. Colonel): 1 – 2 Years
- Section Manager (Captain, Lieutenant): 3 Months – 1 Year
- Operator (Private – NCO): 1 Day – 3 Months

Here are some interesting comparisons to consider – moving from Leadership to Management – from the beginning to the end of the Possibilities Cone. Picture in your mind how these dimensions shift as they move through the Possibilities Cone: from the future to the present, from possibility to certainty, from uncomfortable to comfortable, from uncommitted to committed, from fuzzy to sharp, from chaotic to predictable, from inspirational to motivational – **from Leadership to Management.**

Leadership →		→ Management
Future		Present
Possibility		Certainty
Uncomfortable		Comfortable
Uncommitted		Committed
Fuzzy		Sharp
Chaotic		Predictable
Inspirational		Motivational

The Action Recommendations for Leaders

Leaders need to be out there, too. Leaders need to concentrate on reports generated at the top of the cone – those things that may take years to develop. As a leader, you need to spend a significant portion of your day contemplating the future and dealing with the uncertainty, discomfort, and excitement that goes with it. Structure your organization to allow adequate time for evaluating possibilities and actualizing the most promising ones.

Put creative people into positions where they can scan for possibilities *well in advance* to allow for adequate evaluation and refinement of ideas. Keep your door open to anyone with an idea about the future and clarify that it is a vital part of your job. **Be willing to step beyond the boundaries for the sake of a new idea.**

Creative Person's Role

Like quality and strategic planning, there are many different models and authorities on creativity for individuals and organizations. The work of Edward de Bono, Six Thinking Hats and Lateral Thinking, has solid connections to Strategic Exploration Tools.

Creativity can be found anywhere in the cone. It's the capacity to throw a line out of the cone and "reel" in a new idea. The best place for creatives: on the edge. It's easier to fish from there.

Final Thoughts and Application

- What is the shape of your cone?
- Do you know where the creatives are in your organization?
- How often do your leaders get out to the edge of the cone?
- Do you know where your intuitives are?
- How can you actively encourage fishing?
- Once an idea is inside the cone, it moves at the speed of the assessment, not at the speed of the Time Wave. This means you can get an idea to reality faster than your competition if you have a better cone structure.
- Who is involved in strategic exploration in your organization? The more, the better.
- It is important to map out how your organization deals with new ideas. That discussion will uncover both the shape of your cone and the constraints you have placed on it.
- Earlier is almost always better in terms of information. Just because you know about something does not mean you have to do it right now.
- Strategic exploration simplifies strategic planning; strategic planning simplifies tactical planning; tactical planning simplifies implementation.

***You can and should shape your own future,
because if you don't, somebody else surely will.***

Resources

[Paradigms: The Business of Discovering the Future](#) by Joel Arthur Barker, Harper Business, 1993

The Discovering of the Future Video Series from [Star Thrower Distribution](#)

- *The New Business of Paradigms*: authored and hosted by Joel Barker.
- *Discovering the Future: Paradigm Pioneers*: authored and hosted by Joel Barker.
- *Leadershift*, authored and hosted by Joel Barker

[Intuition](#)

Dr. Marcia Emery's *Intuition Workbook: An Expert's Guide to Unlocking the Wisdom of Your Subconscious Mind*. Prentice Hall. 1994.

[Leadership – Management](#)



[Requisite Organization](#): A Total System for Effective Managerial Organization and Managerial Leadership for the 21st Century, Elliott Jacques, 2006