

The Future: Change, Collaboration, and Lifelong Learning

By E. Lander Medlin



At the outset I am not, nor do I pretend to be, a “futurist.” However, I am a student of futurists such as Ray Kurzweil, Daniel Burris, Jack Uldrich, and especially now the unlikely Thomas Friedman, concerning the topic of change. His recent book, *Thank You for Being Late: An Optimist’s Guide to Thriving in the Age of Accelerations*, has import on the topic of change and serves as a platform to inform my thinking on the other two themes of collaboration and lifelong learning.

Why care about change and where it is coming from? Understanding and knowing why things are happening as they are helps us frame our future with respect to collaboration and our learning needs. In *Thank You for Being Late*, Friedman states that we are living in the midst of a few game changers he calls “the age of accelerations” where three driving forces are now in play.

- **Technology** – quoting Moore’s Law, where computing speed and power is doubling every 18 to 24

months. Hence, 90 percent of the world’s data was created in the past two years!

- **Globalization** (of markets and media) – where NOT just people are connected, EVERYTHING is connected. Hence, anyone can impact everyone anytime!
- **Environment** (climate change and biodiversity loss) – where people are NO longer just part of nature; they are now a force of, in, and on nature. Hence, we might just shift the planet from friend to foe!

DISLOCATION VS. DISRUPTION

It gets worse as all three are changing simultaneously, interdependently, and exponentially (not linearly). As a matter of fact, humans think, act, and adapt from a “linear” mindset where distance, time, and velocity move in a straight-through line. Furthermore, the exponential rate and pace of growth and change is quite different, and with hugely different consequences, indeed, transforming almost every aspect of modern life. The impact is one of dislocation, not to be confused with disruption, whereas humans cannot fathom how to adapt. Yet, we have no choice! The world is being uncomfortably changed. Living and working in this age of accelerations has shifted, is shifting, and will shift every aspect of the higher education landscape. None of us are excluded.

This is all occurring against the backdrop of an array of pressures and challenges confronting the 21st-century education environment and contributing to its volatility. Among the most prominent challenges are skepticism over the value of a college degree, higher expectations for institutional performance, student unrest, intense competition for students and resources, political divisions, and this new wave of technological change that is altering everything we know about the education environment.

SO WHAT CAN WE DO?

The 2017 Thought Leaders Series (TLS) monograph, *Transforming Facilities to Achieve Student Success*, connects us nicely to the importance of not just optimizing facilities function, but optimizing purpose. This gives greater clarity to the role of facilities in this changing environment and how important it is for facilities to clearly and cleanly align with the institution's goals and objectives. Again, the monograph provides greater detail on this role and much, much more.

Nonetheless, we cannot do any of this in a vacuum. It requires us to work not just cooperatively, but in collaboration with others. Collaboration is so important and, if truly understood, can change the very nature of how we relate to and communicate with one another. Indeed it's the way we *see* and engage others, as people who have needs, wants, fears, insecurities, and hopes...just like we do. A person of worth and value; one that matters. Further to the point, you *feel seen* by them. It's this way of *seeing* that captures the essence of collaboration.

To achieve true collaboration you must change your mindset ("mindset" being defined as a set of beliefs or a way of thinking that determines one's behavior, outlook, and mental attitude). It's how you view the world and other people in it—the lens through which you *see* your work, your relationships, the world. And this mindset is either an inward or outward mindset. Both are explained in greater detail in the TLS monograph, and is worth the read. Suffice it to say, choosing an outward mindset, you know others' needs, desires, motivations, and can make better, more collaborative decisions. You are now able to focus on the collective mission with increased perspectives, buy-in and shared ownership, opportunities for innovation, and an intentionality that brings greater value.

It's about learning to *see* beyond ourselves which fosters results we could have never imagined. Understand, the biggest lever for change is not a change in self-belief, but a fundamental change in the

way you *see* and regard your connections with and obligations to others! When people collaborate...results follow!

THE FUTURE AND THE MOTIVATIONAL DIVIDE

So why a focus on lifelong learning? The changes in play today have brought about this need both institutionally and individually. Yep, average is officially over! Let me explain. When I graduated from college, I had to find a job; my girls have to *invent* theirs. I attended college to learn skills for life and lifelong learning was a hobby; my girls attended college to learn skills for their first job, and lifelong learning for them is a *necessity* for every job thereafter! Thriving in today's workplace is best described by the co-founder of LinkedIn, Reid Hoffman, who calls it "investing in the start-up of YOU." You can't just show up. You need a plan to succeed. Therefore, self-motivation is more important than ever.

Why? Because in the next decade, the digital divide will largely disappear and when that happens, only one divide will matter—the motivational divide. The future will belong to those willing to leverage technology and tools, new skills and attitudes to find, hold, and advance in jobs that require more knowledge and education, enhanced communication, and effective collaboration.

Otherwise, Einstein's definition of insanity will hold true, "Keep doing what you're doing and expect different results." Recognizing change, learning to *see* beyond ourselves, and engaging in continuous, lifelong learning will enhance your place in the workforce and within your institution. 💰

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