

Gewerbliche Winterkonferenz 2023

The Future is a verb

By Magnus Lindkvist

For attendees of Gewerbliche Winterkonferenz, 2023

Dear Guests,

What a pleasure to join you in Klosters and give you a slightly different view on all things future compared with the sport of doom-mongering that everybody expects in the 2020s. I want to summarize my key points from the talk so we can continue the journey into tomorrow.

First of all, we live in disruptive times. Many truths of the past two decades have been severely challenged. We used to believe inflation was dead, that globalization was destiny and that war and pandemics were relics of the 1900s. Now we know differently. This doesn't necessarily mean that history is cyclical. In fact, as the late Swedish economist Axel Leijonhufvud pointed out, we must always rise above the instinct to believe that the past will repeat itself and be open to the fact that new, previously unseen things will happen in the future.

The technology investor Peter Thiel distinguishes between two kinds of trends - horizontal, where already invented things spread around the world (i.e., globalization), and vertical, where we can do new things (i.e., technological progress). Thiel points out that the global economy has been too good at the former (China copying the American way of life) and not good enough at the latter (Technological progress has slowed down). This is a cynical conclusion but valuable if we want to remind ourselves that the future used to be a place of radical, deep optimism. I remember growing up believing we would live on Mars by 2023 and have flying cars and super-cheap energy. Instead, we have face masks, war, and climate change.

So, step one on a futurological journey should always be to inject yourself with some liquid optimism in order to have a joyous thrill of the unknown (not just regurgitate news headlines of potential disasters).

Secondly, if the future is a place of change - where things are not like they are today - we must choose whether we want to compete or create.

We live in a world that loves competition. Education is competitive - from grades to what school you can get into and what job/salary you can get after graduation. Nations are often described in terms of competitiveness, and frequent flyer programs will reward you with either gold, silver, or bronze, depending on how much you fly. It's a race of winners and losers.

Creation is about bringing something new, previously unknown, into this world. It could be an art movement like the Modernists did in the early 20th century. It could be a new way of viewing the universe, like Copernicus. Or a radically different way of explaining illness, poverty, or the role of women in society. Creation is not zero-sum but subversive and tends to make enemies for those who try to create (google Ignaz Semmelweis if you want to learn about the struggles creation can bring).

In other words, most people will choose to compete, not create, in life.

But if we want a different future, maybe even better than today, we will need more creators.

This brings me to my third point, what it takes to create, not just compete.

There are hundreds of books about how to compete in sports and business but relatively few about creation (please note that creation is not just the same as creativity. Creation takes courage and vision. Creativity only requires red wine and post-it notes).

This is why I have spent the last couple of years gathering insights about the alchemy of creation. The list has the potential to be endless, but for the sake of simplicity, I focus on six tools to get you on your way.

1. Look Elsewhere: If everybody reads X, you should read Y. If everybody thinks a certain way, try to think the opposite to see where the intellectual path leads you.
2. Experiment: If we cannot predict the future, we must fail cheaply and often. Experimentation is a way to try things out without going bankrupt or getting yourself killed. Every insight begins with an experiment.
3. Dance with Rules: Rules are the scar tissue of society; they are there to remind you that something was once tried but did not work. So instead of the meaningless Silicon Valley credo of breaking the rules, find a way to dance with them. Bend them, don't break them.
4. Embrace humility (i.e., Say "I am a loser!" to yourself every day): Nokia's former chairman Risto Siilasmaa said it well: "Success is toxic!" Pablo Picasso elaborated: "Success is dangerous because you start copying yourself." In other words, start each day by adopting the amateur's mindset. If you say you're a loser, it will make you open-minded and curious instead of arrogant and toxic.
5. Seek Creative Friction: If you add coal to iron, you get steel. Make sure you find coal people and coal ideas to generate friction in your creation. Fleetwood Mac fought all the time, but Rumours became timeless. The US is polarized and conflict-driven, but it is also the most dynamic economy in the world. Fight and argue more to create steel ideas.
6. Survive Three Sorrows! Most things fail, especially in the short run. Find a way to be tenacious and patient. We overestimate what we can get done in a year but underestimate what we can get done in a decade. Recycle failures to find long-term future success. Yes, I do believe the potential in cryptocurrencies and blockchain technology is fantastic in the long run now that they've all collapsed.

I am excited to see what things and ideas you can create with these tools. Switzerland is a marvelous country and has shown time and time again its resilience, its power to rethink and renew and its ability to attract the best people from around the world. It was a pleasure to meet you and I hope our paths will cross again. I will close with Dag Hammarskjöld's moving words:

To all that has been - Thank you!

To all that is to come- Yes!

All the best.

Magnus