



Using The Power of Certainty to Drive Growth in an Uncertain World

By Daniel Burrus

In my latest book *Flash Foresight*, I share seven principles that can make invisible opportunities visible and one of my favorite principles is using the power of certainty.

In times of unprecedented change and uncertainty, we need to ask ourselves what are we certain about? Strategies based on uncertainty and hope equal high levels of risk. Strategies based on certainty dramatically reduce risk and produce superior results.

Let me give you some examples of certainty. As I write this article it is winter in the northern hemisphere. Next will be spring followed by summer and yes I am certain of that! Why? There is a science of cycles. There are over 300 known cycles - business cycles, biological cycles, weather cycles – that allow you to accurately anticipate the future.

Frankly, you understand cyclical change and use it often even if you are not consciously aware of it. Some use it better than others. Warren Buffet is a master of cyclical change buying when the stock market is down and when everyone else is selling, knowing that the market will go back up.

In today's technology driven world of accelerated change, it is now important to understand another type of change because if you don't notice it, your job, your business, and even the industry you are in can vanish in a short time leaving you holding the bag. I call it Linear Change, once this type of change happens, you will not go back. For example, when you get a smart phone, you will not go back to a dumb phone. When people in China park their bicycles and get a car, they will not go back to the bicycle. When people in India get refrigeration for their home, they will not go back. These are examples of one way, non-cyclical changes that are quite profound in their impact.

When is the last time you purchased something from Polaroid? Weren't they in the instant photography business? Isn't that what digital photography is – instant photography? Did someone hide digital technology from the company?

Looking at the last five years, what did GM, Lehman Brothers and all the millions of speculative homebuyers have in common? Four words – Didn't See It Coming. Yet now in hindsight, all the signs were there in plain sight long before the fall. Hindsight only brings lament. You can never go back and change your past decisions and actions.

What if you could predict the challenges your organization will face and stop them from occurring? Short of having a reliable crystal ball, most people believe that's impossible. In reality, you *can* solve tomorrow's problems...today. It's all a matter of learning how to identify the things you can be certain about. The following points will help you understand the power of certainty and use it to solve tomorrow's problems before they occur so you can see the new opportunities change brings.

Hard Trends

People don't believe forecasts based on trends because they don't trust trends. We think trends are like fads: here today, but for who knows how long? "Trends," we say with a shrug. "Hey, sometimes they work out, sometimes they don't. It's a crapshoot."

But it's not a crapshoot. The reason we typically don't trust trends is that we haven't learned how to make the distinction between what I call *hard trends* and *soft trends*.

A hard trend is a projection based on measurable, tangible, and fully predictable facts, events, or objects. A soft trend is a projection based on statistics that have the *appearance* of being tangible, fully predictable facts. A hard trend is something that *will* happen: a future *fact*. A soft trend is something that *might* happen: a future *maybe*. If you don't like a hard trend, too bad, you can't change it. If you don't like a soft trend, change it to your advantage. Both have value when separated!

This distinction completely changes how we view the future. Once we know the difference between hard trends and soft trends, we know where to find certainty—and the future suddenly becomes visible.

For example, let's look at the three hard trends that are principally responsible for today's dizzying rate of technological change.

Three Drivers of Our Accelerating Future

There is a law that has far more important impact on your company's future than any tax code, environmental regulation or health insurance legislation. It's called Moore's law.

Originally coined to describe the rate of increase of number of transistors that could be packed onto an integrated circuit, Moore's Law has come to describe the fact that computer processing power doubles about every eighteen months.

In English: our intelligent devices are going to grow more and more powerful and intelligent. Today's typical smart phone packs more raw computing power under the hood than an Apollo rocket from the 1970s. That power-doubling trend forms a geometric curve that is just now hitting escape velocity.

There are two more such digital accelerators I first identified in 1983, both more powerful still. *Digital bandwidth* is increasing even faster than processing power in its passage from copper wire to fiber optics to new wireless networks. And *digital storage* capacity, both in your device as well as in the cloud, are surging ahead faster still. Leaps in photonics, crystal holography and nanotechnology are creating an explosion in fully searchable storage capacity with upward limits that defy comprehension.

The impact of these three accelerators—the enormous gains in power, miniaturization, product intelligence, interconnectivity, cloud services, mobility and a raft of other technological dimensions—will be felt in every industry, every corner of the globe, and every nook and cranny of society.

Those who see the predictable disruptions and opportunities coming will thrive; those who don't will experience disruption and even collapse.

Examples? Back in the 1990s, while these three technological trends were making inevitable the rapid shift from analog to digital, Kodak (cameras) and Motorola (phones) both tried to hold onto the status quo. You know what happened. Blockbuster didn't act on the leap to online video; Netflix did. The major record labels did not anticipate the power of online audio; iTunes did. YouTube claims more viewer-eyeball-minutes per day than the ten top shows on the Big Four television networks. The list goes on.

Anticipate and flourish; entrench and die.

Stop, Look and Listen

You know the old sign by the railroad tracks: Stop, Look Listen. It's great advice for your organization.

Stop: As change accelerates and the pressure to keep up intensifies, the natural tendency is to try to speed up with it. But that strategy won't work. Rather than try to speed up even more, we need to slow down, stop, and think.

Put aside all your current problems for a moment. Make the decision to devote a little time, on a regular basis, to become an anticipatory organization.

Look: Make a list of Cyclical and Linear changes you can see and ask yourself this question: "What are the problems I'm about to have?" What are the problems you are not having today, but will have in the next three to six months? The next one to three years? *Those* are the problems you need to solve.

Shift your focus from solving only today's problems to solving tomorrow's problems before they happen, so that you never have them in the first place. That is the only way you can possibly get ahead of the curve.

Listen: What is certainty telling you about those future problems and ways you might approach them? Listen to clues that might be lying just outside your range of vision. As you learn more about how to use certainty and foresight, solutions will start to appear to you almost the moment you look for them.

When I talk with clients about becoming anticipatory, they often say, "That sounds fascinating—but we don't have time to sit around thinking about three years from now. We're too busy dealing with what's on our plates right now!"

Of course they're too busy. We're all too busy. There will never be a time when we're *not* too busy—which is exactly why most of us keep flailing about in our uncertainties.

Practically speaking, nobody *has* time to explore the future. The only way it will happen is if you *make* time for it. Make an appointment; put it on the calendar. Start by taking one hour per week of your time. List the hard trends, the certainties you can count on and an opportunity each represents. You will find it to be time well spent!