A CONVERSATION WITH DANIEL BURRUS

AUTHOR OF *FLASH FORESIGHT: HOW TO SEE THE INVISIBLE AND DO THE IMPOSSOBLE*

1. We are all familiar with hunches or gut instincts about the future, but what is "flash foresight"?

Flash Foresight is a sudden burst of insight about the future that produces a new and radically different way of doing something — crafting must-have products, creating high-demand services or building new businesses — that will open up invisible opportunities and solve seemingly impossible problems often before they happen.

2. Why is this skill necessary for business, especially today?

Government, business and education, not to mention millions of individuals in all professions, are faced with an increasingly uncertain future as they try to solve a growing list of seemingly impossible problems. Flash Foresight is a sudden grasp of a future certainty, opening up heretofore invisible opportunities and seeing solutions to seemingly impossible problems. This book shows how large organizations, small companies and individuals can use a simple method to trigger flash foresights whenever they are faced with uncertainty and a desire to leap ahead.

3. What's an example of a company that suffered for lack of flash foresight? What did they miss?

Polaroid's products were designed to provide customers with instant photographs, yet they missed the digital revolution. Kodak failed for ten years missing the shift to digital. Yahoo! didn't see how to profit from search. AOL didn't see how to profit from digital content. Blockbuster Video failed to grasp the leap to online video. Newspapers, magazine and book publishers are failing to see how to profit from the shift to digital content distribution. Cable TV companies are failing to see how to profit from the shift to IPTV. The major record labels never saw iTunes coming—though if they had read Flash Foresight, they would have! Even the major TV networks are failing to grasp the shift to viewer interaction.

4. What's an example of a company that is succeeding with flash foresight and how did they do it?

Apple is a classic example, using the three digital accelerators — increasing storage, bandwidth and

processing power — to create new high-margin products and services. Amazon.com is of course another famous example. Volkswagen, Toyota, and Hyundai followed completely predictable trends that the American Big Three automakers completely missed. Kiva, Netflix and Crocs are a few others who are using the power of certainty and flash foresights to drive growth.

5. **What gives you credibility as an expert on this topic?**

My specialty as a technology futurist and innovation strategist is discovering "invisible" trends, and solving "impossible" problems by seeing "invisible" solutions. I've been doing this for over 25 years in my work with the world's leading corporations, entrepreneurs and global movers and shakers. To the amazement of my clients, I consistently provide them with flash foresights, allowing them to both see the future with certainty and clarity, and solve seemingly impossible problems, sometimes in minutes. Almost always, consulting clients, as well as thousands of audience members, would come up to me and say; "I wish I could think like you do, I wish I could learn to see the future and solve problems like you." The teacher in me wanted to know if what I was doing often taking in my mind almost reflexively, could be taught to others as a systematic process. I spent several years reverse-engineering this predictive and strategic process, laying it out in a systematic, easy-to-understand approach that anyone could follow and duplicate immediately. The result is my book, Flash Foresight.

6. **Why is it important to "Go Opposite" i.e., do the opposite of what my competitors are doing, when we have to assume that in perfectly competitive markets they have all the information we have?**

I don't like to compete in the traditional way. I don't like the odds. I don't want to do what my competition is already doing, I want to do what they've never thought of doing before. In the course of starting six successful companies, I've found that the best way to discover unseen opportunities is to look in the opposite direction from where your competitors are looking, and the entire industry for that matter. For example, if you are a small retailer, the only way to beat Walmart is to do the opposite of what they do – have better service and higher-end products.

7. **In the book, you state that "When you are operating out of hindsight, you never see it coming." By contrast, you argue that we should cultivate a "future view." Why is this important for companies and for problem solving in general?**

You cannot change the past, but you can shape the future based on the actions you take today. Understanding that how you view the future shapes how you act in the present, and how you act in the present shapes your future, it is vital to have an accurate view of what is both possible and certain when looking ahead.

8. **Why is it crucial to know the difference between soft vs. hard trends when it comes to forecasting the future? And can you include an example or two?**

Soft trends might happen, hard trends will happen. Knowing what will happen next provides a powerful competitive weapon, as well as saving time and money. In 2000, the u.s. government was predicting a trillion-dollar surplus, a soft trend that didn't happen. Many state and local governments based their spending on that soft trend and are still paying for their costly mistake. Apple knew that increasing processing power, bandwidth and storage on mobile devices was a hard trend; they designed their forward-looking strategies around this trio of hard trends and profited greatly.

9. **How has the ability to tap into flash foresight helped you in the course of your career? Could you share some examples?**

As I was writing the book, which was the bottom of the global recession, I started a new business using all seven principles. One week after launching the first products, we were featured in the Wall Street Journal as we disrupted an industry and established ourselves as a national leader. Over the past thirty years, I have started six companies; three were national leaders in the first year and all were profitable in the first year using the seven principles, so they are time-tested principles.

10. **What are some examples in the news of companies that could benefit from flash foresight?**

Hospitals, school systems, newspaper, magazine and book publishers, local and state governments are all good examples of organizations that are facing seemingly impossible challenges that could find solutions and new opportunities using the seven principles of flash foresight. Energy companies and health care delivery are two huge industries that desperately need flash foresight. The debate over health care is mostly about who pays for it — but what we need to be radically transforming is the it itself! I go into this at some length in the book, because it's so important today.

11. **Outside of corporate contexts, how can flash foresight be used by governments or nonprofits to solve social problems? Do you see any evidence of the successful use of flash foresights in these areas?**

Governments and non-profits all face seemingly impossible challenges, such as funding needed projects. Flash foresight provides seven powerful tools to see new opportunities for funding and growth. One example was a school district facing budget cuts, which used processor-sharing to turn all of their PCs after hours into a supercomputer for a drug company, generating needed capital. In the book I also look extensively at education and how it could benefit, even be transformed, by the application of flash foresight.

12. **The idea that technology can serve as a time-saver has been around forever. What are you saying that's new?**

Corporate America, as well as education America, healthcare America, and all the other different parts of America, are mostly doing all the same thing with new tools that they did before with the old tools, except they're doing it a little faster. In the meantime, we're wondering why we can't win, why our economy is in trouble. It's time to change the way we think about the future and how to use technology as tools to create new products, services, markets and careers.

13. **Thanks to the economic crisis and global recession in 2009, many companies have been using technology to downsize and streamline themselves as never before. How can you create jobs in a downsized world?**

Technology can be used to eliminate jobs in an effort to be more efficient and reduce overhead. Flash Foresight shows the reader how to use technology-driven trends to create jobs by creating the new products and services that will drive our economy forward.

14. **Can you elaborate on the concept of tomorrow labs? How can it help both individuals and organizations solve problems?**

We all spend too much time managing crisis and putting out fires. In a world of transformational change, it is imperative to have a small group within the organization freed to dedicate consistent periods of time to focus on creating the future products and services of the organization. We can't leave this to our "spare time," because nobody has any! The only way it will happen, the only way we can actually look into the future and shape our future with intentionality, is if we actually book it into our schedules and prioritize it with blocked-out appointments.

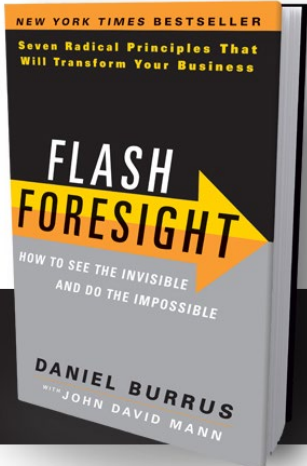**15.** **Why do you say we should take our biggest problem and skip it?**

The problem you're having trouble solving is the wrong problem — that's why you haven't solved it yet. They only way to find the real problem is to skip the one you think you have. You need to learn how to peel back the layers, like peeling an onion, through deliberate inquiry, until you identify the correct problem and underlying opportunity.

16. **What new trends are you predicting might be on the horizon that smart businesses can profit from?**

Technology will transform how we sell, market, communicate, collaborate, educate, train, and innovate in a short and predictable amount of time. All businesses do all of these activities, and if they are merely changing, they will fail. The continuing increase in what I call the "eight pathways of technological advancement" — dematerialization, virtualization, mobility, product intelligence, networking, interactivity, globalization, and convergence — along with the accelerating increase in processing power, storage and bandwidth, will totally transform the landscape of business in the coming years. Web 2.0 will rapidly make way for Web 3.0 and Web 4.0, both of which I describe in the book, and those who see this coming will be positioned to profit enormously.

17. **What are some quick and simple steps we can start taking tomorrow to put Flash Foresight principles to work for our own business?**

In a world filled with unprecedented uncertainty, ask yourself, what are you certain about? There are over 300 known cycles that allow you to accurately anticipate the future: after winter is spring, after a recession is a recovery. Linear change, by contrast, is one-way: processing power is getting ever faster, bandwidth capacity is growing steadily. Yet these trends are just as predictable as cyclic changes: once we have smartphones with GPs and wireless web, we're not going back. If you take the time you look, you can pretty readily see what kind of impact just these three digital trends (increasing processing power, bandwidth and storage) are going to have on your business, your field, your profession or your company. Starting with those insights, and using some of the seven "triggers" I describe in the book — go opposite, take your biggest problem and skip it, and the others — and you can pretty quickly learn to generate accurate and powerful flash foresights that uncover hidden opportunities for your own business.