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## Compass: Taking Charge of Tomorrow

By Jim Ware and Charlie Grantham

“The best way to predict the future is to create it.”

That insight has been variously attributed to Peter Drucker, to Alan Kay, and to Eric Hoffer. No matter who said it first, it's an important insight that bears repeating almost daily as we enter 2009.

We and most futurists prattle on endlessly about how uncertain the future is – but never in our memory has that been more true than it is now. We're all painfully aware that the U.S. economy has now been officially in a recession for more than a year. The stock market lost 38.5% of its value in 2008, the worst decline in 70 years; the official unemployment rate in December was 7.2%; and the United States lost more than 2.6 million jobs during 2008.

That's depressing, to say the least. All eyes are now focused on the Obama Administration's economic stimulus package, expected to be enacted within days of the January 20 Inauguration. But no matter how aggressive and bold the stimulus is, we all know it will be months before the things even begin to feel better again.

What can you do in the meantime? Whether you are an executive or employee of a large organization, or on your own as a “free agent” or small business owner, you are probably feeling very nearly powerless right now – and you're deeply worried about the future, even if you have a viable mortgage and don't feel in danger of losing your home.

Well, here's some advice that may feel like a Pollyanna-ish, naïve pep talk but we actually believe is a basic survival guide for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In a few words: Take charge of your business and your future. ***Don't worry about predicting what's going to happen*** – instead, ***make*** things happen.

We spent much of the last two weeks of 2008 taking stock of where we've been, where we are, and where we want to go. It may not be logical or rational, but we actually feel incredibly optimistic. Here's why: we know what we want and where we want to go, and we have a plan for getting there.

Of course, just having a plan doesn't guarantee it will succeed. But we feel much more confident now than we did even a month ago. We've clarified our vision, defined our mission, set out clear, measurable objective, and selected several key actions that we think will move us forward.

So, at the risk of sounding a little too syrupy and feel-good, and in the spirit of New Year's Resolutions, we want to share with you a few key ideas we guarantee will help you take charge of your future.

### **1. Know where you are**

As our good friend Bruce Rogow once observed, "If you want to go to Los Angeles, it helps to know whether you are in Honolulu or New York." Get very clear about your current situation (products, customers, reputation, cash flow, money in the bank, human capital, fixed costs, long-term commitments, skills and capabilities) before you set out performance goals that could be either pie in the sky or ridiculously mundane if they aren't based in your current reality.

### **2. Invest in agility**

We're convinced there *is* one thing that's actually very certain about the future: it's going to be chaotic, dynamic, and volatile. As we've argued for years (see [Corporate Agility](#), for example), in that kind of unpredictable world you need as much agility as you can generate. That means shedding as many fixed costs and long-term commitments as possible. You need to be able to move quickly, growing in some geographies at the same time you're shrinking in others, and grabbing the talent you need instantly rather than launching a six-month recruiting effort. You need multiple, "loose" relationships with a network of talented people, not long-term employment contracts.

### **3. Spend a day in the life of your customers**

The best way to focus your business is to understand the value propositions of your customers – and, even more importantly, to know in real depth what challenges they facing in meeting *their* customers' needs. You know instinctively that your business is part of an extended value chain, so the best way to be an essential link in that chain is to crawl up it one or two links. If you can speak your customers' language (and demonstrate that you also understand *their* customers' needs) you will be far more effective at demonstrating your own value.

### **4. Build scenarios describing your possible futures**

That's not a typo; we deliberately said "futures," in the plural. When we can't predict "the future" with any certainty, we need to consider the full range of what *could*, or might, happen. We are devotees of Peter Schwartz and his former colleagues at Shell Oil, who invented scenario planning. Scenarios are a powerful way of telling stories about the futures that you may someday face. Their most powerful effect is helping you know what early signals to look for that will tell you whether "Future A" or "Future B" is beginning to unfold. For more detail, see our white papers "[Scenario Planning: A Primer](#)" and "[Building a Strategic Playbook](#)."

### **5. Create a One-Page Business Plan**

That's not as easy as it might sound. Remember that old adage, "If I had more time I would have written a shorter letter."? It actually takes a great deal of time – and thought

– to get your vision, mission, strategy, and plans compressed onto one page. But what a wonderful exercise it is to do just that. We owe this insight to our good friend **Jim Horan**, founder of the – what else? – [One Page Business Plan Company](#). Jim is a former CFO and the current leader of a powerful movement to simplify the process of generating business plans – and, more importantly, using them as living “maps” for the journey of realizing your goals.

So there you are – five steps to an optimistic future. And if you only have the time or energy to do one thing this month, **build a one-page plan**. We’re convinced it’s the single most important first step on your personal path to success.

[Please send your comments directly to us](#), or post a comment on the blog version of this article. We look forward to learning from you.

### **About the Work Design Collaborative and *Future of Work Agenda***

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