MOST DISCUSSION OF TRANSFORMATION, personal or corporate, centers on the how. Whether it is the newest self-help writing—five, 10, 28, or 30 days to a new you—or the marathon runner and retired US Navy SEAL David Goggins speaking on the gritty reality of personal growth, the focus is mostly on the action of change toward a goal of transformation. There is truth in this. Simply putting one foot in front of the other each day in the general direction of better, will, more often than not, get the job done.

But there is a step before the how, and that step is awareness of the models we are using to frame the goal—the selection of which can help us imagine new possibilities before we've even begun. Leaders still need to put one foot in front of the other, but we can be more thoughtful in mapping our course.

Fortunately, we have ample research and thinking on this, from psychologists Gerald and Lindsay Zaltman in their book *Marketing Metaphoria* and from breakthrough futurist James Dator.

ZALTMANS' DEEP METAPHORS

The father-and-son team of Gerald and Lindsay Zaltman found in their research that all humans reference seven "deep metaphors" when thinking. Across thousands of in-depth interviews spanning more than 30 countries, the Zaltmans discovered that we all use these same seven frames to make sense of daily life, age-old observations about the world that act as intellectual shortcuts, heuristics, for considering problems big and small.

You use these deep metaphors every day without knowing it. They are *journey, balance, container, connection, resource, control* and *transformation*. If you think about your organization embarking on a great adventure and moving along a path with ups and downs, you are using the deep metaphor of *journey*. If you worry about asymmetry between short- and long-term incentives for managers, then you are using the deep metaphor of *balance*. If you frequently explain a situation your organization faces in terms of the industry it is in, then you are using the deep metaphor of *container*. Your organization's annual employee survey points to low scores for belonging? Then you are using the deep metaphor of *connection*. Diligently plowing through the financials, trying to find enough savings for a big marketing push, you are using the deep metaphor of *resource*. If you are frustrated by the lack of compliance with a new training program and pounding out a staff email about it, you are using

CHANGING the VIEW

Research shows that by changing our thinking, we can move from entrenched behaviors and invite positive transformation. By Brunswick's **ROBERT MORAN.**

the deep metaphor of *control*. If you are imagining your organization moving toward something new and novel, then you are using the deep metaphor of *transformation*.

Identifying the deep metaphor we are using to frame a business problem is the first step toward considering alternative frames. What if we spend too much time as leaders in the deep metaphors of container, resource and control, and not enough time in the deep metaphor of transformation? Knowing the frame we are locked in is an important first step to choosing a better one.

Let's use the deep metaphor of container and the business of baseball as an example. Billy Beane, when he was general manager of the Oakland A's, could have accepted a container frame for identifying and

developing player talent through the traditional scouting and "farm" system. Instead, as described in the bestseller *Moneyball*, he turned to transformation and analytics, completely redefining the statistics used to compare players and thus giving his team, with its limited budget, its best advantage. The transformation resulted in the A's being competitive against the most well-funded teams in the league.

Similarly, Jesse Cole, co-owner of the upstart Savannah Bananas, an exhibition baseball team that plays with enhanced showmanship, could have defined his business in traditional athletic terms—a container metaphor. Instead, he chose transformation and defined his business as entertainment, not sport. That framing has allowed the Savannah Bananas to sell out every game since their rebranding in 2016. Both offer important lessons in redefining what many observers considered a sport in decline.

Consciously choosing transformation can help not just reinvent businesses, but invent entire new industries, an outlook described by authors W. Chan Kim and Renee Mauborgne in their book *Blue Ocean Strategy*. By looking for the "blue oceans"—areas of operation that are overlooked by the majority—business leaders can establish a new future on their own terms.

DATOR'S FOUR FUTURES

The Zaltmans identified ways we think about the present. James Dator, a noted futurist and former University of Hawaii professor famous for foundational thinking in foresight and idea generation, has identified ways all humans frame the future.

Dator's research found that all humans conceptualize a future as one of four frames: *continuation*; *limits and discipline*; *decline and collapse;* and *transformation*. If you generally think about your enterprise on a gentle, upward trajectory, then you are using the continuation frame. If you are focused on surviving economic headwinds through tight expense control and operational efficiency, then your vision of the future is limits and discipline. If you plan to wind down a lagging business line, then your frame for that business is decline and collapse. But, you could consider a transformation future in each of the preceding scenarios.

At the end of World War I, for example, everyone believed that the future of naval warfare was the "dreadnought"—fearsome metal battleships with long range guns. They were using the limits and discipline frame, determined to do everything necessary to adapt to the new conditions. World War I flying ace Billy Mitchell, on the other hand, was

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convinced that air power would eclipse the dreadnought. In 1921 he proved, to the extreme embarrassment of the US Navy, that aerial bombing could sink a battleship. Unfortunately for Mitchell, his reward for envisioning transformed naval combat was demotion and ultimately a court-martial. But history vindicated Mitchell, and he is now considered the father of the US Air Force.

Dator's discovery helps us identify the model we often default to when we think about the futures of a thing like an organization and the possible alternatives. Do you tend to lean into continuation when you think about the future? Or do you tend to catastrophize and thereby fall into the decline-and-collapse framework?

More importantly, how often do you apply a transformation frame? Leaders can ask how a business unit could be redesigned. They can ask what a novel new approach to that business unit would look like. They can ask how it could be transformed.

MENTAL MODELS

One inspiring example of how we can apply the Zaltman and Dator models to reevaluate and reimagine our own tendencies can be found in science fiction. You may have noticed that a large number of the most popular science fiction stories are dystopian. These can serve as warnings to us, but they also threaten to lock us in a doom loop.

Concerned writers created Project Hieroglyph, which encourages science fiction writers to move from catastrophe to "benestrophe"—positive upheavals, with scenarios in which the characters solve problems and improve their environment. They hope that these transformational stories will give readers more hopeful "memories of the future" and a greater sense of agency.

To the degree that sci-fi shapes our expectations as a society, Project Hieroglyph is doing more than just changing the narrative. They are encouraging a more optimistic, constructive view of the present—and in doing so, they are quite possibly creating a better future.

RIDICULOUS THOUGHTS

Dator is best known for the maxim that "any useful idea about the future should appear to be ridiculous." This is a warning and a yardstick for transformative thinking. Transformative thinking will challenge convention and may require thicker skin and an acceptance of sharp criticism. Moreover, you're not fully in transformative territory unless it appears at least a little ridiculous. ◆