

## Thinking in three horizons

*“In processes of social transformation, societies move from a relatively stable state through a zone of disruption to a new zone of relative stability. Something old must come apart in order for something new to come together.” Donald Schon*

### The big idea

Thinking in three horizons encourages you to go beyond the usual focus on fixing problems in the present. It is an approach that connects the present with desired futures and also identifies some of the disruptions which might occur in moving towards your future vision. It first emerged in the late nineties through the work of Baghai, Coley and White (1999) and has been developed by a range of practitioners (Curry & Hodgson, 2008) since, notably the [International Futures Forum](#) in Scotland.

### Purpose

The purpose of the model is to encourage you to think about the future of your business and to recognise signals about that future in the present. It is unusual as a future thinking tool in that neither the dominant view of the present nor the emerging view of the future is privileged. It also recognises the transition space in between where viewpoints, values and assumptions are often tested. The model stimulates discussion around:

- The present position and challenges that the business faces. It establishes a case for change (horizon 1)
- Your desired future state (horizon 3)
- The tensions that might occur between moving from the present position to that desired state (horizon 2)
- Signs of change in the present position, which give encouragement about moving towards the desired future state (horizon 3 in horizon 1)

## The tool

To use the three horizons approach, you can work through a number of steps:

1. If you are working on your own, print off the attached template. If you are with a group, you can use flip chart pages to represent each of the horizons; put these around the room
2. Think about the issues and environmental factors that your business is facing now. Record your thoughts
3. Set your timeframe and consider plausible future states. This can be done through brainstorming with post-its or you can combine it with another technique such as future perfect (a tool also included in this stage). Record your results
4. Now look at the horizon 2 space and think about what issues might arise as you move towards your desired future state. Record your results
5. Look back across the three horizons you have filled in, think about what might be happening in the present that could move you towards your desired future state. What signals are there in what you are doing now that you can start to make changes? Record your findings
6. Check your findings against existing strategies or plans. Develop an action plan based on the issues raised by your desired future direction

## Take the next step

Try a personal three horizons map. What are your plausible desired futures? What are your current issues? What might you need to do to achieve your possible future? Which position in time do you feel most comfortable working with? What does that tell you about the way you plan?

## Top tips

- Try using symbols or drawings rather than words when you look at each horizon. You may find it opens up your ideas
- People tend to have a particular time preference so don't worry if you get stuck for ideas at a certain point. Try some different creative-thinking techniques if the ideas dry up
- Keep the horizon 3 views plausible
- Remember that horizon 2 is the zone of transition so don't be alarmed if there are differences of opinion about the changes it might contain

## References

Baghai, M., Coley, S., & White, D. (1999). *The Alchemy of Growth*. New York: Perseus.

Curry, A., & Hodgson, A. (2008). Seeing in Multiple Horizons: Connecting Futures to Strategy. *Journal of Futures Studies*, 13(1), 1-20.

Strategic fit

