

The future orientation of foresters: An exploratory research among Dutch foresters into the prerequisite for strategic planning in forestry

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Abstract

The importance of strategic planning as an instrument to cope with the uncertain future has been long recognized, especially in forestry which is characterized by its relationship with the distant future. Surprisingly, the question to what extent the future is indeed considered in forestry decision-making has received only limited attention. It is therefore the objective of this paper to explore empirically foresters' relation with time (called time perspectives), and more specifically their future orientation, as a basic prerequisite for strategic planning in forestry. In a case study approach, Dutch foresters were questioned with Cottle's Circles Test on the role of the future in their decision-making and the extent to which their planning is merely an extrapolation of past experiences and/or the perception of present conditions. The results indicate a strong future orientation of (Dutch) foresters in planning and decision-making. This allows for strategic planning in a truly entrepreneurial style with uncertainty being interpreted as a valuable resource. However, the results also show that this future orientation is constantly contested by the importance which foresters are assigning to the 'past' for learning. © 2007 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

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“Ihr seid groß, ihr wirket unbekannt, unbelohnt, frei von des Egoismus Tyrannei, und euren stillen Fleißes Früchte reifen der späten Nachwelt noch”

Friedrich von Schiller (German poet, dramatist, philosopher and historian, 1759–1805)

1. Introduction

Strategic planning is a necessity for every business organization independent of the nature of the business activity. Likewise in forestry, the notion of strategic (or long-range) planning is widely known with origins that can be traced back to 18th and 19th century in Central Europe when, with increasing demands on wood, con-

cerns about the wood supply for future generations came to the fore (Speidel, 1972: 15; Convery, 1973: 27; Martell et al., 1998: 3).

Generally, strategic planning is interpreted as an active and conscious anticipation of the future (Oesten and Roeder, 2002: 53). Although the future is per definition unpredictable, this does not prevent managers from realising the necessity of holding a vision about what the future should hold when making a decision (Wilson, 1992; Weick 1995). Strategic planning thus means “looking into or ‘grasping’ the future” (Das, 1991: 53) and making “present decisions with knowledge of their futurity” (Drucker, 1972: 13).

Consequently, there is an important link between strategic planning and the individual time perspective. The concept of time perspective refers to “the [] process whereby individuals and cultures assign the flow of personal and social experiences into the temporal categories of past, present or future, that help to give order, coherence and meaning to those events” (Zimbardo et al., 1997: 1008; Epel et al., 1999: 577; Zimbardo and Boyd, 1999: 1271). People have different ways of relating to the three time zones (past, present, future), which result in

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different decisions (Stinson, 1986: 36). The relevance and utility of the concept of time perspectives for strategic planning lies in the fact that only a clear future orientation in individual's time perspectives brings an added value to the risk-taking strategic decisions as opposed to mundane continuations of the past and the present (Das, 1991: 53). The strategic planning of past- or present-oriented managers tends to be defensive, including (1) a passive awaiting of what can occur, (2) withdrawing from risky, open and constructive activities, (3) keeping to routine ways and tested methods of dealing with situations encountered in life and (4) undertaking activities in order to preserve the status quo rather than taking risks to increase present opportunities (Zaleski, 1996: 169). However, such strategic planning as a mere extrapolation of the past and/or the present, with the possible inclusion of some short-term visualizations held by managers (Das, 1987: 207), is not only wasteful but dangerous for the future survival of the organization: it gives managers false reassurance of (non-existent) certainty and stability, and severely restricts the flexibility of the organization to adapt to fast-changing circumstances (Eilon, 1980: 128).

The most significant and distinctive characteristic of forestry is the length of the production process — which is not approached by any other industrial or agricultural production process (Zivnuska, 1975: 18; Williams, 1981: 1; Oesten and Roeder, 2002: 137; Sagl, 2005: 71). Consequently, the way how foresters handle an undertaking that spans several generations (Convery, 1973: 27) has traditionally occupied an important place in forestry. The forestry sector even developed its own specific decision-making instruments to cope with the future; some already in the first half of the 19th century like for example the Normal Forest model ('Normalwaldmodell') (Hundeshagen, 1826 and the Faustmann formula (Faustmann, 1849). It is therefore not surprising that the future time and the tenets to deal with the future time (as for example the sustained yield doctrine) form an important part of forestry's cultural system (Duerr and Duerr, 1975: 33–35).

But although commonly acknowledged to be an important variable, the future is also generally considered to be an uncontested variable that is addressed almost entirely in mechanistic and quantitative terms: time horizons, for example, are for the greater part fixed (e.g. more than 20 years (Speidel, 1972: 19), 50 years (Kangas and Kangas, 2005: 134) or 100 years (Andersson, 2005: 8)) and based on criteria as the production period (rotation) of trees (Speidel, 1972: 95–96; Andersson, 2005: 8), the transaction costs of formulating a plan (Speidel, 1972: 95–96; Friedmann and Segev, 1976: 87) and the rate of interest (Duerr, 1960: 225; Friedmann and Segev, 1976: 87). Approaches interpreting the future as a behavioural and qualitative variable have been lacking in forestry. Consequently, the time perspectives – or, more precisely, the future orientation – of foresters as a prerequisite for strategic management has not (at all) been questioned (Convery and Ralston, 1977: 55).

However, during the last decades doubts have arisen about the lack of reflection in implementing long-range planning techniques and instruments in forestry (Convery, 1973: 28; Olson, 1977: 42; Price, 1989; Borchers, 2005). Several authors observed that, due to the range of uncontrollable and unpredictable factors operating in

the future, decision-making in forestry largely excludes uncertainty and surprise, even when it is known that a situation is uncertain (Davis and Johnson, 1987: 197–198; Price, 1989: 112; Borchers, 2005). Others noticed that the future is often considered to be a very static one, based on the aim to keep the forest more or less similar over time – as for example in the sustained yield approach – (Duerr and Duerr, 1975; Glück, 1987), even when growth and change might ask for other approaches (Duerr and Duerr, 1975: 38). Olson (1977: 42) even talks about the mirage of long-range planning, the nature of the illusion: "Arising from a fear of depletion – an expected future without "planning" – the "planned" future is a forest beyond the horizon, beyond the dazzling expanse of desert".

With these doubts, the future orientation of foresters has also become increasingly contested. Nevertheless, none of these criticisms have been made on empirical grounds. To date, the only study investigating the role of time in forestry on an empirical basis is the study of Kramer (2000) indicating that the long-time horizons are not, or only to a limited extent, considered when making decisions in forest management. The conceptual focus of this study was however on the goal orientation of foresters (Kramer, 2000). The aim of this article is therefore to fill this empirical 'gap' by exploring foresters' time perspectives, and thus their future orientation as a basic prerequisite for strategic management in forestry.

Using a case study approach, Dutch foresters – encountering a magnitude of far reaching changes in the natural, social and political environments in recent years (Schanz and Maas, 2004) – were questioned on what role the future (still) plays in their decision-making and to what extent their planning is solely based on past experiences and/or the perception of present conditions.

2. Measuring time perspectives

As mentioned above, the concept of time perspective refers to the manner in which individuals and cultures partition the flow of human experience into the distinct temporal categories of past, present, and future (Zimbardo et al., 1997: 1008). However, any empirical determination of time perspectives is faced with a severe difficulty. As Kasakos (1971: 24) has pointed out, quality and meaning of time perspectives can be interpreted in light of cognitive processes and reconstructed out of communication. Their direct, objective measurement, however, remains impossible. Instead, time perspectives can only be assessed and compared indirectly through auxiliary constructs.

Over the last decennia many such constructs have come into practice in the different fields of research in which the concept of time perspective is studied (e.g. psychology, sociology, anthropology). Examples of these constructs include the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) (Wohlford, 1966; Wohlford, 1969), the Experiential Inventory (Cottle, 1968; Cottle, 1971), the Circles Test (Cottle, 1967, 1976), the Motivation Induction Method (MIM) (Nuttin, 1964), and the Zimbardo Time Perspective Inventory (ZTPI) (Zimbardo and Boyd, 1999).

It is beyond the scope of this study to evaluate each method with regard to its reliability and validity as a measurement of time perspectives. The approach chosen in this study is the

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