

## Alvin Toffler and Walter Schaffir

Robert M. Randall

I have the privilege of honoring two members of the strategic management community – Alvin Toffler and Walter Schaffir—who supported *Strategy & Leadership* from its earliest days.

The media took full measure of the recent passing of Alvin Toffler, 87, the author of *Future Shock* and several other books that sought to interpret how the speed of technology innovation was changing society.[1] In a tribute titled “We Must Take up the Torch of Alvin Toffler” *The New York Times* noted, “as Mr. Toffler put it in *Future Shock*, ‘Change is avalanching upon our heads and most people are grotesquely unprepared to cope with it’.”[2] Credited by the *Times* as being the best known futurist in the world, S&L was privileged to have him as a member of the editorial board for some 40 years.

When I met him in the 1980s he told me a story that has, over many years, sustained my faith that insightful strategic management journalism can make a difference in the business world. As Toffler recounted to me, before he made a name for himself as a futurist, as a freelance assignment for AT&T he wrote a long whitepaper about the history and future of the company. To his surprise, after he turned the manuscript in, senior executives put his draft in a safe immediately after reading it. He heard rumors that over the next 10 years that it was taken out at board meetings and discussed and then returned to the safe. His *tour de force* whitepaper was in fact a strategic blueprint for reorganizing AT&T, one that the company eventually implemented, at the urging of the federal government.



The late Walter B. Schaffir, for many years the organizer of the Conference Board sessions on strategic management

It is fitting to also remember him with this quote from the introduction to *Future Shock*: “We who explore the future are like those ancient mapmakers, and it is in this spirit that the concept of future shock and the theory of the adaptive range are presented here – not as final word, but as a first approximation of the new realities, filled with danger and promise, created by the accelerative thrust.”[3]

We will also long remember Walter B. Schaffir, who died in July at the age of 95, a veteran consultant well known throughout the strategic planning community for organizing and directing the Conference Board’s strategic management conferences in New York, Los Angeles, London, Vienna and Hong Kong for many years. His consultancy Growth dynamics specialized in corporate planning and business strategy, and his advice to clients drew on his corporate experience first at Sperry Gyroscope as Director of Long-Range Planning, later as Director of Corporate Planning at Continental Copper & Steel Industries and as Assistant Vice President for Business Planning for Western Union.

In S&L's "Conference reports" columns our senior correspondents collected the insights of the talented speakers from industry and academia that Walter had recruited for his conferences. A sample of the ongoing dialog this relationship produced is his 2010 column for S&L in which Walter shared these personal observations about planning, strategy and leadership:[4]

I've been privileged to watch planning evolve over the past five decades. I've seen the various planning societies get formed, grow rapidly, and then struggle to evolve with the needs of practitioners, as evidenced by their many name changes—from long range planning to corporate planning, to strategic planning, to strategic management, to strategic leadership.

Old timers like me can remember the horrendous mistake many corporate managers and management consultants made in the 70s and 80s. They concluded naively that planning should be a staff specialty. As a result every respectable business created a position of director or vice-president of corporate or strategic planning, some with large staffs. These individuals – often some of the best and the brightest managers—assumed that it was their job to think about where the business might be heading and present ideas to their corporate and business unit management. The heads of the corporate units listened to (and sometimes ridiculed) these proposals and then went back to doing business as usual.

Equally fruitless was the subsequent attempt by planning managers to create a system of corporate/strategic planning by devising forms and procedures to elicit contributions from various elements of the organization that hopefully would add up to a corporate/strategic plan. These forms were then dutifully completed by each organizational unit. Such units often created a planning position of their own. Responses were then circulated for comments and review. This activity was often augmented by the corporate planning head visiting the business units and interviewing their senior managers. The net result: when the exercise was over everybody went back to doing business as usual.

This mechanical approach to corporate/strategic planning never worked. At best, it produced some good ideas that suffered from lack of implementation. Inevitably, it left the corporate planning manager out in the cold. I know. I was one of them. Even an all-star consultant called in to help often suffered a similar fate.

It finally dawned upon management and consultants that, to be meaningful and actionable, a strategic plan has to be owned by the management team that is to implement it. Up until this realization hit, many senior management teams had never joined around a table to discuss anything other than budgetary, production and personnel problems. In Peter Drucker's words, such discussions were usually about how to do things right, rather than doing the right thing – that is, about doing things more efficiently, rather than about moving in the best direction.

For planning to work, its underlying issues and options have to be surfaced, debated, and agreed upon to make things happen. Individual senior managers that had their own ideas about the direction and long term promise of the business needed to have them hammered out by the management team.

As managers struggled to put an end to two decades of all kinds of strategy rituals and rain dances and instead adopt a negotiated, team-based strategy, there emerged a new kind of management consultant. Rather than promote a particular managerial dogma, this consultant acted as the Socrates of management. By raising questions until there was a valid and actionable consensus, he or she encouraged client managers to come to their own conclusions. This put the onus on the members of the management team to identify, research and resolve the critical issues and to agree on an action plan for which each member of the management team assumed appropriate responsibility. Perhaps the most famous of these consultants was Peter Drucker, who insisted on rigorous answers to questions like, "If we weren't in this business, knowing what we know now, would we enter it?" Most importantly such consultants provided a methodology, a rational logic flow for taking a fresh look at the business and agreeing on an actionable strategy. Knowing the right questions to ask became the best practice, and largely replaced era of the all-knowing management gurus.

Enduring wisdom. The talented authors showcased in this issue continue the tradition of support for the strategic management community exemplified by Alvin Toffler and Walter Schaffir.

**Robert M. Randall**

*Editor*

### Notes

1. [www.nytimes.com/2016/06/30/books/alvin-toffler-author-of-future-shock-dies-at-87.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/30/books/alvin-toffler-author-of-future-shock-dies-at-87.html)
2. [www.nytimes.com/2016/07/07/technology/why-we-need-to-pick-up-alvin-tofflers-torch.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=second-column-region&region=top-news&WT.nav=top-news](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/07/technology/why-we-need-to-pick-up-alvin-tofflers-torch.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=second-column-region&region=top-news&WT.nav=top-news)
3. [www.nytimes.com/2016/06/30/books/alvin-toffler-author-of-future-shock-dies-at-87.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/30/books/alvin-toffler-author-of-future-shock-dies-at-87.html)
4. Schaffir, W.B. "A cynic's history of management and management consulting", *Strategy & Leadership*, Vol. 38, No. 3, 2010.

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