



More than years into the pandemic, what has the workplace revolution revealed? [From Day One's one-day conference](#) at Denver's Ellie Caulkins Opera House brought together leading thinkers and top executives in HR and related fields for a conversation about how organizations can build stronger bonds of trust with their workers and their communities. The speakers included leaders from Western Union, VF Corp., Vail Resorts, Medtronic, Hunter Douglas, and the City and County of Denver. Among the timely questions: How can companies stay true to their core values, and accountable to their stakeholders, while making enormous changes? Highlights from the conference:

How Future-Minded Leaders Overcome Uncertainty and Propel Innovation

By Rachel Walker Youngblade

In times of uncertainty, creative thinking helps us find new ways forward. But our brains typically respond to uncertainty as a threat, which narrows our focus, leads to more rigid thinking, and reduces our ability to adapt. So how do we overcome this natural response? Is it possible to teach ourselves a new way of thinking?

[BetterUp's](#) Scott Baker says it is. In a talk at From Day One's [Denver conference](#), Baker shared research that shows future-mindedness is a skill that can be learned.

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“Predicting the future is fraught with errors,” he said. “It leads to a lot of dead ends. And yet, on the other hand, it’s our dreams, our imagination, and our vision that drives and propels us forward.”

Instead of trying to predict the future, Baker said future-mindedness, or prospection as it’s called in psychology, is about preparing for multiple possible futures along with roadblocks and setbacks that may occur along the way. It’s more about keeping an open mind and balancing optimism and pragmatism than getting it exactly right.

Future-minded leaders show improved well-being and ability to manage uncertainty. [BetterUp’s research](#), conducted in partnership with the University of Pennsylvania, found decreases in anxiety and improvement in hopefulness, resilience, and life satisfaction. These leaders also had higher performing teams, showing improved agility, engagement, innovation, performance, resilience, and capacity for risk-taking.

The core skills future-minded leaders display are the ability to imagine outcomes, make plans to engage in those outcomes, set sensible goals, and show flexibility in their execution. Baker said it’s possible to develop these skills. BetterUp’s research revealed several ways to do so. Which is good, because 82 percent of people have significant room for improvement, according to the study.

To improve future-mindedness, start by removing the innate preference for our own ideas, called the innovator’s bias. To mitigate the innovator’s bias, Baker offered three exercises: trying on others’ shoes, mental time travel, and the floodlight question.

To try on others’ shoes, ask “How does this idea impact a seemingly unrelated population?” For mental time travel, think about what your idea will look like 100 years in the future. The most effective of the three tactics is the floodlight question: “What’s the worst case scenario?” This question helped leaders realize they could achieve their goal in different ways, but didn’t reduce enthusiasm for the original idea. “It’s this level of cognitive agility that it introduces in people when they start to envision the worst case scenario that opens up the aperture for what we call future-minded leadership,” Baker said.

So how do we build these tactics into our leadership practice? Begin by cultivating a practice of regularly envisioning the worst case scenario. Organizations can also add training on future-mindedness into leadership development programs and encourage diversity of thought as a best practice.

“One individual imagining worst case scenarios is going to have blind spots,” Baker said. “But if we have more individuals with diverse ideas, diverse backgrounds and diverse perspectives, we’re going to be able to take away what some of those blind spots are and be much better at imagining the range of possible outcomes that are out there.”

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Bio

[Rachel Youngblade](#) is a Denver, CO-based writer who covers creativity, leadership, growth and human-centered design. She produces a podcast for IDEO U, the online learning arm of global design company IDEO, featuring interviews with creative leaders.