

The Future You

Break Through the Fear
and Build the Life You Want

Brian David Johnson



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PUTTING THE FUTURE TO WORK

Quick Questions 1

QUESTION 1

What are your biggest fears about the future?

Let's kick things off with a simple brainstorm. I want you to tick off three or four future fears that keep you up at night. The fears might be related to job loss or the economy. Or maybe you're afraid of getting sick or that someone you love will fall ill. Or it could be the idea of growing old alone. Whichever fears come to mind first, jot them down and then move on to the next question.

FOLLOW-UP QUESTION:

- **Are there any small fears or worries that nag at you?**

What are the fears that hang around in your head during the day? These don't have to be big life-altering fears but the small stuff. Are you worried about getting out of shape? Are you spending too much time on technology?

QUESTION 2

What is the most recent prediction you've heard about the future?

As I talked about throughout this chapter, professional prognosticators are everywhere. Flip to the news and you'll quickly

be bombarded. If not from the lips of a TV pundit, maybe the last prediction you heard came from the guy on the treadmill next to you at the gym, talking about this or that sure thing in the stock market. If you've heard more than one prediction recently, so much the better.

FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS:

- **How did that prediction make you feel?**
- **What did it make you think about?**

Jot down a few words about how hearing these predictions made you feel. What did you see in your mind when you heard them? Did it change how you thought about the future? Was that a good thing or a bad thing? Why?

QUESTION 3

What is the furthest possible moment into the future that you can see?

The answer to this question will depend somewhat on your age. The younger you are, the further your future might extend, though you might still only be able to imagine life five or ten years out. Regardless, take a few minutes to imagine and describe the future that comes to mind. What kind of place are you in? Who are the people around you? What do you look

like? Details are critical to futurecasting, so the more specific you can be here, the better.

FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS:

- **What excites you about this far-off future?**
- **What worries you?**

This really is like trying a new workout routine: it requires muscles you probably aren't used to using. You might find it difficult. It might hurt, or at least annoy you a little, but it's worth it. Getting used to thinking about the future and articulating it is going to be a massively helpful tool for you to imagine, design, and reach your future.

Part 2: Talk About the Future

In this part of the exercise, I want you to pose these same questions to three other people in your life. Try for some diversity of age, gender, and background—maybe one friend, one relative, and one colleague. When you actively and intentionally seek answers from folks who may not share the same identity as you, you're looking for their innate answers, based on their personal experience. Someone who is from a different generation, someone whose skin color is different, someone who is a different gender, someone whose socio-economic status

is different—you can bet that their perspectives and answers can open up things you may not have considered on your own. When asking questions about the future, gaining these different points of view can bring new awareness and broaden your ideas.

Ask these people to write down their answers in an email or text, or take notes during a phone call or face-to-face. Either way, try to gather as many specific details as possible. If thinking about the future is going to be an important skill for you to get comfortable doing, then talking about the future is also essential. Remember, these are new exercises for the people you are talking to as well. They are not used to thinking about this. They might be uncomfortable. They might think it's silly. Bonus! This is a quick way for you to identify the unsupportive or toxic people in your life. These people could also become part of your team that helps you reach the future you are seeking.

Part 3: Reflect on the Future

In the final part of this exercise, I want you to compare and contrast your answers with those of your respondents. Now, I realize you're only a couple of chapters into the book, so I don't expect you to have completely altered your perception of the future. But hopefully some distinctions between your vision of the future and those of your respondents will be evident, given

that you've started the process of redefining your relationship to the future.

Reflecting on the future is important because it gives you space and time to think. Most people don't give themselves time to just think about the future they want, to talk about it with other people and finally to reflect on it.

QUESTIONS:

- **What did you learn?**
- **Do you still want the same future?**
- **Did this change the future you now envision for yourself?**

Your future isn't fixed. It can change and you can change it. It's okay if your future changes as you begin to build it. That's a positive thing. Reflecting on your future gives you the space to get it right.

Quick Reflection: The Power of Uncomfortable Conversations

Whenever you reflect on an uncomfortable conversation you had with someone, ask yourself these questions:

- *Why did the conversation get uncomfortable?*
- *Was the person negative or dismissive? Did they disagree with a core part of your idea? Of you? Was their disagreement unexpected?*
- *Were they challenging? Did I learn anything?*

The conversations you have with people, with your team, need to be positive. They also should be challenging and uncomfortable at times. There is an important difference between being dismissed and being challenged. When a person dismisses you, they don't recognize your worth and humanity. This is terrible. Get away from that person. But when a person challenges you with positive intent, possibly pushing you to see the world in a different way, that is a gift.

Humans don't like feeling uncomfortable. You probably

saw that while doing the exercise in chapter 2. Try to get comfortable with feeling uncomfortable. You don't have to agree with the person but if you really want to get the most out of the conversation, it's important to get curious. First, acknowledge out loud that what they just said made you uncomfortable and explain the reasons. Next, tell them you value what they said but could they re-explain or re-phrase it.

These kinds of conversations are how we change and grow and learn. Uncomfortable conversations can shape your vision of the future you, even make that vision more grounded and achievable. Making sure that you find the right people for your team, people you can have uncomfortable conversations with, will make the future you a reality.

Begin Backcasting

Now that you have a clear vision for your future and understand the forces that will help propel you there, it's time to figure out the precise steps you'll need to take to get there. It's time to backcast.

I always love this moment in the process when I'm working with a client. After weeks of research and interviews and intense questioning, culminating in the modeling of futures good and bad, the moment comes to get down to brass tacks and apply what we've learned to the creation of a concrete action plan. That's what being an *applied* futurist is all about.

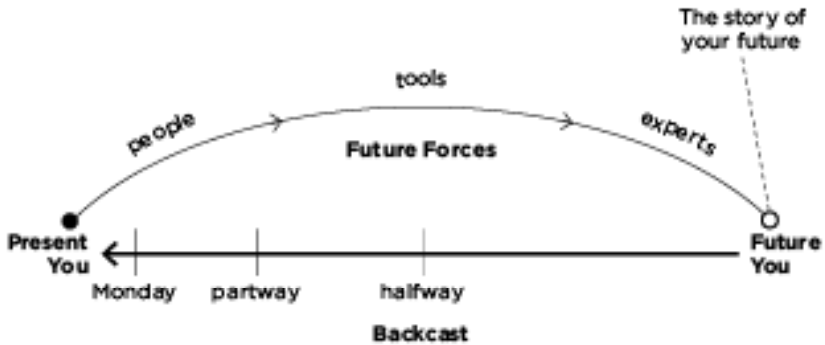
For the average person, the process can seem incredibly daunting. It's easy to feel like there's a massive expanse between where you are today and the future you've imagined for yourself. Trust me when I say, it's closer than you think.

Backcasting is the secret to closing the gap, by identifying the specific steps you need to take to reach your goals. Once again, details are critical, as they're what will turn your future from abstract to actionable. By focusing on the details, the massive expanse will not feel so massive.

To get started, I want you to divide your actions into three phases:

- halfway,
- partway, and
- Monday.

Here's a sketch I drew up some years ago to help a client visualize the process, including the backcast as well as the earlier future forces of the program:



I now give it to everyone I work with, including you. Hopefully it will help to convince you that a seemingly Herculean effort of changing the future is actually quite simple and streamlined.

Time to Think Like a Futurist!

Quick Questions 2

Part 2: Future Forces

Identify Five Forces for the Future You Want

In this part of the process, I want you to list your *people*, your *tools*, and your *experts*. You don't need to go all in and create a complete game plan around all three forces. But try to identify one or two future forces within each category. I'll use the meditation example as a jumping-off point for you to come up with your own more-specific questions.

QUESTIONS:

PEOPLE:

- **Do you know a friend or colleague who started meditating recently or made a similar life change, like learning poetry or the guitar?**

TOOLS:

- **Is there a local meditation group you could attend?**
- **Are there any apps that could help?**

EXPERTS:

- **Are you aware of someone who has integrated the practice of meditation into their daily lives?**
- **Have they written a book or given talks?**

As you are identifying your future forces, thinking through the details is just as important as it was in Part 1. Push yourself to get specific, writing down actual names of people or experts. List possible apps, groups, or other resources. This forces you to do a little work, but this work is already propelling your future.

Part 3: Backcast—

Sketch Out Your Halfway, Partway, and Monday

This final phase of the process employs the same mini drill. Think now about the incremental steps you will take to achieve your future. These examples of questions reflect the same meditation group idea, but again fill in your own, elaborating as much as you like on each backcast point in your proposed journey.

QUESTIONS:

- **Is *halfway* when you have taken a class and feel like you can meditate on your own?**
- **Could *partway* be attending a class for the first time?**

- Is *Monday* as simple as making a list of your possible future-force people and looking up possible apps and classes?

These examples are simple and straightforward, and that's very much the point. The purpose of this exercise is just to get you familiar with every step of the process so you can then apply it to larger, more complex challenges, like changing jobs or moving cities or finding love. Because I promise you, the same process applies regardless of what you're trying to futurecast. I've done it with Fortune 500 companies and I've done it with the guy at the end of the bar who's clearly going through a rough time.

So have fun with these exercises, but take them seriously too. As we move into heavier future topics, I think you'll see just how life changing the futurecasting process can be.

THE POWER OF PEOPLE

Quick Questions 3

QUESTIONS:

- Who are three (or more) people who will play an active part in the creation of your future?
- Who can help propel you to the future you want?
- Why do you think they can help?
- Will they support you in a positive way?

FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS:

- Do these people have an alternative perspective to yours?
- Do you and these people come from different backgrounds?
- Will these people challenge you?

In addition to answering these questions, as a bonus revisit Quick Questions 1 for yourself and then take it to the people you have identified. Ask them the exercise questions and use the questions to have a conversation about the future. See how that discussion goes. Was it positive? Did you feel more energy and support after the conversation than before it started?

After you've taken the time to reflect on Quick Questions 1, go back to your people and tell them about the future you and that you'd like to involve them in this process. I bet you'll find they consider it an honor and are willing to do what they can to make your future come true.

THE THINGS THAT HOLD US BACK

Quick Questions 4

QUESTION 1

Where is this particular barrier to your future right now?

In some cases, the answer to this question will be obvious and fairly focused. If you want to be a country music star, you go to Nashville. If you want to study marine biology, you head for the coast. Other times, there will be multiple paths leading to your future place. I think romance is like that. If you're young and single, growing cities will have a high percentage of eligible partners. But as Ruth's story showed, you can also find love in your own backyard, if you know where to look. So there probably won't be one right answer here. I just want you to think hard about where you need to be to find the future you're looking for.

FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS:

- **Where did the barrier come from?**
- **Do you have control over that barrier or will you need help from your future forces to remove it?**

Don't forget the details. The more you can describe the thing separating you from your future, the easier it will be to move past it.

QUESTION 2

What/who are some future forces that will help you get past the barrier?

This is another opportunity to practice the process. Don't worry about checking every box and formulating a complete plan. But write down a handful of forces—people, tools, and experts—that might be helpful in this part of your journey. Remember the fundamentals. A good team member is someone you can bounce your idea off of and who will respond with honest, constructive feedback—say, an old bandmate from college who spent time in Nashville herself. Tools can be sources of deeper information—maybe an online dating app tailored to your specific interests or a local program that could help. And experts have already done what you're looking to do—perhaps a marine biology group on LinkedIn where you can learn about career prospects once you earn your degree. In this same manner, come up with five forces of your own that will help lead the way.

FOLLOW-UP QUESTION:

- **Do you have ready access to your future forces (people, tools, experts)?**

The people here should be the team that surrounds you in your life. Your team is local. But the tools and experts can come from anywhere.

QUESTION 3

What specific steps can you take to move around that barrier?

This is backcasting. We're not looking for a fully formulated plan. I just want you to start to work these mental muscles. What's the halfway point to where you want to be? Scale is a factor here. If achieving your future involves a cross-country move, there are going to be many more steps than if the answer is in your own community. Don't overthink it. Remember, the point of the backcast is to take a process that feels too hard and overwhelming and break it down into manageable parts. Rox freaked out when I first presented her with the idea of moving to California because she felt like it was all going to happen at once. In fact, the process involved multiple steps taken over many months. I realize this in and of itself can feel daunting. But the more you do it, the more patient you become, releasing the need for instant gratification that's so ingrained in our culture. You start to appreciate the journey, seeing it as its own kind of reward.

FOLLOW-UP QUESTION:

- **Is there a barrier that feels too large to move? Can it be nudged?**
-

LET'S TALK TECH

Quick Questions 5

QUESTION 1

What is an experience from your childhood in which technology played a big role?

This is to get you thinking about your past relationship to technology. I once asked this question of a friend, and he told a harrowing tale of taking apart a remote-control car to try to figure out how it worked only to be scolded by his dad for wasting money. Poor kid spent weeks trying to put the car back together. He's on the more tech-averse side of the spectrum.

For others, technology unlocked a world of wonder and imagination. From video games to robots, kids are often in love with technology. I build robots with kids, and they come up with the most amazing ideas. I've seen robots that wear capes or overalls, a robot that has a switch on the back of its head to tell either GOOD or BAD jokes. I have even built a robot that farts. You should see the pure joy that explodes from both young and more mature people when a robot stops doing a task and lets out a fart. For many, technology can be full of wonder and humor.

Let's see where you are.

FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS:

- **How did that experience (from Question 1) shape your worldview of technology?**
- **Did it make you want different things from not only technology but also the world in general?**
- **What do you wish your experience with technology had been when you were young?**

When I talk to people, they are often split into two groups: those who wish they'd had more tech in their childhood and those who wish they'd had less. It can be helpful to talk about not only what you experienced but also now, later in life, what you wish had happened.

QUESTION 2

What are three positive and three negative things about smartphones?

This part of the exercise is intended to capture your current feelings about technology. For most people, it's not an either-or decision. There are things you like about smartphones and things you don't like. Let's get a better handle on where you fall today.

FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS:

- **Who do you blame or credit for the negatives or positives?**
- **How has your relationship with your phone changed over the years?**
- **When you speak about your phone with your friends, parents, or kids, how do you refer to it?**

We all have a complex relationship with technology. It has become an integral part of our lives. But this is nothing new. Fifty-six percent of Americans name their cars. We humanize our technologies because they are such a big part of our daily routines. The more complex the technology, the more complex the relationship.

QUESTION 3

What is the impact automation could have on your profession in the next ten years?

Now we're looking out into the future. There's no shortage of doomsday scenarios around robots, job loss, and the like. Without influencing your answer too much, I tend to think those fears are overblown. But what are your thoughts? Certainly answers will vary depending on the type of work you do. Are there other factors that contribute to your thinking?

FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS:

- **What is the future you want to have with technology?**
- **Is there any way your relationship with technology could be better?**
- **Who do you think has control?**

These follow-up questions get to the meat of why people have such anxiety over technology. It's about control. I'll hold off any further armchair analysis at this time, except to reiterate the point that your relationship to technology was shaped by forces beyond your control. But the same is true of everything else. The difference with technology is that it plays such an outside role in our culture and so its mystery can feel a little terrifying. I hope by getting you to think more deeply about your relationship with technology, maybe for the first time ever, you see that you're actually the one in control.

STARING DOWN FEAR

Quick Questions 6

Okay, let's get journaling by answering the following three questions.

QUESTION 1

What's the most scared you've ever been in your life?

We have all lived through some incredibly harrowing global events, from 9/11 to COVID-19. Maybe it was during them that you experienced the highest level of fear. Or if you or a loved one has ever received a serious health diagnosis, it no doubt sparked a tremendous amount of fear. Or maybe it was an early childhood experience, being separated from your parent in a crowded space or having a close encounter with a stray animal. Once you settle on the moment of super-heightened fear, describe some of the feelings around it. Fear will certainly be at the core, but what else do you remember feeling? Anger, confusion, powerlessness, guilt? Do your best to capture your specific frame of mind at that moment in time.

FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS:

- **What are your feelings today about the same experience?**

- **How do you think you will feel about this experience ten years from now?**

Take a moment to think about how your feelings have evolved since the original event. How has the fear shifted shape? Maybe it's mellowed over time or maybe it's intensified, the way an untreated injury or ailment gets worse over time. Just as with the first question, try to isolate any specific feelings or emotions associated with this memory. The more specific you can be with the exercise, the better.

You thought about now versus then. Next I want you to think about now versus tomorrow. How much control do you think you have over this seminal life experience? Will it follow the same trajectory? Or do you think it will take on a different dimension over time?

QUESTION 2

What keeps you up at night?

Our fears change throughout our lives. What scares us as kids is different from the anxiety we have as young adults making our way into the world. The concerns of a parent can be shaped differently than the worries we have as we move into our golden years. But we are talking about the big fears, the ones you don't think you would talk about in polite conversation.

FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS:

- **How does this fear shape your life today?**
- **Do you take precautions?**
- **Have you ever talked to anyone about it? What did you say?**

Much of our lives are ruled by fear, anxiety, and worry. These emotions rob us of our future. They make us brittle. Recognizing your fears and the deep power they might have over your actions can help you to do something about them.

QUESTION 3

What's the worst thing that could happen in the future?

This is an important question we will come back to later in this chapter. The worst-case scenario is a powerful tool as we think about the future, but it is a way of thinking that is taboo for many people. They don't want to think about the really dark places. Some might think it's morbid to even have these thoughts, but it's not unhealthy if you're going to put these visions to use to make your life better.

FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS:

- **Do you feel like you have any control at all over this?**
- **What is an indicator that this dark future is starting to happen?**

This is how you start to take power away from the darker fears. Finding what you have control over is a first step, even if that control is small. (We'll explore this too later in the chapter.) In typical backcasting form, understanding the details around what it will take for this future to happen is important. Going to these dark places and coming back can help us all build a brighter tomorrow.

HERE WE GO . . .

Quick Questions 7

How are you feeling? Are you ready to start? Do you have your journal or device out? Are you starting to make lists?

This book and these stories are your toolbox, your cookbook. You have everything you need to get started. You can start envisioning the future you. You will discover the people, tools, and experts to propel you to the future, and you have the clarity of thought to chart out the steps that will get you there.

It's time to start.

QUESTION 1

What do you need to start?

I can't tell you your future. Now you have the ability to imagine and attain the future you. What's missing? What's holding you back? Reflect on specifics of the hardest part of futurecasting: overcoming your fear of the first step.

FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS:

- **Where can you find what you need?**
- **What's standing in the way?**

QUESTION 2

Who are the people you should talk to?

You are going to build your future and people are going to help you, support you, and guide you. As you explore your future forces, writing down the people, tools, and experts that will propel you into the future you want—I have found that it's people that get you going. It's that one conversation you didn't expect. Go have a look back at Quick Questions 1 (chapter 2) and Quick Questions 3 (chapter 4). They can give you a starting place.

Next think about:

FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS:

- **Where can you find that person?**
- **What is the one question you want them to answer?**
- **What is the one thing this person could tell you to get started?**

QUESTION 3

Did you know that you have already started?

You can do this because you've done it before. That's what we've been doing throughout this book. By reading this

book you've already started moving toward the future you want.

Each exercise has given you a little more detail about the future you. Every story has given you examples for how other people have tried and applied the process. In fact, Quick Questions 2, the simplest of all the exercises in the book, was the one that contained every single step in the process. Review all seven exercises, do them again, deeply imagine the future you, and then you will have your start.

You are ready.
