



The Duty of Foresight with Jeff De Cagna

Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 414

Jeff De Cagna: [00:00:00] Basically, there are three choices that we have, which is to do nothing, do something, or do everything we can.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:10] I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:12] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:20] On January 1, 2025, we'll enter the second half of the turbulent 2020s and come that much closer to the Threatening 30s, to borrow the terms of our guest.

Organizations of all kinds have a vested interest in seeing the future as clearly as possible and taking action—action to bring about the best possible future for those they serve.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:44] In this episode of the Leading Learning Podcast, number 414, Jeff talks with Jeff De Cagna about this and much more. Jeff De Cagna is executive advisor for Foresight First, LLC, in Reston, Virginia, and he helps association boards set a higher standard of stewardship, governing, and foresight, and a board's duty of foresight has been Jeff's focus for the last 10 years.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:09] Jeff and Jeff talk about foresight as an intentional process of learning with the future and about intentional learning as a process of sense-making, meaning-making, and decision-making. While Jeff De Cagna focuses on working with association boards, much of what he has to say about foresight and our duty to our successors can apply more broadly to leaders and other staff in learning businesses. The Jeffs spoke in May 2024.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:45] Can you talk a little bit more about what your work with boards actually looks like? What do you do when you engage with a board?

Jeff De Cagna: [00:01:52] It's really about helping boards become more. What I mean by that is that every board, no matter where it is on its trajectory, can be more than it has been

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historically, more than it is today, perhaps even more than those who are serving on the board imagine that it can be. And that's essential in today's environment. We really need our boards to be at the highest possible level of performance, given the nature of the challenges that they face. So what I'm trying to do is helping to shift the board's language toward the future, trying to shift their thinking toward the future, and trying to shift their actions toward the future, really having them lean their orientation toward where we're going versus perpetuating, if you will, what the organization and what the board have been doing over the course of its history, trying to shift that mindset, trying to shift those habits of mind in a new direction.

Jeff Cobb: [00:02:48] Something that jumped out to me when you were talking about the shifts that need to occur is a language shift. Can you give an example or two of what kind of shifts in language have to occur with boards in your work?

Jeff De Cagna: [00:03:01] Sometimes they're significant in the sense of getting the board to understand the impact of orthodoxy, for example. Orthodox beliefs—the deep-seated assumptions we make about how the world works. We have built up a whole way of talking about our organizations that is embedded in our orthodox beliefs. But the problem is that orthodoxy often does not reflect where we are headed. It reflects where we have been. And so we have to challenge that belief system by asking are these orthodox beliefs we hold about membership, about board work, about the way we create value for stakeholders, the relationships that we have, are those beliefs true? Were they ever true? And, if they're true today, that's fine. If we accept that they are true—and I mean true in a sense of do we have good reasons to believe that they are true; there's evidence for them.

Jeff De Cagna: [00:03:55] But then the second question is, is it helpful to hold those beliefs? Are they guiding us toward the future? A big challenge for every board in 2024 is to sort through the belief system of the organization, which then defines the way we talk about it, and ask, okay, what's the orthodoxy? Which, by definition, in this environment, is detrimental because it's holding us back. It's limiting us. It's connecting us to a past that doesn't actually exist in the way we thought it did and is not really appropriate to where we're headed. And then, what's the justified belief? What is it we can say, yes, this is true, and this is the kind of belief we want to hold on to as we look toward the future of the organization? We can shape our future on the basis of that belief. We have to sort through all of that.

Jeff De Cagna: [00:04:41] And, by sorting through that belief system and challenging, reckoning with those beliefs, we can actually change the language of the organization. Also, other smaller things go into this, and they're tied to orthodoxy, but I'll just give you one example. Reminding

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boards that being on a board, in an association specifically, is not a volunteer role. It's a voluntary role, and the difference is that, being a volunteer in an association, most volunteers don't have fiduciary responsibility. They come to the task and participate without having to carry that particular set of responsibilities or those duties with them. That's not true for boards.

Jeff De Cagna: [00:05:23] Boards do have the duties of care, loyalty, and obedience, so there is a difference there. But the other, more fundamental difference, as I see it, is no one ends up on a board, again particularly an association, by accident. It's voluntary. No one's holding you there. You have the ability to leave at any time. That implies a willingness to do it at the highest possible level/ Because you're choosing it, just like anything else you choose to do, you want to do it the best possible way. Those kinds of things—some subtle, some more explicit—are part of changing the language that boards have. And there are a lot of other things like that. But those are a couple of ideas of the approach that I try to take.

Jeff Cobb: [00:06:05] I like that it's a lens that brings that sense of intentionality to what you're doing as a board member, as a part of that board.

Jeff Cobb: [00:06:14] Let's turn to the concept of foresight and the duty of foresight, which I know are really central, they're core, to your work with boards. I also want to explore how it may apply beyond boards, but let's start with the concept first. Can you define what you mean by foresight and by a duty of foresight?

Jeff De Cagna: [00:06:38] I like a relatively simple definition of foresight, which is that foresight is an intentional process of learning with the future. And what that means is that we are trying, through foresight, to better understand what the world could look like. Sometimes people will equate foresight with prediction, or they will equate foresight with forecasting. And, certainly, in foresight, there are people who do make predictions, and there are people who do forecasts. I'm not saying that these things don't happen, but, to draw a relatively simple differentiation among those things, if I were to say to you that on January 1, 2029, this will happen, X will happen, that's a prediction. If I were to say to you that on January 1, 2029, there's a 75-percent chance that X will happen, that's a forecast.

Jeff De Cagna: [00:07:28] What we're really talking about in foresight, as far as I'm concerned, is what could the world look like on January 1, 2029? We're not trying to predict it. We're not trying to forecast it. We're asking a question around what the world could look like. And we want to understand how the world could look in different ways. Could it be a more favorable world for our organization? Could it be a less favorable or unfavorable world for our

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organization? Could it be an unthinkable bad world for our organization? Those are usually the three ways, the three frames of futures that I try to get boards to think about—the favorable, the unfavorable, and the unthinkable—because they need to confront all those plausible futures.

Jeff De Cagna: [00:08:10] By situating themselves in those time horizons and asking the questions around what those futures could look like, and whatever the time horizon is—whether it's 60 months, 72, 84, or whatever the time horizons are—they're trying to ask the questions around what the world could look like. What are the issues that we might be grappling with there? What does the landscape look like? What does the context look like? And then, after devoting some attention to that conversation, bring it back to today and ask a different question, which is, what do we need to do as a board to be more effective decision-makers, to navigate toward a favorable future and navigate away as best we can from an unfavorable, unthinkable future, but at a minimum to be able to anticipate and prepare for all three and more of those plausible futures so that we are actually in a position to learn with the future as it unfolds?

Jeff De Cagna: [00:09:02] The idea is that we do that foresight work. We bring it back to today. We start making decisions. And then we look for the indicators—the signposts or the signals—that tell us we're headed in a certain direction and try to adjust and course-correct as best we can as an organization. That's a relatively simple way of looking at what foresight is, and then, to build on that, but the duty of foresight started out as the idea that boards should devote themselves to learning as much as possible about the future. I imagine we'll talk about this as we go. In today's environment, I really see the duty of foresight as a requirement on the part of association boards specifically to stand up for their successors' futures. Someone's got to be able to take responsibility and say that the people who are coming to our organization over the course of the next 60, 72, 84, 96, 120 months and beyond, the rest of this decade into the 2030s, someone needs to stand up and say, "We're going to try to do everything we can to stand up for the futures of those people that we don't know personally, who are going to be part of our community, part of our profession, part of our industry, part of our field." Because right now no one else is doing that.

Jeff De Cagna: [00:10:21] Our stakeholders and our successors are out there on their own, pretty much trying to figure out what comes next. So as organizations that have always cared about how people live together, how people work together, how people collaborate with one another, about the well-being of one another, I think that, for our boards, the duty of foresight has a responsibility to stand up for the futures of their successors. Again, not just those who will come in the next couple of years, but those who will never be known to them personally

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because that's the way it is supposed to work. We've always believed that our predecessors had our best interests in mind, and now it's an opportunity for us to demonstrate that we have our successors' best interests in mind. The work of foresight is very much tied to the duty of foresight, but the duty of foresight is that commitment and that requirement, and the work of foresight is how it gets supported.

Celisa Steele: [00:11:14] At Tagoras, we partner with professional and trade associations, continuing education units, training firms, and other learning businesses to help them to understand market realities and potential, to connect better with existing customers and find new ones, and to make smart investment decisions around product development and portfolio management. Drawing on our expertise in lifelong learning, market assessment, and strategy formulation, we can help you achieve greater reach, revenue, and impact. Learn more at tagoras.com/more.

Jeff Cobb: [00:11:53] Can you talk a little bit more about how learning factors into foresight, and what kind of learning journey does a board often find itself on as a result of engaging in this process?

Jeff De Cagna: [00:12:06] Boards have to make choices about where they're going to focus their attention because all of this comes back to a question of attention more so than anything else. How will boards devote their attention to the areas where they think they can have maximum impact? And then make that the areas that they really do a deeper dive of learning—and that deeper dive, that intentional learning, as opposed to incidental learning, which we all do every day by having a newsletter come into our inbox, or someone sends us a video or we read a quick article online/ We're all doing some kind of incidental learning every day, but that's not enough for any of us, given the nature of the challenges that we're confronting these days, but especially for boards that are having to make hard decisions. And those decisions are only going to get more difficult. They need to have a deeper process.

Jeff De Cagna: [00:12:53] For me, intentional learning is a disciplined process that is based on a cycle that I have been using, and there are other learning cycles out there, but the one that I have used consistently because it's relatively straightforward and helps boards navigate their way through it with reduced complexity—I won't say no complexity because it's inherent, but a reduced level of complexity—is to look at learning, intentional learning, as a process of sense-making, meaning-making, and decision-making. The sense-making process is about gathering information about things. Do we understand this?

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Jeff De Cagna: [00:13:28] I've been doing a lot of work with AI in recent months and years. Do we understand enough about what AI is to be able to talk about it? Do we understand what a large language model is? Do we understand some of the issues that exist with LLMs that we have to navigate? Do we understand different techniques that are also related to this? What's the difference between generative AI and machine learning? And that sort of thing. Boards need to have some measure of literacy in any topic to be able to talk about it, and that's the sense-making process, our understanding of it.

Jeff De Cagna: [00:13:59] Of course, as you well know because of your deep immersion in learning, people look at sense-making, meaning-making as the same thing. They're integrated, I agree. But I think, in this case, I like to break it out so that we can see the differentiation and the steps, the phases, and the process. If we cognitively, intellectually gather up information and try to understand at that level, then we can move into more of a meaning-making process, where we're teasing out what are the human implications of what we've learned? What are the ethical implications of what we learned? What are the strategic, reputational, and other kinds of implications? What does this all mean to our organization, to our stakeholders, to our successors? This is the place where we can really start to have more long-term thinking in the meaning-making phase of a process.

Jeff De Cagna: [00:14:45] Then we take all of that, synthesize all of that sense-making and all of that cognitive and the affective, and tie it all together into our decision-making process, and make better decisions on that basis. But, then, of course, by making decisions, we now are doing things that lead us to more sense-making, more meaning-making, and more decision-making. So it becomes a cycle of activity. And then the final thing is, of course, there's another loop around that, which is, we always have to evaluate how well we're doing at each one of those phases. How good are we at sense-making? How good are we at meaning-making? How effective are we at decision-making?

Jeff De Cagna: [00:15:23] There's another level of learning that goes into this, where we're reflecting on our practice in each one of those phases so we can improve our performance. That's also an element of the learning process as well. That's the way that I try to help boards think about their intentional learning, something that we all do quite naturally. We just don't name the phases of it. I think that is how I see the difference between an intentional learning process being central to the foresight work and to the duty of foresight versus the incidental learning that we're doing every day in a very casual way.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:15:59] A number of things jump out at me there. First of all, that distinction between incidental and intentional. I think I've always been cognizant of that. but I don't think I've ever used quite that language with it. And that does help with understanding different ways in which learning operates. We all need to be doing both, obviously. We all are hopefully doing both in our lives. A lot of what you said there brings to mind some of the more learning knowledge theorists that we've had on the show before.

Jeff Cobb: [00:16:28] Harold Jarche, whose work you may be familiar with, talks about sense-making, making meaning. He has all of his frameworks and approaches to that. Clark Quinn was on recently, and he characterizes learning as a process that essentially brings you to the point of being able to make decisions. That's what it's about. You have to learn enough to be able to get to that point. That's really what you should be aiming for when you're creating learning experiences—ultimately empowering people to be able to make decisions through that process.

Jeff Cobb: [00:16:57] I know you referenced this a little bit, but I want to call out that you've been focusing on this, at least in this named "foresight," "duty of foresight"-type version, for a decade now. We're celebrating an anniversary. That's part of the reason you're on the show now. You did shift the definition a little bit, and you mentioned the learning has always been there. There's now more of this notion of standing up. Are those the main distinctions between how you have defined it up until, I believe, 2022, and then you shifted the definition to what it is now?

Jeff De Cagna: [00:17:30] Yes. For the first, roughly, I'd say, eight and a half years, the definition was very stable. The duty of foresight is a commitment to learn as much as possible, by boards to learn as much as possible with the future. Then the pandemic happened, and, for a lot of us, it required—I was going to say "forced." I don't think it forced me, but it did definitely move me to want to reflect back on what I had been talking about and writing about before the pandemic occurred—everything I wrote in the 2010s—and looking back on that.

Jeff De Cagna: [00:18:05] I realized that the duty of foresight needed to adapt to the world that we were in, following or as a consequence of the pandemic. I spent a lot of time in 2022 thinking about how the definition needed to change, and that's when I adjusted it in September of 2022, and I call it the next definition of the board's duty of foresight, and it starts out with the idea of standing up for successors' futures.

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Jeff De Cagna: [00:18:29] I wrote it in a way where it would read like any of the other duties that boards carry: the duties of care, loyalty, and obedience. It reads in exactly the same way. I'm not an attorney, but I have been a director, an officer, and have worked with boards for a long time. I wrote this in the same way that I would write the definitions for the other duties. And intentional learning is still there. We're standing up for successors' futures through intentional learning, through short-term sacrifice, and through long-term action. The intentional learning aspect remains part of it. I think it actually raises the stakes for learning, even though it's not a definition totally framed around learning or exclusively around learning. Learning remains quite critical, but also the idea of short-term sacrifice, which does not mean sacrifice for a short duration, but means sacrifice today versus waiting, versus not sacrificing for the future, but being willing to give up what we think is not critical or we think might be detrimental or is not going to serve our successors.

Jeff De Cagna: [00:19:32] We're willing to make those sacrifices and repurpose our resources or redirect our attention to other kinds of actions that would have greater benefit for those that we would be wanting to help in the future, the successors we're trying to serve, and always having that long-term view, always maintaining the perspective of how are we going to...? How will this play out? Or how could this play out? What are the potential implications? What are the foreseeable consequences of our decisions? And making sure we're considering those choices. The definition has expanded its frame a little bit to accommodate that.

Jeff De Cagna: [00:20:08] And I think that the reason why I wrote it the way that I did—this updated, next definition, which I refer to as the “next” definition because I know there'll be another one; I know that at some point in the future there'll be another definition, so it's just the one for now; it's not the one for all time—but I think that I wrote it in a way to remind us that not all duties that we carry—and particularly for boards, where, in the case of boards, it is viewed as all duties are grounded in law; the duties of care, loyalty, and obedience are in statute there, in case law; they're in regulation—not all duties are grounded in law. In this case, this is a duty grounded in our shared humanity. We have a responsibility for one another. And so that's where the duty of foresight comes from. It is a choice that boards make. It's not required of them. They're not compelled to do this. But I hope that they are impelled to do it because they feel a shared sense of humanity with those who will follow them and want to serve those people, those human beings that they will never know, so that they can leave it better for them than how they found it. That's inherent in the way that this next definition is framed to expand that sense of responsibility and that commitment beyond just the scope of “We've got to do the learning.” The learning is in service of a larger purpose.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:21:41] As I mentioned, I have served on boards. I do serve on boards. I imagine a number of our listeners similarly do. When you walk into your traditional board meeting, you're expecting certain things. They all go a certain way, those types of meetings. I'm wondering what it's like after Jeff De Cagna has shown up and worked with the board, taking them through getting the concept of the duty of foresight, what does it then look like to serve on a board? And I'm thinking very practically. I show up for the quarterly board meeting, the annual board meeting, or whatever it is. What's happening in the room that's different? It may be the agenda, the activities that are going on. What's different about serving on that type of board?

Jeff De Cagna: [00:22:26] It's all grounded in next practices. It's about what combination of next practices we're going to put in place. And those next practices are approaches and ways of doing things that are intended to challenge orthodoxy, intended to reinforce or strengthen core convictions for why boards exist and what their purpose is and the habits of mind. I think that, depending on the combination of next practices that a board would implement, the way that I see it is the traditional structure of an agenda that mirrors more something like Robert's Rules of Order, it's not what you would see in that situation.

Jeff De Cagna: [00:23:08] It's much more about how do we use every minute of that meeting, every moment that we have available, for maximum benefit, maximum value of attention, maximum focus on where the organization is going. I want to help boards devote as much of their attention as possible to the future. If you use a ratio that is often shared with me of 70:20:10, where people say, our board spends 70 percent of their time on the future—we can talk about what they mean about the future versus what I mean, but that's a starting point—and then 20 percent on other things that have to be handled in that time. And then 10 percent is the slack that allows them to adapt to whatever might come up that they are not necessarily aware of at the moment, but it's available if they need it.

Jeff De Cagna: [00:23:59] I'm like, "That's a great starting point, but I want that 70 number to be as close to 100 percent as possible." Now, I may never be able to get all the way to 100, so maybe I'll have to be satisfied with 95:5, but I would love to think that what's happening is that the conversation is oriented toward, "This is where we're going. These are the futures that we're going to have to contemplate, and how do we make those choices? We're going to be doing our intentional learning—sense-making, meaning-making, decision-making. We'll be doing that process repeatedly during our meetings. We'll be confronting orthodoxy.

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Jeff De Cagna: [00:24:35] Our conversations are going to be qualitatively different. We're going to be using different words and different phrases, different language to talk about things, all in service of trying to move the organization forward. And we're not going to be devoting nearly as much of our attention to the traditional activities or the traditional kinds of agenda items, and we would redesign the agenda completely to enable that. We would move a lot of that work to committees and let them do the heavy lifting of some of that underlying, very important governance work, but not stuff that necessarily needs to occupy as much of the board's attention, just simply the board making sure that it maintains proper oversight of that and doing what it needs to do, but not redoing committee work, but enabling committees to do it using consent agendas and using other approaches, and so on.

Jeff De Cagna: [00:25:28] I think it's a fundamentally different kind of experience, and I do think about it in that way, that what we really want to design for our boards—and I've written about this both before and since the pandemic, about the idea of designing director experience that begins at the time that people are identified for potential board service, their recruitment and selection, and then their seating and their service on their board, and their development while they're serving. All of this experience should be designed in a way to maximize the meaning of the experience for directors and officers and to maximize their capacity-building. This should be a deep capacity-building experience for them. I think the way we do that is by shifting completely the nature of what these conversations are like and enabling them to have different long-term conversations grounded in the duty of foresight, grounded in the core convictions that I encourage boards to adopt, and the habits of mind that I encourage them to cultivate.

Jeff Cobb: [00:26:36] Your work is focused primarily or entirely on boards, but then, obviously, whatever boards do in the boardroom ultimately has to extend through the organization and out into whatever the constituency being served is. How does the duty of foresight extend beyond the board, say, to the executive team, to the staff, or the organization, or even out to the stakeholders in general?

Jeff De Cagna: [00:27:07] Yes. So the way that I think about it is it's really three levels. There's the duty of foresight, which we've talked about. There's the work of foresight, which we've talked about a little bit. How do we build futures? How do we use the methodologies of foresight, whether it's scenario building, environmental scanning, or backcasting, or any of the tools that are available? And then there's the consistent practice of foresight. How do we know that we're doing it, over and over again? We're going through our learning cycle related to foresight—sense-making, meaning-making, decision-making—doing it repeatedly and building that consistent practice.

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Jeff De Cagna: [00:27:42] I think that the duty of foresight is something that belongs to boards, and the reason for that is because they're really the only one—and, again, I'm speaking in the association context—they're really the only ones in our organizations who sit at the center of the Venn diagram that includes responsibility, authority, and opportunity. They're the responsible parties for their organizations. They have the authority under the bylaws and under law to make decisions on behalf of their organizations, and they are the ones who will meet, we know, frequently. Every board's going to meet two, three, four, or more times per year. So they sit at the center of that. There's no other group that has the same combination of responsibility, authority, and opportunity in any organization. Not staff, not committees, not consultants. It is the board that has that set of features, if you will, a set of commitments. So I think the duty of foresight needs to reside with them.

Jeff De Cagna: [00:28:42] Having said that, I think any CEO, any senior, any C-suite team working with a board, it's fair to say that the duty of foresight extends to include them as the most senior staff decision-makers, without the fiduciary duties that come with board service. But they can certainly choose to say, "Look, I'm going to adopt this as part of what I do too because I'm working with the board, and the board is doing it, so I'm going to do it as well." I think that would also be true for other staff that are working in the organization. But, again, it remains a choice. So I think that, certainly, staff at every level and contributors within and beyond the boundaries of our organizations have roles to play in the work of foresight.

Jeff De Cagna: [00:29:24] We want as much diversity as possible in these conversations. We need to include as many different voices and, as I said, not just within the association but beyond it as well. One of the great approaches, a next practice that I think associations can pursue is the idea of building foresight networks and one or more networks of contributors from across and beyond the association's boundaries who can bring perspective on the issues that the board is trying to investigate. Boards can't do all the heavy lifting of the learning on their own. They need assistance, they need support, and they need that diversity of perspective. Foresight networks can help them with that. It can be one foresight network that covers a lot of different areas, or they could be individual foresight networks for different topics if you want a deeper dive.

Jeff De Cagna: [00:30:11] But, regardless of the structure, those networks—informal in nature, focused on learning, and inclusive—can really assist. That's a way for a lot of contributors to become involved. And the final thing I would say is that the idea of a consistent practice of foresight is something that is really bolstered by the board's acceptance or the choice to adopt

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the duty of foresight because they become the champions for everything that happens from there. When they say, “We are committed to the duty of foresight; we are making this choice,” it enables the entire organization to orient its thinking in that way.

Jeff De Cagna: [00:30:47] And, because this is foundational to the idea of stewardship in the methodology that I pursue, the idea that we have to leave it better than how we found it, it is an opportunity for boards to nurture and to create that shared sense of stewardship across the organization, where everyone who is a part of the organization can make a contribution to stewardship, even if that contribution is relatively small. Even if the duty of foresight, as I believe, really resides with the board, there’s a lot of opportunity for other stakeholders in the organization to be involved—and actually more than opportunity. We very much need them to be involved in this work to ensure that it really addresses the full range of what is plausible and the full range of what is necessary to navigate through these challenging conditions.

Jeff Cobb: [00:31:47] One of our core concepts at Leading Learning is—well, it’s in the name, leading learning. So not just being reactive and turning out traditional learning content based on what the market seems to want, but looking ahead and setting the pace for what and how that field or industry you serve needs to be learning in order to progress. Sometimes that may mean leading people down paths that they aren’t eager to go down, or they don’t even know are there yet. It seems like this whole concept of foresight would be applicable here, maybe at a higher level, not necessarily the whole duty of foresight concept. I’m not sure. So I’d welcome your perspective on that.

Jeff De Cagna: [00:32:32] Even if you don’t go deeply into learning about the methodologies of foresight, I think we can all be more open to learning with the future. And I refer to that as developing a “foresightly” perspective. It begins with discarding orthodoxy, and it continues to clarifying our orientation toward the future and displaying humility, like the ability to say, “I don’t know. I don’t have an answer to that, but I’m going to look into it. I’m going to investigate it. I’m going to formulate a question, and I’m going to explore that question.” It starts out with those, and then it continues to nurturing our curiosity.

Jeff De Cagna: [00:33:09] We are all curious because, at one time in our lives, the world was completely not understandable to us. We had no concept of what was going on, and we built that concept step by step as we go through our lives. How do we get back to that innate sense of curiosity through our question and pursue it and then go further than just the incidental learning that we have to do and get into pursuing discovery, that deeper dive, really following through our cycle of learning? And then the final one of these habits of mind that I talk about

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with foresightly perspective is one that sounds a little bit different than all the others that I just mentioned. Discard orthodoxy, clarify orientation, display humility, nurture curiosity, and pursue discovery, and embrace serendipity.

Jeff De Cagna: [00:33:53] Embracing serendipity is not necessarily about being open to chance, which is the way we tend to colloquially think about serendipity. It's recognizing that we can find something valuable even when we're looking for something else. And that, by doing all the other things that I've just mentioned, all the other habits of mind, we can, in fact, discover things that we didn't realize were important and then see value in them and recognize them. In some ways, for me, that's what the duty of foresight was.

Jeff De Cagna: [00:34:25] I wrote my original article in 2014 about BlackBerry with the intention, really, of trying to understand how a company that had been so successful in innovation—because that's where I was focused in 2014, on innovation—how could a company like BlackBerry that had innovated itself into a position of being the world's preeminent technology company, not just mobile devices, but from technology as a whole, all of a sudden becoming an afterthought, where it was almost sold to private equity just two years before I wrote my article and now operates as a software security company, but is not a factor in anything at all? No one talks about it except as a cautionary tale. How could that happen? I started out wanting to understand the implications of failure and innovation, and, as a result of my research and work, I found something that I didn't realize was there, which was a concept that I came to refer to as the duty of foresight.

Jeff De Cagna: [00:35:25] In many ways, serendipity was central to what happened to me in that way, and I think it's very much a part of the way we're going to navigate our way into the future, where we won't have all the answers. We won't be able to establish a playbook for how we're going to get to the next decade and the years and decades ahead. We have to be open to the idea that there's something that we're going to find, but we have to prepare ourselves to find it. I think if we all can do that, if every one of us can build those habits of mind, I think that's a huge step forward. And, of course, if people want to go deeper, they can learn the tools, approaches, and methodologies of foresight itself. They can build their capacity in that way. But just simply on a human level, if we can do those six things consistently, I think we can all be more open to learning with the future, and it's going to give us a lot more opportunity to explore the issues and challenges that we're facing in a fresh way, in a way that is less connected to the orthodoxies of the past and more open to recognizing the possibilities of the future.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:36:32] I think the BlackBerry example illustrates in such a jolting way how these unknown, unseen threats that are sitting out there can completely change things, and trying to prepare for them does have to be a constant practice.

Jeff Cobb: [00:36:50] When you look out at the future now, obviously, you're not predicting; you're not forecasting/ But there are things on the horizon out there in what you've characterized as the Turbulent 20s we're living in right now. And then we've got the Threatening 30s coming, that you've called them. What are you seeing as some of the biggest areas of concern or potential disruptors that we do need to be learning with the future on right now?

Jeff De Cagna: [00:37:17] When I wrote about the Threatening 30s toward the end of 2023, it was out of a genuine concern that maybe we're not recognizing the fact that the threats of the 2030s are already here. And, of course, there's going to be new threats that emerge. But the threats are already present, and no one likes to, I certainly take no pleasure in writing a series of articles titled "The Threatening Thirties," but I wanted to get people's attention as best I could to say, "Look, we've got to recognize what we're facing in a different way. We really must not console ourselves with the idea that everything will work out in the end because it always has." I think that the plausibility of that way of thinking is probably at its lowest point in our recent history.

Jeff De Cagna: [00:38:03] Again, I'm not excited to say that, but I feel a responsibility to say it because I think it's important for us to understand where we are as we approach the midpoint of this decade. As of January 1, 2025, we'll enter the second half of the Turbulent 20s, and we'll be on a collision course, I would say, inevitably, with the beginning of the 2030s. Whether you see it as social deterioration across our society—not just this inability for us to talk to each other, but the fact that there's a lot more public bullying, and there's a lot more anxiety in our environment. People just seem to be on edge quite a bit. There's that aspect of things.

Jeff De Cagna: [00:38:44] We see so much how technology is reshaping our lives at work and in other phases of our lives and not always for the better. I certainly think how we're grappling right now with artificial intelligence—on the one hand, a technology with tremendous potential, but also a set of technologies with tremendous problems, and ones that we're not necessarily dealing with effectively as individuals, much less at other levels of our society, with government, and so on. Or whether it's the ongoing concerns around the economy and the growing divide between those who have and those who do not have and the inequality that's inherent in the way of the structure of our economies right now, not just in the U.S. but in other parts of the world. Certainly, I don't think there's any other way to say it but the ticking time

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bomb of the environment and the climate crisis and the concern now that some of the most catastrophic effects that we were hoping would be delayed, and there would be time to mitigate them, are actually happening, and that 1.5° C above pre-industrial levels may not be a viable target anymore.

Jeff De Cagna: [00:39:49] We may be trying to figure out how to live in a world of 2° C, which will be a very difficult world to live in for all of us, and other aspects of climate deterioration are a concern. And then the ongoing deepening political divides that seem to exist, not just in the United States but around the world. And the rise of authoritarian governments. Within a matter of a few weeks, 450 million people in Europe are going to vote in European Parliament elections. We don't really know how it's going to look after those elections, whether or not more extreme, authoritarian-oriented political parties will have more influence in the next European Parliament, and what the implications are of that. That's just in the context of half the world's population voting this year in elections around the world. Some have already voted, and others to come. But what will that look like? And how will things like AI influence that negatively? We're really operating in an environment that many people refer to as a polycrisis environment.

Jeff De Cagna: [00:40:50] And that's the way that I'm writing about it and talking about it. Multiple crises. We have two wars going on right now. Multiple crises all happening at once, the aggregate impact, they're influencing each other. They become far more connected, and their impact is influencing us in a profoundly detrimental way. These threats are already here, and we've got to be adaptive to them. I'm not suggesting that associations are going to be the ones to solve these problems. They clearly have to be solved in other ways, but we have to be contributors to addressing them in some fashion, and we cannot ignore their impact on what's happening in our organizations. We're facing considerable challenges, and I think that we've got to be adaptive to this reality right now. I think the duty of foresight is a way of thinking and a set of approaches that go with it to help us navigate this environment more effectively, to be more anticipatory in our approach, and make better decisions sooner, so that we cannot be waiting until things are unrecoverable. We do not want to delay our thinking about how to prepare for this very challenging future.

Jeff Cobb: [00:42:06] We always like to ask guests that come on the show about their own approaches to lifelong learning, and I know we've asked you about that before. So I want to reframe the question a little bit this time. In many ways, you've already answered this throughout our conversation, but I'm wondering about this idea of the duty of foresight as something to be practiced on a personal level. And it sounds like, from what you've said, that it

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is something to practice on a personal level, potentially. So I wonder how do you apply it personally in your own life and learning?

Jeff De Cagna: [00:42:44] Well, as a foresight practitioner, I'm always thinking about how I want to think about the future, how I want to learn with the future, and what learning I need to do. I'm sure you feel the same way about your job; one of the great things about having the kind of job that we have, when you work for yourself, and you're really focusing intently in a particular area, is that I get up every day and I say, "I don't know." There's not a day that goes by where I don't say, "I don't know" because I'm always dealing with something I don't know anything about. And the beauty of that is I get to learn about it. I can ask a question, and I can explore it. And so, for me, intentional learning has become very much a part of what I do every day in my work, and that's exciting.

Jeff De Cagna: [00:43:22] The way that I think about the duty of foresight in my own work—because right now I'm not serving on a board—so to bring the degree of integrity in the way that I think about the duty of foresight that I see that as something that really belongs to boards, but what I try to do, the way that I try to express that or my connection to that is the preoccupying question of my professional life, which is, "What will our successors say about us?" I'm always asking that question if I'm getting ready to have a conversation with someone like you, Jeff, or on a podcast, or if I'm doing a presentation, or if I'm writing an article. I'm always asking the question, "What will our successors say about us?" And that's guiding me in my thinking.

Jeff De Cagna: [00:44:07] It's a question that I ask of boards as well. When we're having a discussion, it's always one of the first slides in my presentation: What will our successors say about us? And it's different from the conversation about legacy because legacy is generally about the stories we want other people to tell about us, in which we feature as the heroes, typically. What will our successors say about us is not about the words we say. It's about the actions we take. What will we do to try to leave it better than how we found it? That's what I'm trying to do. Certainly for myself, in terms of, am I doing everything I can to try to help my clients get to where they need to be? But, really, it's for the boards themselves to say, okay, when we're no longer here in this room, what will our successors say about what we did in 2024 to serve them, to leave it better than how we found it, to ensure that they have every opportunity to be successful? I think I may have said this earlier, but, if I didn't, I'll say it now. I think that, basically, there are three choices that we have, which is to do nothing, do something, or do everything we can.

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Jeff De Cagna: [00:45:20] I don't think of the first two as viable options. We can't do nothing. We have to do something. I think, actually, we have a responsibility to do everything we can. The way that I'm thinking about, I'm always pursuing intentional learning in my work, and I think we all need to do that. It's necessary in this world that we live in. And the challenges that I described earlier that we face, we've got to better understand what we're confronting and figure out how we're going to participate in trying to confront it.

Jeff De Cagna: [00:45:49] I think that if we ask ourselves, "What will our successors say about us?"—again, we're thinking about the people that we will never know personally, so we won't be able to talk to them. We will only be able to do things, and they'll make an evaluation, a judgment at some future point about whether or not what we did served them, whether or not we served ourselves, or something in between. I think that's where we have to go. That's the thing we can all do, all ask ourselves that question, and then try to shape our actions accordingly. I think the best way we can do that is by making foresight a priority. And, certainly, when serving on a board, really looking at the duty of foresight as an essential choice for the future, choosing the future over the past, which I think is crucial for us in 2024 and beyond.

Celisa Steele: [00:46:46] Jeff De Cagna is executive advisor for Foresight First, and he helps association boards set a higher standard of stewardship, governing, and foresight. In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode414, you'll find a link to the Foresight First Web site and Jeff's profile on LinkedIn.

Jeff Cobb: [00:47:06] At leadinglearning.com/episode414, you'll also find options for subscribing to the podcast. We'd be grateful if you would subscribe if you haven't yet, as subscriptions give us some insight into the impact of the podcast.

Celisa Steele: [00:47:19] We'd also be grateful if you would rate us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen, especially if you find the Leading Learning Podcast valuable. Your ratings and reviews help us show up when people search for content on leading a learning business.

Jeff Cobb: [00:47:32] And please help us grow the Leading Learning community. At leadinglearning.com/episode414, there's a link to find us on LinkedIn.

Celisa Steele: [00:47:41] Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

[music for this episode by DanoSongs, www.danosongs.com]

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