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Alan Kay, the educator and computer designer, famously [declared](#), “The best way to predict the future is to invent it.” But what does it take to invent the future in such a turbulent and uncertain world? How do successful organizations build on their history, even as they craft a new point of view about what comes next? How do established brands stay true to their original promise, while also making themselves relevant to new customers with different values and preferences? How can accomplished executives be sure that all they know — their hard-earned wisdom and expertise — doesn’t limit what they can imagine?

These are the questions that separate organizations and leaders whose best years are ahead of them from those stuck in the past. I've made it a point, in research for my books and my HBR contributions, to pay close attention to leaders who seem energized by these questions rather than paralyzed by them. As I reflect on those leaders, on the habits of mind that drive them, I've realized that most could be sorted into one of four categories:

The Learning Zealot

One of the great satisfactions of being a leader is that you get to be a teacher, sharing the wisdom you've acquired over the course of a career with young colleagues hungry for time-tested advice. But when it comes to inventing the future, the most effective leaders are the most insatiable learners. Creative leaders are always asking themselves, "Am I learning as fast as the world is changing?"

Garry Ridge, CEO of WD-40, may be the most learning-obsessed executive I know. He's unleashed huge innovations and presided over unprecedented growth. The secret of WD-40's success? Ridge's [devotion to building an organization of "learning maniacs"](#) who are zealous about engaging with new technologies and business models. He empowered a group of executives and engineers, called Team Tomorrow, to turbocharge learning throughout the company. His favorite question to colleagues, a test of their zeal for learning, is, "When's the last time you did something for the first time?" Leaders who are fit for the future are determined keep learning as fast as the world is changing.

The Personal Disruptor

The longer you've worked in an industry, the more success you've achieved, the harder it can be to see new patterns and possibilities, new paths to what's next. All too often, senior leaders allow what they know to limit what they can imagine. That's a big problem: You can't invent the future if you cling to out-of-date ideas, even if they've worked in the past.

Rosanne Haggerty, one of the country's great social activists, has made a huge impact in the fight against homelessness. But her biggest (and most revolutionary) achievement, the [100,000 Homes Campaign](#), required her to challenge everything she knew about her cause. "I concluded, to my horror, that we had developed a way of attacking the problem that was inherently limited," she says. "We had to blow ourselves up." [That act of personal reinvention](#) was brutally difficult — and absolutely necessary. "Too often," she warns, "pride in your most recent idea becomes a barrier to seeing your next idea." Leaders who are fit for the future understand when it's time to [disrupt themselves](#).

The Tough-Minded Optimist

Leadership is emotional as well as intellectual. How we present ourselves, the attitude and outlook we exude, sets a tone about what's required to make deep-seated change in turbulent times. John Gardner, the legendary scholar of organizational life, [argues that great leaders exude "tough-minded optimism."](#) The future, he says, "is not shaped by people who don't really believe in the future. It is created by highly motivated people, by enthusiasts, by men and women who want something very much or believe very much."

Vernon Hill, an entrepreneur whose young company, Metro Bank, [is reshaping the future of financial services in the UK](#), exudes a spirit of energy and confidence that is infectious. Sure, his high-touch business model is reinventing a field notorious for lousy service. But it's the mindset he personifies that defines the fast-growing bank. "If we don't maintain a sense of energy," he says, "we are hurting the message." Which is why the company looks for leaders with "zest," personal enthusiasm for the bank's mission. You can't invent a prosperous future for your company unless you are excited about what the future holds.

The Eager Experimenter

There's a dirty secret about the future that many of us don't want to face: Even the most exciting breakthroughs are built on the backs of projects that fizzled, products that bombed, initiatives that failed. That's why leaders who are fit for the future are support lots of ideas, knowing that most of them won't deliver as planned, to discover the few that will deliver bigger than anyone imagined.

Does any executive personify [the spirit of experimentation better than Jeff Bezos](#)? The Amazon CEO is the richest person in the world based on his willingness to embrace ideas that don't work out. "If you're going to take bold bets, they're going to be experiments," Bezos explained. "And if they're experiments, you don't know ahead of time if they're going to work." Leaders who are fit for the future understand that there is no success without setbacks, no progress without pitfalls.

Of course, like all frameworks, this is a simplification. And many of us wouldn't fall into just one, clear-cut category. But for most of us, more fully embracing any of these traits would help with the hard work of big change. There is no guarantee that one particular attitude will help you invent a more prosperous future for your organization or yourself. But if each of us can figure out which of these habits of mind best suits who we are, we may become more fit for the future.

In any field, leaders who move their organizations forward are the ones who can reimagine what they've always done, refresh and reinterpret the products and services they offer, and unleash bold experiments about what comes next. Are you that kind of leader?

Author's note: I've created [a 16-question quiz on my website](#) to help you figure out which of these categories you might fall into. It's free, but you do have to enter your email address to get your results.

Bill Taylor is the cofounder of *Fast Company* and the author, most recently, of [Simply Brilliant: How Great Organizations Do Ordinary Things in Extraordinary Ways](#). Learn more at williamctaylor.com.
