

---

# The Wise Power of Utopian Thinking



By **Marc Le Menestrel** , INSEAD

## **Imagining an ideal world is a powerful tool for enhancing proactivity and leading organisational transformation.**

Today's shifting global dynamics have increased the pressure to navigate into the new and the unknown. Alas, afraid of how the world is evolving; eager to keep for ourselves what we have; willing to preserve the certainties that we have built in our heads; enticed by a new philosophy where we are supposed to maximise happiness — we continue to resist and reject change. Why embrace the future if it is this painful? Why become aware that our world is collapsing?

To avoid a growing sense of helplessness and despair, we then run faster towards that light at the end of the tunnel. Instead of embracing the unknown, we become even more blinded by what we think we know.

Companies only learn agility in order to increase productivity, grow their revenues and make more profit. Governments engage in stakeholder consultations but their conclusions, coincidentally, always happen to confirm the initial intentions of those in power. People are concerned about plastic in

our oceans but they ignore why this issue has become so salient. We change in order to remain the same and this is not good enough to meet today's challenges.

As Einstein wrote in 1946, "A new type of thinking is essential if mankind is to survive and move toward higher levels."

## **Utopian rationality**

Business rationality is at the core of how leaders think. Yet, it has to evolve. In my teaching, I invite executives and directors to become *smarter* than rational. I do not propose to throw out rationality. Rather, I want to overcome a rationality that imposes itself upon a complex reality in a totalitarian fashion.

To identify a goal, choose the best action to reach it, then measure the consequences and finally claim success once the task is done is not smart enough. In a world full of surprises, we need to dream beyond our goals if they are to have meaning. A sense of purpose is essential for long-term value creation, as the dream that drives our goals will ensure the relevance of work beyond the next quarter or business cycle. We also need to realise that we may not attain our goals, and that can be an opportunity because they may need to be changed. We should never be prisoners of our goals. In a world ready to be deeply disrupted, we need to love what we do right now. Anchored in our values, we can appreciate where we are at present and have our eyes fully open. Instead of serving a system that is at risk of destroying our humanity, we should make sure to put the framework of rationality to the service of our values and dreams.

The ability to dream our future world into being can help us survive. It is also a powerful strategic exercise. At INSEAD, my experience is that the building of a utopia allows executives and directors to free their minds from confining intellectual prejudices. The method draws from the **three core principles** of Wise Power: duality of mind, emotional maturity and generosity of soul. It is a way of thinking, feeling and dreaming that enhances our ability to meet the world half-way. It is especially useful for important and difficult decisions.

Wise power consists of the ability to face surprising, even unpleasant truths bravely and honestly, although they may directly contradict our firmly held beliefs and preferences. Wise leaders are much less susceptible to the fear of the unknown that underlies defensiveness, because they perceive the

deeper dynamics of the landscape around them. Instead of being fixated on the light at the end of the tunnel, they learn to pause and see that the tunnel is in fact made of beautiful trees, each of which is also a door to another space where they can discover, learn or just be.

### **How to generate a utopia?**

Now more than ever, strategic business decisions must be taken in light of other realms of power. It is thus essential that utopias encompass the political, social, technological and natural spheres, as well as business. This allows leaders to embrace the growing expectations of multiple stakeholders across myriad issues.

Complex, ambiguous grey zones have a perfect right to exist in these utopias. For example, you do not have to choose between business having freedom to operate, and governments possessing scope to regulate – you can have both.

As participants present their utopias in class, it is liberating for them to express these contradictions. Executives are typically constrained in a discourse where business interests dictate everything. However, they are also citizens eager to exist more fully and freely at work. As they share their utopias and listen to others', they become conscious of common predominant themes: a form of social equality, a government that cares for the common good, technology at the service of humans and not the other way around, and harmony with nature, among others.

These commonalities transform what might have seemed an exercise in fanciful idealism into something highly relevant to the everyday exercise of executive power. The unthinkable suddenly becomes almost feasible. The lines between utopianism and executives' habitual "realism" begin to blur.

### **Why utopia?**

Peel back the layers of realism, and you will often find cynicism and pessimism feeding fear a steady diet of rationalisation, e.g. the world is so corrupt, boldly engaging with it is useless. Some cynicism and pessimism can also be valuable. Life is not black and white -- and we also need to tame some messianic tendencies that bring us back to the authoritarian form of leadership that we want to transform.

Utopian thinking enables us to perceive the big picture, including the things that upset or even repel us, in a usefully optimistic light, in terms of what could be. It gives us the courage and confidence to see the distance between reality and our dreams as a space of opportunity rather than *ipso facto* defeat.

## **Applications of utopia**

Utopian thinking can be open-ended, but it can also be tailored to address specific business problems. I have used it to find solutions for a multinational energy company facing a disastrous situation. The company was heavily criticised in the media for its role in the environmental devastation and worsening quality of life of local communities. In response to being painted as villains in the press, executives had adopted a stance of denial of their responsibility. Their relationships with community leaders and government officials were at an impasse.

By inviting participants to conceive of the best resolution imaginable for such conflicts, we foster within them an appetite for the unknown. They start envisioning ways to use their companies' wealth and power for mutual value creation, together with locals on the ground. Most importantly, they become more aware of the pitfalls of a confrontational non-market strategy. Instead of maintaining the belief that they can save the world if they become a force for good (another way to remain in the ego-driven authoritarian form of leadership), companies can cultivate a global vision in which they interact with other forms of power in a more respectful and harmonious manner.

Imagining utopias can also be useful for established organisations in the midst of market flux. For instance, a session on utopian thinking applied to the future of mobility allowed executives of a car manufacturer to better appreciate the multiple facets and layers of their situation. Rather than being constrained by the established discourse and culture of their company, they could engage at different levels and discuss the deeper changes driving the shifts in their industry. They were developing a sense of where they stood within this larger ecosystem and could find new levers to shape their culture and their identity. Instead of nurturing fear and helplessness, their uncertain future provided meaning.

## **Developing utopia**

You do not need to wait for other people to apply utopian thinking. You can start yourself as an individual. Just think of a high-level challenge facing your organisation, industry, or even the nation or region in which you do business. Then apply your imagination to the problem, working through the different perspectives of the relevant stakeholders. Do not fear contradictions and allow space for the commonalities of good intentions and diversity of values. As a transformation of your own mind-set, the exercise will teach you to fear less and embrace more.

You can scale up the benefit by involving your team – sharing your ideas with them and adding their contributions until a collective utopia emerges. This dream will help you select your objectives and identify the key stakeholders that can help you. It will also change your attitude to the world. Less afraid to envision change, you will look for opportunities to contribute to a better world beyond strict business objectives.

#### **Find article at**

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/responsibility/wise-power-utopian-thinking>

---

#### **About the author(s)**

**Marc Le Menestrel** is an Affiliate Professor of Decision Sciences at INSEAD. He teaches and coaches senior executives and board directors on high-level performance and leadership as well as the exercise of wise power in governance, sustainability, anti-corruption and risk management.