

The Anticipatory Leader: Buckminster Fuller's Principles for Making the World Work



FROM THE DYMAXION WORLD OF BUCKMINSTER FULLER (WFS FILE PHOTO)

By Medard Gabel and Jim Walker

For leaders striving to “make the world work for 100% of humanity,” there is no better model of leadership than that of “comprehensive thinker” R. Buckminster Fuller.

He didn't head up an army or corporation, wasn't elected to any public office, was not the leader of a foundation, and wasn't wealthy. In fact, he had none of the trappings most people usually associate with leadership. Yet, Buckminster Fuller's leadership surely

changed the world during the twentieth century, and his impact continues into this century as well.

How did he accomplish this? What were the tools of leadership that he employed? Fuller himself often used the phrase "comprehensive anticipatory design science" to describe the far-reaching scope of his work and research efforts. Through a careful study of Fuller's writings, inventions, and methodologies what emerges is a powerful blueprint for problem-solving leadership in an age of rapid change—a leadership approach that has implications far beyond the field of technological innovation.

We call this framework "comprehensive anticipatory design leadership." This problem-solving leadership framework could be useful not only for changing the world, but also for changing your own local organization or business—an equally challenging task.

10 Principles for Comprehensive Anticipatory Design Leadership

Fuller's approach to life, change, technology, and design can teach us much about leadership. Before exploring the specific principles that

we uncovered, it is important to appreciate the rigorous, tenacious, and inspired patterns of thought that led to some of Fuller's most impressive breakthroughs. As Fuller expressed it, "I always say to myself: What is the most important thing we can think about at this extraordinary moment?"

This was no mere platitude. In many ways, it summarizes Fuller's entire leadership philosophy. Not only was Fuller always considering important things, but he also perpetually attempted to discern the *most important* things and place them in the context of *extraordinary* times.

1. Think Comprehensively

Throughout his career, Fuller demonstrated an unwavering dedication to framing problems in their widest possible context. When you first encounter Fuller's writings, it is difficult to appreciate his wide-angle view on the world and the universe. Armed with a poet's imagination and a scientist's exhaustive inventory of the entire uni-

verse, he could "zoom out" from a given problem in countless directions until he spied the remote fundamental cause that needed to be changed or even revolutionized. If these upstream interconnections and causative factors could be addressed in a carefully comprehensive and decisive fashion, then Fuller had confidence that downstream matters would inevitably right themselves with a minimum of stress.

In terms of leadership, this means taking the time, and having the courage, to frame challenges clearly by digging into their root causes or the formative forces that brought them into being, then seeing the opportunities that are always present. Instead of

trying to convince people to change their behavior, Fuller sought to change the environment to which those behaviors were a logical response. For example, if your organization has high employee turnover or your city is experiencing an outflow of residents, you must seek the root causes of their departure and address those larger issues.

By providing a new or altered environment, Fuller's leadership provided a new logic that led to new behaviors and outcomes. At the core of this approach was a respect for individuals and their decisions.

2. Anticipate the Future

Buckminster Fuller was ahead of his times—so much so that many of

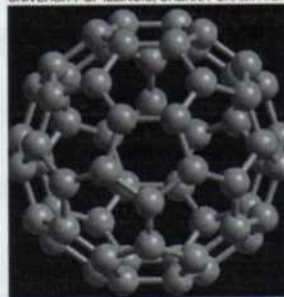
his insights, proposals, and inventions were literally decades ahead of their era. His 1930s Dymaxion car would fit right in at the latest car shows. His "World Design Science Decade" proposal has morphed into today's UN Millennium Development Goals. His

geodesic geometry was discovered as a core design principle at the molecular level—the aptly named *buckminsterfullerene* carbon-60 molecule, or "Buckyball." Clearly, Fuller had a well-honed ability to anticipate the future.

Fuller was exquisitely in touch with trends, especially technological, world resource, and human-need trends. This enabled him not only to forecast the future, but also to anticipate both upcoming problems and their optimal solutions. Just as a great waiter is able to service tables and anticipate guests' needs without being asked, Fuller was able to anticipate what the world would need at critical junctures, then offer both the philosophical framework and the practical tools for solving those issues.

For leaders, trend spotting not only requires a feel for timing, but also the ability to tune in to the relevant topics, tune out the noise, and

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS, URBANA-CHAMPAIGN



Buckyball.

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