

W. Sutton or W. Gretzky: Succeeding in the Present vs. Preparing for the Future

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The famous bank robber Willie Sutton was once asked why he robbed banks. The answer, known as Sutton's Law: "Because that is where the money is." This maxim is frequently invoked in medical diagnostics, keeping company with Occam's razor and a well-known quote about hoofbeats, horses and zebras.

On the other hand, Wayne Gretzky was famous for following his father Walter's advice: "Skate to where the puck is going, not where it has been." Predicting the puck's future path left him alone with good scoring chances time after time, making him arguably the greatest hockey player of all time.

Predicting the future in an incredibly complex world is more difficult than predicting where a hockey puck will end up in a limited space constrained by the rules of the game. As individuals, companies and organizations, we cannot predict the exact future, but preparing ourselves for likely future developments is necessary for survival and growth.

I was reminded of this on a recent trip to Antarctica. Our last stop was Whaler's Bay on Deception Island in the South Shetlands, just off the tip of the Antarctic Peninsula. We landed on a beach littered with a post-apocalyptic appearing collection of rusted tanks and rundown buildings and old wooden boats. Uninhabited now, in the 1920s this was a beehive of industrial activity as Southern Right whales were killed and processed to provide whale oil for lighting, and as an ingredient for soap, margarine and automatic transmission fluid. We asked our guide how the site came to be abandoned. It was a classic example of an abrupt paradigm shift. By the early 1930s, petroleum products such as kerosene had become abundant and cheap enough to displace whale oil as a necessary commodity, and Whaler's Bay was closed. It seems that John D. Rockefeller, often viewed as a monopolist robber baron as the head of Standard Oil, had indirectly saved the Southern Right whale from extinction.

The whale oil industry and Standard Oil are long gone. In fact, the average large company struggles to exceed a lifespan of 60 or so years. In recent years, Kodak, Polaroid, GE, GM, Nortel and RIM/Blackberry are a few corporations that have risen like Icarus and then crashed. Perhaps they overly extrapolated the present, rather than focusing on the future and how they needed to evolve to survive. In fact, the Walter Gretzky quote was labelled as one of the most overused corporate clichés in a 2014 Maclean's article,¹ in which John Roth (former CEO of Nortel) was quoted as using it, to which the author opined: "Nortel didn't just miss where the puck was or was going to be, it found itself stuck at home, waiting for someone to give it a lift to the rink."



I don't know the lifespan average for not-for-profit organizations, but the dilemmas are likely similar. Should the focus be on incremental improvements to current activities, or more radical changes in preparation for the inevitable and somewhat unpredictable paradigm shifts of the future?

Thinking specifically of the CRA, we have been blessed with visionary Presidents, Executive teams, Boards and CEOs. Well-informed "gambles," such as splitting our annual meeting from the Royal College in the 1990s, or purchasing the *Journal of Rheumatology* more recently, have cemented our organizational future in an era where funding may be more constrained and digital channels become increasingly important.

Most money is now in the digital cloud, not in bank vaults. Willie Sutton could not adapt to that new paradigm, but a new generation of digital thieves certainly has. Perhaps that is why Sutton's autobiography was entitled "Where the Money Was," in which he denied originating the Sutton's Law quote. By 2020, the CRA President will likely be another Sutton (no relation as far as I know). My advice would be to look to Walter and Wayne Gretzky for direction, not Willie Sutton.

1. Jason Kirby. Available at <https://www.macleans.ca/economy/business/why-business-people-wont-stop-using-that-gretzky-quote/>. Accessed February 10, 2019.

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