

Megatrends: Sustainability Summit 2017

By Skid Crease

"Science is just science until it's applied to something?" - Mojdeh Poul, President of 3M Canada

"Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic?" - Clarke's Third Law

"Never attribute to malice that which is adequately explained by stupidity?" - Hanlon's Razor

Put those three quotes together and you have a basic idea of what the 3M Corporation was trying to accomplish in one day at their Sustainability Summit 2017 on Global Megatrends. It took place near King City at the magnificent Kingbridge Conference and Retreat Centre, and it was my honour to interview the opening keynote speaker, Richard A. Matthew (BA McGill; PhD Princeton), Associate Dean for International Programs and Professor of Urban Planning and Public Policy at the University of California at Irvine.

I first became aware of the 3M company when I was doing coast to coast leadership seminars in the early 1990s. I was trying to break educational administrators out of their straightjackets, so I used the story of the Post-it® sticky notes developed by a 3M "skunkworks" team. A skunkworks is a project developed by a small and loosely structured group of people who research and develop a project primarily for the sake of radical innovation.

In other words, free the creative thinkers from bureaucratic procedures and they just may come up with something new and functional. In my old North York Board of Education, it was the IDEA (Inter-Disciplinary Educators Association) group of creative wing-nut program leaders who kept the board innovative, and was the first group to get surgically neutered when the TDSB amalgamation took place. Can't have too many creative thinkers around when you're changing regimes.

That was the warning and the message brought by Dr. Matthews. He started off by asking the audience to "perhaps move the conversation away from Trump's tweets." Stop worrying about the inane distractions, and start forward thinking! Or, as 3M likes to say, "If you want to innovate for sustainability, start caring for tomorrow by spending time today."

As Dr. Matthews outlined his Nine Megatrends, he also cautioned us that the pace of change makes studying complex systems very difficult. We can identify a trend today with all the best knowledge at hand, and it could all change overnight with the current speed of high tech data gathering. The new normal is change and uncertainty, so don't shoot the messenger.

The first Megatrend that caught my attention immediately: dealing with an aging population that could easily live on to 100. As a 70-year-old, brought back to life through medical science advancements, I fully intend to make it to the century mark. But the society in which we live has us taking early retirement at 55, or more likely 66 for full Canada Pension Plan (CPP) and Old Age Security (OAS). That gives a healthy aging population another 30 years to go before we start recycling.

How will our aging urban infrastructure deal with the needs of this community for safe transportation, medical centres, wellness facilities, and accessible housing? There are now more people over 65 than under 20. There are now workplaces where the needs of four generations need to be considered. We have a 65-year-old that needs face to face communication and human empathy working beside a 16-year old who needs Facebook and constant electronic affirmation via "likes."

Add into this mix an increasing diversity in the workplace as global demographics shift. In a world where our young are unable to read human facial expressions and our seniors are coping with understanding the cultural nuance of "the others," it creates a challenge to human communication perhaps not seen since the Tower of Babel came down.

Megatrend Two dealt with the speed of technological change bringing artificial intelligence, nanotech development, cyberlife, and even meddling with evolution as we genetically modify our customized children. As if this weren't enough, consider the raw speed at which we now process data - what took us a 1,000 years to gather and process we can now do in one day.

Matthews spoke here of the need for "disrupting the world through positive innovation" in contrast to the "negative disruption" being caused by President Trump. Too much negative stress leads to depression, withdrawal, and cardiac arrest. His solution: put the phone down, turn off the black mirror, and take a walk in the woods with a friend.

Megatrend Three dealt with the realities of the rich getting richer and the poor falling further and further behind. He presented the sobering fact that 3 million people in our society are worse off than serfs in the Middle Ages, that the 8 richest people in the world make as much as that earned by 3.7 billion people. That trying to live on \$2 day was a recipe for grinding, consuming poverty leaving the most vulnerable the most easily displaced in times of crisis.

Number Four dealt with severe planetary degradation: the load of toxins, food scarcity, water depletion, deforestation, topsoil loss, and the titanic volumes of plastic waste that are choking our oceans. And what will we do when 65 million environmental refugees fleeing flood, drought, and war come seeking shelter and safety and nourishment and a little human empathy on our high dry lands? Megatrend Five examined another form of degradation, this on our aging infrastructures in everything from roads and bridges, to sewer and water lines, to energy production to flood and fire disaster management. We have for decades chronically underfunded infrastructure maintenance and improvement and the current model is now unsustainable.

Six looked at the crisis in public health care, the increase in mental health issues, and the role that extreme poverty plays in sickness and depression for the most vulnerable. We should all be painfully aware of what happens when stress causes our immune systems to collapse into dis-ease and we retreat into our reptilian brain stems. As a species we tend not to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel when our bodies and minds are in survival mode.

Megatrend Seven looked at the total collapse of trust (or a 'blind trust' in Canada) in governance ? how we have declined in confidence in our political democratic system as we moved into the influence of the military/industrial/pharmaceutical complex and became a corpocracy. So much so that citizens are simply not voting in elections they feel the outcomes have already been hijacked by the 1%.

In this atmosphere of mistrust, Matthew stressed the need for positive partnerships with clear conditions for success negotiated between the public and private sectors.

Number Eight dealt with Global Security Threats. Matthew smiled at the audience and said, 'I think we've all heard enough about this for now.'

Number Nine, Education. We have an industrial model school system with a largely irrelevant curriculum that is boring students to death. They often get more relevant information about the world around them from a YouTube seminar or a TED talks podcast on their cell phones.

The lyrics Gord Downie first sang in 1992, about another travesty of justice in Canada, could easily be applied to high school students enduring their final four years of yesterday's curriculum:

'There's a dreamy dream where the high school is dead and stark.

'It's a museum and we're all locked up in it after dark,

'where the walls are lined all yellow, grey and sinister

'Hung with pictures of our parents' prime ministers.'

I was reminded of Jared Diamond's novel 'Collapse: why societies choose to succeed or fail.' If we have learned the lessons of Mesopotamia, and the Roman Empire, and Easter Island, perhaps we can avoid the next collapse. If not, we can at least plan to rebuild from a post-apocalyptic world. But we will never be able to change our direction or mitigate our disasters driving at high speed looking in the rear view mirror.

As Richard Matthew challenged us at the beginning of his talk, the time is right now to move the conversation towards innovative disruption and a sustainable future.

Megatrend Nine: Education, Irrelevant to Relevant: 'Most of us no longer have any idea where to find the line between fact and fantasy, between what is scientifically plausible and what is scientific nonsense. In this hyper-technological age, where so many things, perhaps even our survival, depend upon subtle decisions by a scientifically informed citizenry, that ignorance is deeply alarming.'

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data.