



# In Search of Strategic Leaders

Stand as a Champion

BY ROGER WOODWORTH

**H**ave you noticed? The role and relevance of the utilities is under duress. Changes in what technology enables, policy makers want, and consumers expect, don't easily fit the business models that now underpin our industry. What happens next hinges on you, dear reader. You are, after all, a person in a position to lead and shape the future in some way.

The question is, do you stand strictly in defense of the way things are as good enough? Or are you a strategic leader, one who actively explores how to make things better?

Best lean to the latter, since the former is a predictable path to irrelevance. History affirms this as true.

"You see what your knowledge tells you you're seeing," says James Burke, esteemed science historian. So, it stands to reason that those who don't seek, or worse ignore new knowledge, have only the status quo to defend.

And defend they do with absolute certainty of their truth. It's human nature.

Indeed, as Thomas Kuhn, author of *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, wrote in 1962: "awareness is prerequisite to all acceptable changes of theory." You need not look far for proof.

Our ancestors once believed, with conviction, that the earth was at the center of the universe, not the sun. The laws of physics were absolute, not relative. The continents were static, not adrift upon tectonic plates.

As paradigms shift, so do cultural norms. Typically, shifts occur after some tumultuous period of unrest, resistance, or disruption.

For example, note how concepts of work and employment changed as

Pay particular attention to the emergence of blockchain technology which enables peer-to-peer transactions directly by consumers.

agriculture gave way to the industrial age. In the mid-1800s, Florence Nightingale fostered nursing as a profession and led several health-related social reforms. And most will recall Rachel Carson's 1966 book *Silent Spring* which invigorated an environmental movement that has grown stronger ever since.

It's an obvious lesson. Scientific discoveries can translate into practical technologies, unleash fresh thinking about possibilities, and forever alter societal priorities.

This lesson is best exemplified by our own industry and the story of

electrification that has powered the most prosperous nation on earth. But here's the irony. Electricity, once valued as a technical and market novelty that shaped the future, is now viewed in the developed world as a basic commodity.

Our industry successfully reduced the complexities of power delivery to the flip of a switch and a monthly bill. But now our industry is at a crossroads with many changes afoot.

One path is to defend what we've known and resist change. The other path is to embrace our historic role as an enabler of change and discover what more can be.

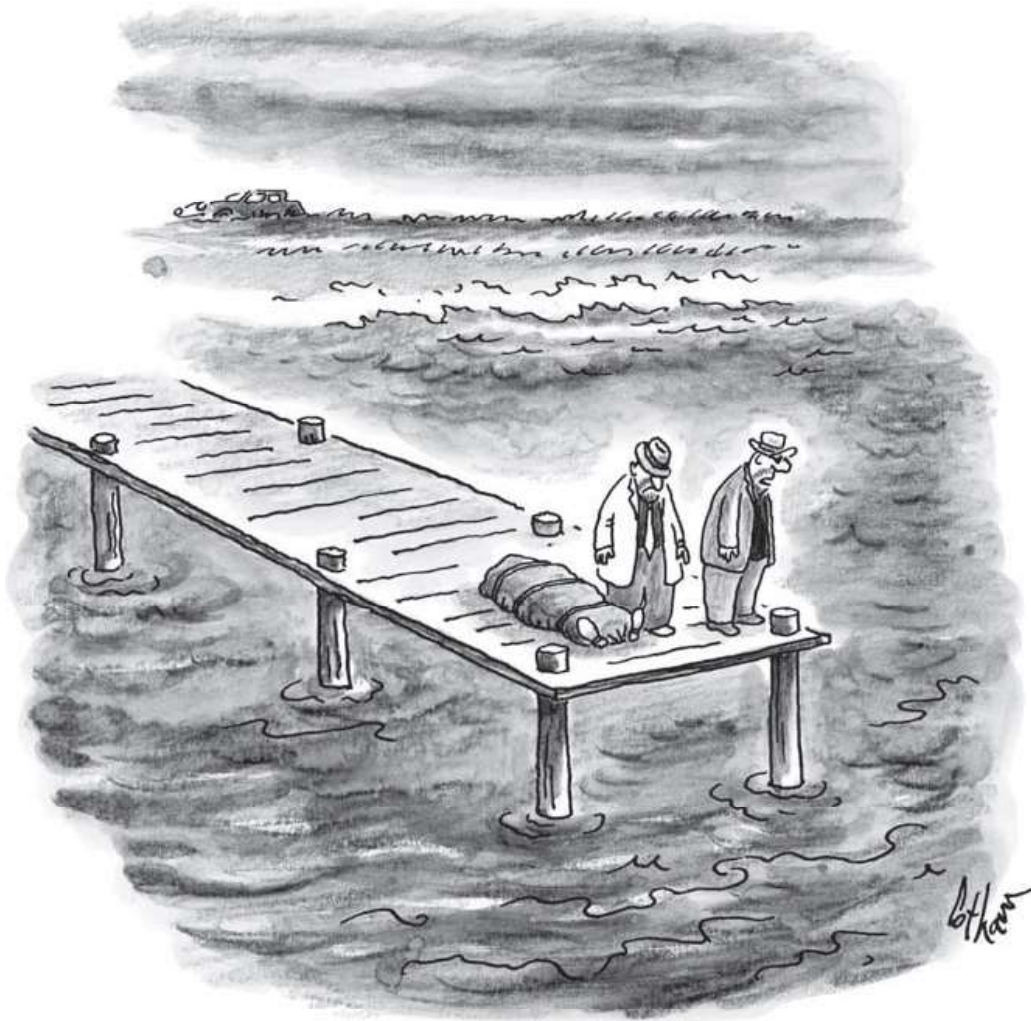
Do you see the shifts in motion? Today it is possible to measure almost anything, anywhere, anytime, at low cost.

You see it in real-time weather apps on your phone, and health devices you wear. You also see it at work in the form of internet-addressable transformers, smart meters, and more.

This growing trove of data harbors

---

**Roger Woodworth** recently retired as president of Avista Development and as vice president and strategy officer of Avista Corporation. He has chaired the Edison Electric Institute's Customer Service Executive Advisory Committee, and was board president of the National Hydropower Association. He started his career as a fish and wildlife biologist.



*“I’ve been dumping bodies here for years, and it seems to me that the sea level is rising.”*

rich insights waiting to be mined. Data science offers the new advanced tools that make predictive analytics possible.

And the massive computing power required to crunch the numbers is readily available via the cloud. In short, what wasn’t possible a few years ago is now, and that in turn, again changes what’s possible.

Who can succeed by standing still in the face of change? Striving to make things better is a wise course on any field of play, as famous sports author Steve Wilstein has written. “It’s dangerous to believe you will remain successful simply by doing the same things that once brought success. That will be true only if the world doesn’t

change. To be successful over the long haul, you need to change before it stops working.”

The dynamics of change are clearly at work in our industry. The cost curve on distributed energy devices continues a downward trend. Policy makers and regulators press on for more renewables and a cleaner more resilient energy system.

Companies of all kinds are introducing technologies and services to help consumers manage energy in new ways. On this point, pay particular attention to the emergence of blockchain technology which enables peer-to-peer transactions directly by consumers for value of all kinds – energy included.

And there are more.

The inescapable truth is that our industry, once the enabler of change, is now the subject of change. Returning to how we began, you (yes, you) are in a position to lead in some way. To stand as a champion of what happens next.

By understanding the past and accepting what is known, you have the chance to offer strategic leadership that’s about discovery, not defense. Please, take it. **PUF**

#### **Endnotes:**

1. “The Day the Universe Changed,” a BBC production, Episode 1, aired 1992.
2. “Getting What It Takes to Win,” *Hemispheres*, June 1994.