

**MITZI WYMAN**

# Bridging the Horizons:

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How Independent Thinking  
Drives Transformational  
Change

By Mitzi Wyman

The pressures of leadership today demand more than simply managing what exists—they require imagining and creating what could be.

The **Three Horizons model**<sup>1</sup> provides a lens to examine where systems are now, where they need to go, and how to bridge that gap. Paired with Nancy Kline’s **Thinking Environment**<sup>®2</sup>, this framework offers a practical guide for fostering the kind of thinking that drives genuine transformation. By shifting from habitual, reactive mindsets to bold, independent thinking, leaders can unlock new possibilities and navigate the tensions that arise in the process of change. This paper explores how these ideas intersect and offers strategies for applying them to meetings, systems, and leadership practices.

## The Three Horizons

The **Three Horizons model** developed by future and systems thinker, Bill Sharpe, offers a powerful framework for understanding and navigating change in complex systems. It invites us to reflect on where we are, where we need to be, and how we transition between the two. The model provides a way to hold multiple perspectives simultaneously, helping us think about the present and the future in a more structured way.

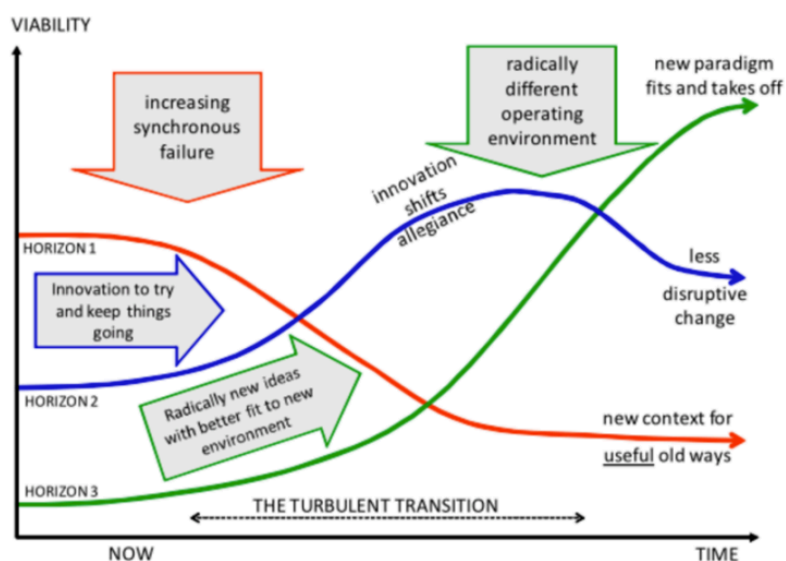
## Horizon 1: The Current Paradigm

Horizon 1 represents the systems and practices currently in place—the structures, habits, and ways of working that define the status quo. These systems may have been effective in the past but are often no longer sufficient to meet current challenges.

### Key characteristics of Horizon 1:

- Focuses on maintaining stability and control.
- Resists change and tends to pull innovations back into familiar patterns.
- Reflects established norms, which can become rigid and less responsive to emerging needs.

Despite its limitations, Horizon 1 has value. It holds the institutional memory and operational infrastructure that can provide continuity. The challenge lies in recognising when Horizon 1 thinking is constraining progress.



1. Sharpe, B. (2013). Three Horizons: The Patterning of Hope. Triarchy Press.

2. Kline, N. (1999). Time to Think: Listening to Ignite the Human Mind. Ward Lock.

## Horizon 2: Innovation

Horizon 2 represents the space of experimentation and innovation within the current system. It is where new ideas, projects, and practices emerge to address the limitations of Horizon 1.

### ***Key characteristics of Horizon 2:***

- Bridges the gap between the current paradigm and transformational change.
- Contains both supportive and constraining innovations.

Horizon 2 is dynamic and contested. It is a space where new ideas must prove their value while navigating the resistance of Horizon 1 and the aspirations of Horizon 3. It is also messy and uncomfortable. People's fears and anxieties often surface, especially as deeply-held assumptions are challenged. Tensions emerge between those clinging to the old and those trying to innovate.

## Horizon 3: Transformation

Horizon 3 represents bold, transformational thinking. It is the space of the future, where systems and paradigms are reimagined and rebuilt to align with emerging values and needs.

### ***Key characteristics of Horizon 3:***

- Focuses on long-term, radical change.
- Often operates on the margins or outside of formal systems.
- Represents the "unseen" potential—the new, unfinished, and unknown.

Horizon 3 is not without its challenges. Because it exists beyond the current paradigm, it often lacks the institutional support and resources that Horizon 1 systems control. Also, Horizon 3 disrupts existing norms, often requiring secrecy, rule-breaking, and experimentation to avoid resistance from Horizon 1 defenders. This can create further tension as fears of loss of control or irrelevance emerge.

**Horizon 3 is where true transformation begins. Leaders must help people navigate these tensions, addressing anxieties while maintaining focus on the vision of transformation.**

## Key Questions to Reflect On

- Where is your system currently positioned within these horizons?
- Where do you believe your system needs to be to achieve transformational goals?
- How can innovations in Horizon 2 be nurtured to support transformational change in Horizon 3, rather than reinforcing the status quo of Horizon 1?



## Where Are You on This Spectrum?

As leaders and thinkers, the challenge is to recognise where our systems—and our thinking—are most often positioned. Are we stuck in Exchange Thinking, holding onto the familiar? Or are we creating the conditions for Independent Thinking to ignite the transformational change of Horizon 3? By embracing Independent Thinking, we align ourselves with the bold, future-focused ideas that define Horizon 3. It is this kind of thinking that allows us to move beyond merely fixing the past to actively creating the future.

### Transforming Meetings: From Rush to Reflection

Traditional meetings often operate within Exchange Thinking, perpetuating a cycle of urgency and control that inhibits fresh ideas. In contrast, meetings designed as Thinking Environments break this cycle, creating a space where Independent Thinking can thrive.

### The Role of a Thinking Environment in Meetings

#### **Freedom from Urgency and Rush**

- Thinking Environment meetings<sup>4</sup> begin with positive opening rounds, which prime participants with oxytocin and endorphins. This physiological shift enhances calm, openness, and creativity, replacing the adrenaline-driven urgency of typical meetings.
- **Participant insight:** *"When we slow down, we think better—and better thinking moves us forward."*<sup>5</sup>

#### **Rounds and Open Discussion**

- Meetings are structured with rounds where everyone contributes without interruption. Open discussions, while more fluid, follow the same principle of no interruption, fostering trust and equality.
- This creates the conditions for fresh, generative ideas to emerge, which are essential for navigating Horizon 2.
- **Participant insight:** *"Populating meetings with uninterrupted rounds transforms thinking, unlocking the potential to create the future."*<sup>5</sup>

#### **From Exchange to Independent Thinking**

- Rounds allow participants to reflect and articulate their thoughts fully, shifting the focus from rushed reactions to thoughtful contributions.
- Over time, this practice builds a culture of Independent Thinking that enables organizations to move beyond Horizon 1 constraints.
- **Participant insight:** *"Independent thinking in meetings is the foundation for independent action in the organisation."*<sup>5</sup>

4. Kline, N. (2020). *The Promise That Changes Everything: I Won't Interrupt You*. Penguin Life.

5. Statements shared by participants during workshops run by Mitzi Wyman during 2024.

## Navigating Tensions in Transformation

Every Horizon brings its own tensions:

- **Horizon 1:** Fear of loss and a clinging to control stifle progress.
- **Horizon 2:** Anxiety and uncertainty dominate, as systems struggle between the old and the new.
- **Horizon 3:** Disruption can lead to secrecy and rule-breaking, which risks alienating those still rooted in Horizon 1.

Leaders must acknowledge these tensions, creating space for people to express their fears while keeping the focus on the bigger

picture. This is where the Thinking Environment becomes critical—providing safety, structure, and a sense of calm amidst the turbulence.

## Final Insights for Leadership

**Leadership is not just about navigating the external world of change but also about mastering the internal world of thinking. By combining the clarity of the Three Horizons model with the practices of the Thinking Environment, leaders can guide their teams through complexity and into transformation.**



**Mitzi Wyman** is a lawyer and Thinking Partner to boards and senior teams. This paper evolved from a workshop co-facilitated by Mitzi and world renowned systems thinker, Myron Rogers, incorporating insights and materials he generously shared. It integrates the Three Horizons framework, developed by Bill Sharpe, with the Thinking Environment approach, pioneered by Nancy Kline. This unique combination supports organizations in exploring future possibilities and creating actionable strategies for sustainable, long-term success.

## Get in Touch

*If this paper has sparked any thoughts or questions, or if you'd like to explore how these ideas could apply to your work or organisation, we'd be delighted to hear from you. Feel free to contact [mitzi@mitziwyman.com](mailto:mitzi@mitziwyman.com).*

**MITZI WYMAN**