

# The Art of Shaping the Future



Amidst all the diverse opinions in our world at the moment, most people can agree on one thing: we will not be able to solve 21<sup>st</sup> century issues with 20<sup>th</sup> century ways of thinking and acting. The inherited organizational vocabulary around leadership and the ‘windows’ that it opens up in our minds are insufficient to face the complex challenges of our times. In this article we will introduce an approach that invites each of us — regardless of gender, race or education level — to become a

Shaper of the future.

The fact is, in today’s interconnected world, you no longer have to hold a leadership title in order to take a stand, do something important, and make an impact on society. ‘Shapership’ is our term for the art of shaping new realities, armed with a clear acknowledgement of *what is* and a transformative vision of *what could be*. At its core lies a completely different way of being, seeing and acting that brings new ‘shapes’ and models to the world.

Shapers do not act alone, especially in our highly-networked age. Instead, they create new forms of collaboration where people join their ecosystem because they want to be part of the journey. Whether it is through a movement, a company or a community, Shapers unite people around a shared purpose.

Three fundamental elements lie at the heart of the Shaper’s mindset:

- Creative resistance
- A transformative vision
- Anticipative experimentation

We will examine each in turn.

## 1. Creative Resistance: The Big NO

While most people accept a given situation as ‘just the way things are’, Shapers perceive the status quo as something to be overcome or disrupted. Creative resistance emerges from looking at reality and seeing the need for a new reality to take shape.

By looking at reality in a fresh way, the Shaper initiates a creative reconstruction of *what is possible*. While creative resistance is a durable attitude, it is not enough on its own. As the great scientist and futurist, **Buckminster Fuller** once said:

*“You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something [you have to] build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete”.*

In short, a Transformative Vision is required.

## 2. Transformative Vision: The Big YES

Shapers embrace ‘what could be’ and set out to bring it to life, armed with a deep commitment to a meaningful and transformative vision. Using this vision as a ‘lens’, they open up new paths towards the future, embodying the change they want to see happen in the world. As they go about practicing what they preach, their transformative vision becomes the axis upon which they align their thoughts and actions.

## 3. Anticipative Experimentation: The Creative How

A Transformative Vision calls for transformative actions, and Shapers explore and learn by doing. Indeed, to begin to shape new realities, they often completely reinvent the

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## Shapers of the Past and Present

- **Abraham Lincoln** (United States 1809-1865) and **Mahatma Gandhi** (India, 1869-1948): Shapers of Nations
- **Rosa Parks** (United States 1913-2005): Shaper of Social Justice and Freedom
- **Martin Luther King Jr.** (United States 1929 -1968): Shaper of New Dreams.
- **Pastor Jose Maria Arizmendiarieta** (Basque Province of Spain 1915-1976): Shaper of a Regional Destiny
- **Nelson Mandela** (South Africa, 1918-2013): Shaper of Freedom
- **Muhammad Yunus** (Bangladesh 1940-): Shaper of Development Through Credit for the Poor
- **Baltasar Garzón** (Spain, 1955-): Shaper of Universal Justice
- **Daniel Barenboim** (Argentina and Israel, 1942-): Shaper of Peace Through Music
- **Sanjit ‘Bunker’ Roy** (India, 1945-): Shaper of Barefoot Education
- **Catia Bastioli** (Italy, 1957-): Shaper a New Model of Sustainable Development
- **Ricardo Semler** (Brazil, 1959-): Shaper of Industrial Democracy
- **Gunter Pauli** (Belgium, 1956-): Shaper of the Blue Economy
- **Michel Onfray** (France, 1959-): Shaper of Freedom of Thought through Philosophy
- **Rob Hopkins** (United Kingdom, 1968-): Shaper of the Transition Town Movement
- **Salman Khan**, (Bengali, 1976 -): Shaper of Education for Many

way things operate. To achieve this, they rally a formidable ecosystem of committed actors and partners, so that anticipative experimentation can be a place for co-creation and direct contact with users.

Following are two examples of Shapers who have embraced this process and gone on to shape our world for the better.

### 1. Maria Montessori (1870-1952)

**CREATIVE RESISTANCE:** After graduating from the University of Rome in 1896 as Italy’s first female medical doctor, Montessori started out by focusing on mentally disabled children who, at the time, were considered ‘uneducable’. She was convinced that their problem was not so much medical, but rather pedagogical: when adequately stimulated, these children improved greatly.

**TRANSFORMATIVE VISION: THE BIG ‘YES’.** Deeply inspired by her background in Pediatrics, as well as by her psychological, anthropological and philosophical knowledge, she called for a complete transformation of current educational methods.

Montessori had a vision of Education strongly based on Science, but aiming at the transformation and improvement of human beings. She strongly believed in childhood education as the master route to build a more compassionate humankind and as a key to the reform of society.

The goal of the Montessori method is to develop a child’s sensory and cognitive skills, while at the same time enhancing practical life skills, natural abilities, initiative and character—what she called ‘Connected Heads, Hands and Heart’. In Montessori’s view, each child has a unique potential for growth and development waiting to be expressed and revealed, and such potential is best developed by letting the child be free to explore and manipulate the surrounding environment. The role of the teacher should not be that of directing the child’s activities, but rather that of continually adapting the environment in new and exciting ways in order to let the child fulfill her potential at growing degrees of complexity.

**ANTICIPATIVE EXPERIMENTATION.** In 1899, after beginning to disseminate her ideas about child pedagogy at the national level, Montessori was asked to direct the State Orthophrenic School in Rome, where she continued her experiments and observations of how children can reach new levels of autonomy and self-motivation. As she refined her methodology, she managed to lead mentally-challenged children to pass state exams with the same performance as normal children. This is what amplified her questioning of the validity of the conventional system of education for ‘normal’

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children. In 1906, she started organizing a school for the children of indigent working mothers in the slums of Rome. In 1907 the first Casa dei Bambini ('Children's House') was founded, and soon became a model school to be visited by educators and researchers from all over the world. By the end of 1911, Montessori Education was officially adopted in public schools internationally.

We should not be surprised to learn that modern-day Shapers like **Larry Page** and **Sergey Brin**, the inventors and founders of **Google**, and **Jeff Bezos**, Founder of **Amazon**, all studied with the Montessori Method. Same goes for **Peter Drucker**, **Yo Yo Ma**, **Anne Frank**, **George Clooney** and many others.

### 2. Dr. Govindappa Venkataswamy (1918-2006)

**CREATIVE RESISTANCE:** In India, 12 million people are blind. After retiring from performing eye-care surgery at the Government Medical College in Madurai (south India), Dr. Venkataswamy — known as Dr. V — decided, at age 55, to devote the rest of his life to eliminating blindness among India's poor.

**TRANSFORMATIVE VISION:** Driven by his higher purpose, he founded the **Aravind Eye-Care Hospital** in 1976. Surprisingly, he considered **McDonalds** as a source of inspiration in terms of efficiency: how was it that it could deliver the exact same hamburger to customers all over the world? What if it were possible to deliver the same high quality eye surgery to those who needed it around the world?

**ANTICIPATIVE EXPERIMENTATION.** After starting with 11 beds, Aravind has grown into the world's largest provider of eye-care. The Aravind Eye-Care System is a model of efficiency, admired globally as not only a health success, but also a financial success. This despite the fact that eliminating blindness among India's poor required high quality eye-care services at low prices. It also required an ecosystem approach in south India: a network of hospitals, clinics, community outreach efforts to create an effective referral system in rural India (including women trained for eye diagnosis, non-physicians to gather diagnostic data and

counsel patients, telemedicine centers), factories, research and training institutes.

Today, the Aravind system manages some 2.5 million outpatient visits and 300,000 eye surgeries. It has been calculated that it does 60 per cent more eye surgeries than the United Kingdom's National Health System per year, at one-hundredth of the cost. The majority of Aravind patients (55 per cent) pay only a symbolic amount, or nothing at all: the system makes enough on paid surgeries to not only cover those who cannot pay market rates, but also to generate a nearly 40 per cent gross operating margin.

### In closing

As indicated herein, anyone with a strong vision for improving their community or society can become a Shaper. Despite the wide range of areas they impact, one thing Shapers have in common is a dream to somehow enhance the dignity and the significance of human life.

This approach is particularly relevant at the moment, as the world sorely needs new shapes, forms, models and approaches to deal with the wicked problems we face. Going forward, we encourage you to do what you can to enable Shapers of the future to emerge and thrive. As a wise person once said: "Those who do not believe in the 'impossible' are requested not to discourage those who are busy realizing it." **RM**

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