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Short communication

Joseph F. Coates...or the quiet strength of experience
A personal reminiscence

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The circle of futurists is small and most members know all the others by their publications. I have been fortunate enough to meet some of the most famous futurists including Bertrand de Jouvenel, Philippe de Seynes, Edward Cornish, Olaf Helmer and, from the world of strategy, Igor Ansoff. Among those of my own generation, I have had the pleasure of knowing Jerome Glenn, Clem Bezold, Eléonora Masini and Peter Schwartz. Indeed, it is by working with the top futurists in the field that you can grow and also challenge yourself, as I have been able to do over the past 25 years with Hugues de Jouvenel and Jacques Lesourme in France.

I also was fortunate in having the incredible opportunity of working twice with Joseph F. Coates. I have only one regret—that it did not happen sooner! The fault is all mine for Joe had expressed an interest in my work when he prefaced my book “From Anticipation to Action” (Unesco, 1994) and again “Creating Futures” (Economica, 2001). I should have had my eyes and ears open earlier, as there is much to learn from this man, whom I consider the greatest living futurist.

In December 2000, while listening to Joseph Coates speak about future technologies to an audience of hundreds here in Paris, I realized how much better he was than the other speakers—including myself. He did not need slide or power point presentations to captivate his listeners. He simply looked up from his notes occasionally to emphasize a key idea. The essential came from his thoughts expressed in resoundingly clear sentences made up of simple words.

What struck me while listening to Joe Coates was his youthful stare and powerful message. Everything appeared clear and everyone felt more intelligent. Only the truly great possess that quiet strength and can make complexity understandable with simple words.

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In May 2000, I had the honour of joining Joe on the podium during a two-day seminar in Scotland. We addressed some 60 executives from Montgomery Watson, a California-based firm active around the world, especially in Asia.	31 32 33
I was impressed by how dynamic Joe was in leading such a large seminar alone at age 72. I helped him just so that I could feel useful and also so that I could experience the event from the inside. One thing is remarkable: Joe uses no visual aids. His foresight workshops resemble those we hold in France in that silent individual work is included. However, his workshops are far simpler and use more group work in plenary sessions. Overall, the results are perhaps less systematic and participants would have to dig deeper later, but the way in which Joe Coates led that group was incredibly efficient. In fact, the participants eagerly organized themselves in groups!	34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41
Review of trends workshop.	42
Plenary session task	43
1. Working on your own, list one or two variables that have affected your sector over the past 20 years.	44 45
2. Vote as a group to decide on the three most influential variables from the past.	46 47
Subgroup exercises	48
1. Take one or two minutes alone and silently list the most important factors for the future of your business activity.	49 50
2. Using consensus, list four to five factors as a group.	51 52
Plenary session	53
(1) Collate all the lists of four to five factors from each group.	54
(2) Vote as a group on all of these factors using applause as a measurement so that only 10 or 20 key variables remain. These are considered the most important and the ones that require foresight the most, e.g., political situation, labour skills, legislation, economic environment, IT, competition, workforce and population.	55 56 57 58
Parallel workshops	59
1. Choose a strategic vision, e.g., establishment in China, doubling size and multi-cultural staff.	60 61
2. Build several scenarios of visions compatible with this strategic vision with regard to previous key variables.	62 63
3. Vote on four or five of the 'standard' visions from the vision scenarios.	64 65
"Scenario" workshop	66
Build the optimal scenario for this strategic vision.	67
Debriefing session.	68

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“Action” workshop.	69
Subgroup exercises	71
1. Point the consequences for the company.	72
2. Identify the action to be taken by the company.	73
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At this point, in France, we use systematic individual and group voting procedures. Joe Coates uses the simpler method of applause instead. Where we generate grids to build scenarios through morphological analysis, Joe sticks to a few scenarios of strategic visions based on key variables.	75
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Later, I asked Joe about using something like morphological analysis because I know he is well acquainted with such methods. In fact, he was one of the firsts to use them in the past. He replied that something like morphological analysis is too difficult for a large group that has to think together for a short time. In the end, I realize that the French School’s approach may be more rigorous but it is certainly harder to manage than Coates’. With his incredible talent as a facilitator, he makes his approach effective. Participants certainly interacted and shared intense, useful moments of group reflection. In addition, after all, is that not the essence of the whole exercise?	79
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	Untagged references: Unesco (1994) and Economica (2001).	