



Percept Emergent Positioning

2023



What the world needs

A crossroads is a place to reflect, to take stock, to consult maps and guides, to see the road ahead and to imagine the wonders to which it will lead.

Recent history, in many parts of the world, has been defined by a hardening – a calcification – of our everyday politics. We have naturalised the social, political and economic order as ‘law’ and treated the laws of nature as malleable. We have animated The Market with desires and habits, while denying the consciousness of living species. We have resigned ourselves to gross inequality and violent competition, while extracting and polluting with incomprehensible consequence.

The world with which we have to engage wants to distil reality into binary choices and demands that we take sides, increasingly so as our society has become more splintered and polarised. And sometimes, indeed, we must choose and take sides. But the transdisciplinary calling is more often to refuse the binaries, to navigate between the siren calls of the dichotomous opposites:

Between human health and climate health

Physical health and mental health

The public and the private

Social dis-ease and biological disease

Ecology and economy

Local and global

Markets and Marx

Our world suffers from a tyranny of ‘no alternatives’; an impoverishment of the imagination. In navigating our shared future, we are often trapped in ‘either/or’ assumptions:

That a living wage means inevitable retrenchments

That technological advancement is anti-human

That the ‘green transition’ is at the expense of economic flourishing

That the formal wage job is the only route out of precarity

These interwoven and persistent opposites pose vexing challenges that can leave us paralysed and frustrated, but they are also ripe with opportunities for learning, growth and creativity.

The value in tensions – even as we resist their pulling in opposite directions – lies in their ability to shift us from our stuckness, towards lasting, novel and creative solutions.

The future we want to live in

In a world of binaries and hardened silos, conversations are not for mutual learning or co-creation, but for proving an opponent wrong. They are rigged for conflict and competition, rather than collaboration or consensus-building. They are designed to confirm what we already know, fixing ‘us’ as separate from ‘them’.

All of this belies a fundamental truth: that our social order, our own brains, even our cosmos are elastic and expansive. Every second, in every place on earth, human beings – together with non-human beings and ecosystems – are engaged in fragile and embattled projects of social, cultural and biological reproduction. Because we are constantly in-flux, it is necessarily in the in-between spaces – including in unexpected collisions – that radical re-making and re-worlding is taking place.



We need to find a new language, one that we can learn to speak fluently, that all of our clients and stakeholders will be able to understand, that sails between the aloof, often dismissive arrogance of quantitative analysis, the sometimes alienating lexicon of the humanities and the vapid meaninglessness of corporate-speak.

We start by envisaging the world we want to be part of creating. Then we identify the key building blocks of that world. And finally, we find partners involved in constructing those building blocks, who are like-minded and share our values and vision.

What we are called to do

Our work is here: at the meeting-place of apparent opposites. It involves, in the words of anthropologist Margaret Mead, making the familiar strange, and the strange familiar. It means dismantling assumed borders and binaries, and exploding methodological silos to offer the thinking this world needs.

Many of the tools we use to navigate the world have been misfiring – the economic forecasts, political polls and financial models. We need new ways of mapping our fractal, multi-scalar, ever-changing world: maps that lay bare both the bird's-eye view and the worm's-eye view, and the webs of connection that tie them together.

These are maps for moving with, for finding unlikely connections, for telling new stories about ourselves and our relationships to human and non-human life. They are not for fixing people, places or borders in place.

This work calls for expansive methodologies.

Percept was envisaged as a multi-disciplinary consulting firm, because we never believed that a single lens was sufficient to tackle the most meaningful, and most difficult, problems. Over time, that conceptualisation has evolved from multi-disciplinary- a coming together of different perspectives, viewpoints, theoretical and practical foundations, individuals working together in teams to solve a problem- to transdisciplinary, where the prefix denotes the transgression of boundaries, a potent merging inside the team with the willingness of individuals to be transformed by the experience, a transcendence of the limits imposed by a single toolkit. Multi-disciplinary brings the base metals together; transdisciplinary performs alchemical magic with them.

In our sense-making, and ways of working, we will want to dissolve the boundaries between:

Quantitative science versus qualitative interpretation

Analytical versus creative

Bird's eye view versus worm's eye view

Head versus heart

Numbers versus stories

Big data versus thick data

This means that nothing can reside in the comfort zone. We must daily navigate being true to ourselves and what we hold dear, while risking being changed by who and what we encounter. And that means that we need soft and safe spaces, places of respite, in the shade of trees, from our adventures through the thrilling but arduous mountains.

Always, our mandate will be to listen, and remain attuned to the different registers in which the data, people, and the planet are speaking – to listen for a world 'yet-to-be-born'. What is emerging in the cracks of existing reality?



From here to there

The voyage has started. Percept is active in inequality and early childhood development, and is beginning to find footholds in climate, though a clear articulation of medium-term strategy in all these areas will be important, and important connections with areas such as nutrition are just beginning to emerge.

When the binaries start to dissolve, what we are left with is not a middle-ground. What we seek is an explosion of possibilities, which arises not from a compromise position, but a mutual activation. By finding touchpoints of genuine alignment – a place of symbiosis – new energy is unlocked.

For example, the apparent dilemma between paying a living wage and remaining competitive in the market would dissolve if the terms of competition were to shift. What if the basis of our competition were not cost but the ability to deliver value to customers and quality jobs to workers? Slow fashion proceeds exactly on this premise, with consumers willing to pay higher premiums to support just practice. This has been the driver for our work in value-based care, which seeks to align a vibrant healthcare market around a new set of metrics – the outcomes that matter to health seekers.

In dancing between the binaries, our continued work in the health sector, for example, will be guided by questions like: How do we extrapolate from the lived experiences of healthcare to create metrics for a more compassionate healthcare system? How do we surface the human story embedded in big data? How do we humanise the digital, while digitising the human?

Our climate crisis work will ask how we amplify local knowledge in global conversations; how we hold large-scale patterns together with small-scale particularities.

Values

Out with the old? In with the new? Not really. There is so much to love in the old, which still feels brand-new. What we've lovingly built at Percept over six tough, but exhilarating years is beautiful, robust, and still a marvel to behold, especially in comparison to the other models of organisational culture and purpose we've all been exposed to. And old versus new is one of the false, or at least unhelpful, dichotomies that this fresh incarnation of Percept is destined to shed.

“Building a healthier, more resilient world” still resonates as clearly as ever. But our perspective on what constitutes the “world” must extend beyond humanity, and ‘health’ must extend beyond healthcare.

To work at the interstices, in places of connection, means seeing relationships as the fundamental site of change. Working like mycelium networks, our role becomes to facilitate communication, find unlikely connections, and guide the distribution of resources to where they're most needed.

To tend to inequality, climate crisis or broken health systems is to tend to relationships, to the pacts between us that have gone wrong. A Perceptor recently articulated this work using the metaphor of blowing air into the creviced spiral of a conch shell, softening hardened dogmas, releasing new energy where there were once stagnant patterns. Tending to relationships – between business and labour, public and private sector, health providers and patients, human and non-human species, and across generations – is a type of care work. It helps us anticipate and prevent acute episodes and build a lexicon for working with and through tensions. Like blowing into the conch shell, tending to relationships also reverberates, often through webs of connection that make disproportionate impact possible.



“Many of us have been socialised to understand that constant growth, violent competition, and critical mass are the ways to create change. But emergence shows us that adaptation and evolution depend upon critical, deep and authentic connections.” – Adrienne Maree Brown

Resilience and organisational culture

It is this focus on relationships that is at the heart of Percept’s resilience. Resilience, we often forget, is a feature of ecosystems. It should not celebrate the ability of individuals to keep going in the face of unjust and exploitative systems. Instead, resilience is a state of collective continuance. It is a function of interdependence, adaptation and responsiveness. Our resilience comes from a culture and set of values that has been carefully and deliberately nurtured by its people but transcends individuals.

Ours, in the words of Adrienne Maree Brown, is not a “mile-wide, inch-deep movement”, but an inch-wide mile-deep movement designed to schism the existing paradigm. It is small, but kaleidoscopic – without being bounded. It is fractal: a space to practise and model the world we hope to see.

We have learnt that borders, disciplines and nationalisms no longer serve us. Our ‘inch-wide’ organisation will work across oceans and borders in the ways that our planet, and our problems, need.

Ours will continue to be a non-hierarchical movement, where there are roles not titles, where ‘governance’ is decentralised and focused on tending to relationships, easing communication and finding points of connection.

“We mean reinstating value systems that measure a nation’s “wealth” by the health of its land, air, and water. “Success” by the quality of our relationships and time allowed to nurture them. And “economy” by meeting the needs of the masses, not just by how well the rich are doing.” – Kaniela Ing

Team

A re-composed Percept team will need a balanced mix of disciplinary skills that span quantitative thinking (including data science, actuarial science, and/or social science) as well as qualitative thinking (including anthropology, sociology, design and/or humanities disciplines). Who we choose to bring into our team is first about an alignment of culture and values. But a close second to this is finding people with the right combination of skills, expertise and experience, who are willing to work in radically transdisciplinary ways. We are also acutely conscious of other dimensions of diversity which are fundamentally interwoven with the systems of oppression and separation that shape the world.



Clients

As the new vision gains traction, our clients will be companies, organisations and institutions grappling with 'wicked' problems; those seeking to dissolve an impasse or a breakdown in relationship; and those who see the value of complementarity, transdisciplinarity and multi-scalar approaches. Many of these clients will be confronting the collapse and blurring of challenges that are nearby (geographically and chronologically) and those that are far off. They will be seeking a partner, not simply a provider. And perhaps most importantly, they will share our vision of a healthier, more resilient world.

As well as defining the areas in which we choose to work, we must choose the clients with whom we partner with conscience and consciousness. What are the attributes of the clients we enjoy working with? How do we seek out such clients, and avoid those who drain our energies? Our intention is to set up a parallel process for the Percept collective to think through our client relationships in light of the new vision, considering who we have been indifferent about, which relationships we want to nurture, and who we would love to work with in future.

Climate change

One of the areas of work in which Percept would like to establish a presence is in the broad area of climate change. A one-page summary to guide strategic development was circulated to interested team members in August, and is reproduced below:

For most of its first five years, Percept's focus has been on the sectors in which its team members have built deep expertise over the course of their careers: healthcare and financial services. Recently, opportunities have opened to us in other areas, such as early childhood development and inequality; our keenness to apply our skills in these areas is driven by the fact that they play a fundamental role in society and the economy which plays out in our main areas of expertise.

There is perhaps no more fundamental and pivotal challenge to global society now than the climate crisis. Over the past six months, several Perceptors have felt a calling to do work in this area, without a clear direction on how exactly. It could be argued that this is an unwarranted spreading of attention in a small team, but exploration of possibilities in this area is justified on two main grounds:

- *Climate change is a force of fundamental and overwhelming importance which will shape the risks faced by societies and the lives led by individuals over the coming decades; its effects will be felt throughout the fabric of human existence, including the domains of human health and economic resilience.*
- *Though we can claim no specialist expertise, it seems probable that the range of skills within Percept and the transdisciplinary approach we have cultivated will have value in thinking about how to deal with this unique challenge to the planet, in ways that are likely to be different to what is offered by others.*

There are however significant challenges to Percept meaningfully contributing to and participating in this space:

- *No specialist climate science, mitigation or policy expertise;*
- *A densely populated service supply area with a high degree of competition for donor money; and*
- *Few identifiable private-sector consulting opportunities, cutting out a significant portion of our joint networks.*

A high-level outline for making progress in this area over the latter half of 2022 must include at least the following:

- *Deepening climate knowledge across several team members in order to lay a foundation*
- *Building a map of the landscape*



- *Understand our potential competitors (through a lens of potential collaboration)*
- *Forging relationships with potential funders, partners and door-openers*
- *Fleshing out strategy and identifying niche areas*
- *Beginning to publish thought pieces to establish a presence, as a precursor to building a climate reputation*

Possible areas:

- *Influencing asset managers to change corporate behaviour through the redirection of capital to radically reduce net emissions*
- *Transdisciplinary evaluation of adaptive capacity in the face of water scarcity and increasingly frequent flooding*



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