

Questioning Scenarios

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Not Worth the Effort

With a lead article from Graham Molitor, this symposium on scenario planning brings together scenario planning practitioners and theorists to debate the question: Is scenario planning worth the effort?

Molitor, with his fifty years as a futurist argues that scenario planning is not worth the effort. He writes: "I can't recall any personal experience with scenario exercises that was worth the time and effort spent. Among major companies, business groups, and government offices I never saw scenarios make any major contribution or breakthrough ...despite what some colleagues brag about."¹

Worse, for Molitor, scenarios reinforce the present, thus defeating the purpose of most futuristic projects, which is to create a distance from the present so the present and thereby future (and even the interpretation of the past) can be transformed. He writes: "At best, most scenarios merely reinforce and regard what participants already basically knew."

Action Learning and Strategic Conversations

Fabrice Roubelat, Associate Professor/futurist at the University of Poitiers in France is equally suspicious of scenarios. Given the exponential growth of scenario planning since the events of 9/11 (and we can since Gore's call to arms against climate change, SARS and the Asian Financial crisis, and now the USA debt crisis) Roubelat wonders if it is worth promoting the practice of scenario planning. However, he concludes that scenarios are worth doing provided that action learning/planning is built into the process and not as something that is done later, after the scenario planning. Moreover, he argues that scenario planning must not only use methodologies that bring in the worldviews of different stakeholders but examine how these worldviews move through time. And what moves them through time is the agency of individual actors. Scenarios thus can be overly structural forgetting the capacity of individuals to recreate the future, to recover agency.

Robert Burke, former Ceo of Century Mines and Car Lovers – that is a user of scenario planning – and now Director of Programs at Mt Eliza Executive Education, Melbourne Business School, Australia, agrees with Molitor's assessment of the limitations of scenarios. For him, the root issue is the claim of strategy. Strategic planning, for Burke, is of little value. The only real strategy is what organizations actually do. Futures studies and scenarios are of utility insofar as they create new conversations that mimic the new future that is desired. Concludes Burke, "scenarios are not about fore-

casting or even alternatives but about having deeper more effective conversations about world's we wish to create."

Jui-Kuei Chen, Chair of the Graduate Institute of Futures Studies, Tamkang University and business consultant, writes that scenario planning, when done well, can lead to organizational learning. Scenarios work best in a peer-to-peer setting where orthodoxies can be challenged, and agency affirmed over structure. However, the challenges, as Chen writes, in disobeying reality are multiple: first, scenarios need time in which to develop; second, they need skillful encouragement by futurists; third, the information gained from the scenarios must fit the issues that the organization is facing, and lastly, the results gained from scenario planning may not be immediately relevant to the organization. These challenges can be met by using other futures methods when appropriate and remembering the real goal of creating a learning organization.

Theorizing Scenarios

Angela Wilkinson, Director of Scenario Planning and Futures Research at the University of Oxford, argues that we need to better theorize the practice of scenarios. As with other writers, she argues that it is not forecasting (the most probable) but foresight (a set of the plausible) that is of import. Instead of being stuck as Homo-Deductivist (formal and quantitative) or as Homo-Constructivist (intuitive, story telling, focused on many), Wilkinson suggests Homo-Abductivist (imagination followed by causal analysis). Moving scenarios into new theoretical frameworks, Wilkinson sees as crucial if we wish to play an enhanced role in public policy and strategy development. The two frameworks she recommends are causal textures theory and sense making. Both conceptual frameworks invite depth; wherein ontological and epistemological considerations regarding time, choice and action are clarified upfront.

Peter Hayward and Rowena Morrow futurists/academics at Swinburne University find theoretical advancement coming from Wilber's integral theory. An integral approach brings in four added dimensions: a perception of the selves that perceive the situation; the actions of the selves that bring forth a desired future; the shared sense of reality that is created together; and a shared sense of the desired world that action creates together. Thus individual and collective at inner and outer levels are used to enhance the reflexivity (selves and groups reflect on their constructions of reality) of the scenario process. As with Wilkinson's framework, depth is achieved. Hayward and Morrow write that their approach works best when organizations wish to explore the interplay between the external environment and the actors who live in that environment. This interplay can lead to breakthroughs.

Andrew Curry, Futurist at The Futures Company, England, theorizes that "Futures work can be thought of as a devise for 'disturbing the present.'" Futures studies helps us see the present differently, with new identities. Scenario work, writes Curry, "is a process which is about learning and negotiation, about constructing social meaning." Scenarios are thus poor forecasting tools, but they are much better at generating foresight. Concludes Curry, "it should be our challenge, as practitioners, to turn that foresight into insight."

Gary Saliba, Futurist and Adjunct Professor at Charles Stuart University, Australia, as with other writers finds the beauty in the scenario process that of meaning making. He finds utility in scenarios in that they help us understand the deeper mental models of all the actors involved (including the consulting futurist). He writes: " a shift in our mental models can affect our sense of identity and our personal metaphor (unconscious scripts that shape the current way we live our lives)."

Most importantly, though, the scenario process makes the future real. Instead of the theoretical distance gained from scenarios, Saliba offers us futures intimacy. In one project with a resource company, one executive commented: "these stories were so compelling I was consumed by them and could feel the pressures of what could be in the future."

Exploring mental models, worldviews, instead of increased complexity and confusion, can result in clarity. Saliba quotes one CEO of a large educational institute: "After we had worked through the uncertainties I had a fundamental shift inside me that took away the fear of the complexity and the uncertainty ...I have a deep feeling that inspires me that we are on the right track and that we will be successful despite the change."

Scenarios can thus move from the challenge of the weight of structure to individual agency. And it is this, for Saliba, that makes the difference.

Decisionmaking and Meeting the Needs of Clients

Anthony Judge, formerly responsible of the online Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential, as always does not just write about depth but through the use of metaphors takes us to deeper unknown places. He opens up the future by challenging all frameworks. He does this initially by challenging the "continued assumption that somehow a degree of consensus can be achieved amongst 'rational' people as to the best way forward." Scenario responses as well are rarely rational ... rather Judge remarks that the normal response is one of avoidance, sometimes overt and sometimes covert. Covert is especially challenging as a full range of definitional games (narrowing the time frame, for example) are used. This is more challenging when the scenarios are extra-systemic, across knowledge boundaries as institutions do not have the policy frameworks to implement.

For Futurist Marcus Barber, the key issue is to match futures methods with the needs of the client. Barber writes that he guides less than 10% of potential clients to the scenario process. As important, if one decides to use scenarios is which scenario method to use. For example, the quick Coffee cup method where the future of x is considered or the "Normative" Big vision which explores what the world will look like given the achievement of the vision. Time, cost, depth of inquiry, contingency planning, team building and creativity and strategic value are all factors in deciding which is the appropriate scenario model to use. Concludes Barber, "Whether the need is new insights, removing organizational blinkers, better customer relationships, team building or intellectual naval gazing, the need and process must be matched accordingly."

Jordi Serra, futurist at Periscopi, Barcelona forcefully responds to Molitor by asserting that scenarios are worth the effort! The challenges facing futures studies are enormous: "our own brain, ill suited to deal with change and novelty; our social and cultural systems, for which change is tantamount to calamity, and; last but not least, our political systems (particularly democratic ones) that are structurally entangled with short term horizons." And scenarios can help in dealing with these challenges.

Elina Hiltunen, Futurist and Strategic Foresighting Manager at the Nokia Group, Finland, as well finds scenarios valuable tools. By helping us prepare for possible eventualities, they make the organization more flexible and more innovative. Two dimensions are critical for Hiltunen: they create a new process in the organization (new tools, different ways of thinking) and they help create new products and services. For this to happen, Hiltunen argues they must be taken seriously by the organization.

Award winning fiction writer Rosaleen Love, concludes the responses to Molitor by asking a different question: "who will be using scenario planning ten to twenty years from now? Future decision-makers will have one thing in common that will set them apart from today's groups. They will have grown up playing with scenarios in the various shared worlds of computer, video and online games" (and their future incarnations). Scenario planning thus will be not unusual but a social technology that will be part of the "collective intelligence" of the future.

Molitor rounds up the symposium by stating that if it works, use it. However, as a "pick and shovel" researcher, for Molitor the value is in mining and finding patterns of change that reveal and reinforce the trend, direction and timing of impending developments.

Concluding Comments

To these marvelous responses, I would reinforce/add the following.

First, scenarios can be usefully theorized as distancing us from the present. This conceptual distance allows us see the present or future anew ...the distance can be temporal (going back and forth in time) or can be epistemological (seeing the issue from different ways of knowing).

Second, scenarios are not just about moving from forecasting to foresight but they are useful in creating the preferred future, in the victory of agency over structure. The preferred future, can be judged against, a worst case possibility or a business as usual. It can be compelling, helping create different worlds, different possibilities. Scenarios thus open up the future and then they can help in creating the desired future.

Third, scenarios are different from Alternative Futures, which is, as Dator suggests (2008), a far broader concept, being based on historical archetypes, deep patterns that reoccur through time.

Fourth, scenarios should not be seen in isolation to futures theory and practice. They are one method, one approach amongst many. Whatever model of futures studies one uses it is clear, reliance on one method will almost always leads to problems given that we live in a differentiated complex and transforming world. For example, in my own work, I use scenarios in phase four of the futures studies process. Initially, I map the past, present and future through the futures triangle, then disturb this map through

emerging issues analysis. Following these two approaches, I explore the timing of the future – the macrohistorical patterns. This is followed by an exploration of depth – the alternative ways of knowing via causal layered analysis. Now that the past, present and future have been explored through multiple methods, I introduce scenarios. I do so not obedient to any particular model of scenario planning but rather give participants choices (single variable, double variable, archetypes, integrated, and so forth). The last part of the process is creating a desired future, backcasting from this future to the present, and concluding with action learning the next steps. Scenarios thus are a step in the process, not the entire process.

Finally, scenarios have an inner process as well. That is, as the authors have explored, scenarios need to not only account for the changing meanings of individuals in changing external worlds but as well the inner landscape of the inner maps held by selves. Scenarios can map these inner stories/metaphors. I use this approach by moving from the preferred future – the desired organizational future – to the disowned future. The disowned scenario is what is seen as outside the individual's or organization's identity horizon ...what it is pushing up against, saying it is against. The integrated future becomes the integration of the preferred and the disowned. Doing this requires not just an understanding of external events and trends, images of the future and critical uncertainties, but an inner map of the organization's psyche. As the authors in this symposium suggest, it is a broadened and deepened understanding of the construction of reality that is crucial for conversations that lead to foresight and insight (at inner and outer levels) and then action at inner and outer levels.

I wish to thank colleagues, particularly Graham Molitor, for taking time to write for this symposium. As scenarios become more popular, as digital natives age, bringing in the broader gaze of futures studies will become increasingly important to ensure that scenarios are used to their fullest capacity.

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Notes

1. All quotations from this issue of JFS.

References

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