

I participated in the 5-day ***School of International Futures*** (SOIF) Workshop last week — what follows in this blog are some of the things that resonated with me on Days 4 and 5.

I blogged the first three days here: [Day 1](#) | [Days 2 and 3](#)







## Too Long; Didn't Read (TL;DR)

Scenarios are a hugely important aspect of the futuring process. Getting from scenarios to strategy is an art form, but it would seem that thinking on incorporating predictive data analytics into the futuring process is still at a very early stage of development. It may even define the 'cutting edge of futuring' practice? My week at SOIF was everything an intensive learning week needs to be...exhausting, full to the brim with new ideas and the motivation to transfer as much of the learning as is possible into my organisation.

## What we learned

### From Scenarios to Strategies

We were introduced to the "foresight onion", in which we start with our organisation and work outwards through

1. my organisation's transactional environment
2. the surrounding strategic context and
3. the wider contextual environment

This is a reminder that Futuring requires us to look at more than just our organisation, we must be external facing because we need context — i.e. what else is going to be happening in the future that will impact us — the future is 'out there', not 'in here'.

This seems to be an art form and it was mentioned that getting the project scope right (Day 1) is pretty critical, because if you try and "boil the ocean" and look at everything, your project will flounder.

We looked at how you would fit Foresighting into an organisation's traditional strategy process (below). It starts with, oddly enough, "set a vision". This presumes of course that you've done the necessary work to create a vision of where you want to be in the future, but a number of people acknowledged, in side discussions with me, that this seemed to be mostly an informal process, if there was a recognizable process at all...

Set a Vision	Where are we? Where do we want to be?
Develop and test options	How will we get there?
Strategic priorities	
Strategic Planning	Who must do what and by when?

## Monitoring System Change How are we doing?

It seems to me that creating futures scenarios is a much more robust method of developing a strategic vision than simply gathering a few top people in a room until the white smoke issues from the chimney.

Undertaking a futures scenarios process requires (1) that you look across the entire Foresight onion and that you (2) also engage with people across the organisation and outside of it. Both seem like sensible strategic processes.

In the local UK health and care sector we have such a process, it's called the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA). Perfect. That's what I'll use to build futuring methods into our strategy development.

This all seems very obvious, but for me this was followed by another 'a-ha' moment.

Futures scenarios could improve the way we monitor system change. I twigged to this some years ago when I was trying to understand the role of modelling within the intelligence process. If you undertake trend analysis and use it to forecast, how do you interpret it? More importantly, how many interpretations are possible? Usually, many. So many that often forecasts are unusable on their own... Heresy, I hear you say?

The truth is that analytical forecasting is only really powerful, when you've taken the time to model your expectations before you undertake the trend analysis — how does your forecast differ from what you expected it to be? Now you can look at the processes underlying that. This is, in my view, much more powerful than throwing some numbers on the wall and then thinking about what it means.

Scenario development is powerful because the process forces us to build a model that we then call a 'scenario'.

You have to examine assumptions and test what happens if your assumptions are wrong.

This seems to be a more rigorous method than I have been exposed to in traditional organisational strategy development. Maybe there is a reason that strategies often do not survive leadership change. If they were built around a leader's vision of what an organisation needs to do, rather than where an organisation should be in the future — based on a more rigorous scenarios based approach, maybe we should expect the vision to fade.

If I got a vote, I'd take the scenarios based approach over the visionary leader approach. Just

saying.

Food for thought. I wasn't expecting to have my 'strategic planning' assumptions challenged at a Futuring workshop.

## **Vision Scenario**

A good vision inspires and "should be judged on the clarity of its values not the clarity of its implementation path" (Donella Meadows).

Our preferred future is not necessarily the same as a 'visionary' future. Preferred futures can be constructed at different levels: personal, organisational, national, global (think onion).

A vision scenario is a scenario that requires that 'you' and/or 'your' organisation have 'agency', i.e. that you can act on the strategic vision you've built. It really can't be composed of general 'motherhood' statements.

It must be an inspirational story that resonates. This is often termed the 5th scenario.

There are four different ways of building a strategy using scenarios:

1. The Robust Strategy — one that works regardless of the scenario
2. A Bet the Farm Strategy — like Brexit, this is the default strategy when you fail to prepare a strategy that will work over multiple plausible futures scenarios
3. Hedge Bet Strategy — you develop four scenarios, one in each quadrant of the Deductive Scenario (2x2) matrix
4. Core + Satellite Strategy — having developed a number of scenarios you find one to be Core and worth investing in, while taking care prepare should one of the satellite scenarios come about.

## **Policy Options and Wind Tunneling**

It seems that there are four types of policies (I don't work in policy so this was new to me):

1. Strategic responses to threats and opportunities
2. Advocacy — key areas of focus
3. Product and service offerings
4. New impact areas

If you map your options against the deductive scenarios + your vision scenario, you can

identify which options stack up against those scenarios and which ones don't. Options that work against all developed scenarios are "no regret" options.

<b>Options</b>	Vision Scenario	Scenario 1	Scenario 2	Scenario 3	Scenario 4
New Service X,Y, Z Network	+	+	-	-	-
segmentation and investment	+	+	+	++	++
Regulation	+	-	+	-	-
...					
...					
...					

Wind tunneling's value is in the strategic conversations that can then be held and which may shift decision-makers assumptions about the future. This is a bottom-up process that complements the traditional strategic planning process (top-down), because it provides relevance/texture to the discussion.

## Back-Casting

During the monitoring phase of a futuring project you look for what might be the earliest and clearest signal of one of the future scenarios (1, 2, 3, 4, vision) that you have developed.

These scenarios, as previously discussed, are the models that you are testing, but this time by hunting for signals. Looking for 'early signals' without knowing what you are looking for is going to be much more difficult. Scenarios make this easier.

It occurs to me that this also makes it much easier for organisations to be data-driven, because they can use their big-data approach here to test their 'scenario models'. Seems like a very sensible way forward on the integration of predictive-analytics and futuring.

## Building Strategic Capability

How do you get your futures messages to be taken up by colleagues and clients?

- Heart
- Head
- Hands



This is key to the development of strategic capability development. You need a strong narrative that engages, followed by plausibility, coherent thinking and finally, you've got to be able to deliver. Under promise; over deliver (good advice for any type of project).

Designing futures projects so that they will succeed:

1. Understand how the outcomes will become inputs, e.g. how do we increase innovation pace?
2. Embed futures into your processes (e.g. UK Cabinet Office): aging, globalism, climate change, digitization, security...
3. Simpler is better, because trying to explain or share what you did must produce a good clear narrative.

Another important thing to think about are the 'mindsets and mental models' held by senior managers within organisations (similar challenge is found in basic change management principles): Managers — focus on managing the organisation, the Entrepreneurs focus on growing the organisation and the Visionary want to transform the organisation. Recognize these different mindsets and you might be able to move from unconstructive to constructive conversations.

The basis of building capacity has to start somewhere.

Some of the reasons why Foresighting is not adopted by an organization:

1. fear
2. lack of evidence for effectiveness
3. short-term focus — no time to change
4. inertia — it takes effort/energy to change
5. people think its already being done
6. no culture of futuring within the organization
7. lack of resources
8. it's an alien process
9. ignorance is bliss

How to do Foresighting well?

- build a credible team
- do your scoping very well
- focus on the people — take stakeholder analysis seriously

- take an ecosystem approach to create future ready organisations that can adapt as the future unfolds
- make sure to follow up scenario development with measurement and monitoring activities — demonstrate impact
- agree criteria that demonstrate impact

Invest in capability development across the ‘capability matrix’.

	<b>Organization</b>	<b>People</b>
<b>Assets</b>	Structure & Capability	Staff and Leaders (Champions)
<b>Processes</b>	Programming	Communications

## What we did

On Thursday, Day 4, there was a flurry of activity including several short sessions simulating key parts of the futuring process — participants were reminded that although we were responding to a real client, understanding the futuring process was the main learning from the day — content was of secondary importance (note that participants worked like Trojans, and as a small group facilitator I was exhausted just watching them!).

**Visioning:** Each group developed a vision or statement of their desired future in 2030. A short statement of a couple sentences with a few bullet points speaking to the challenge: “What does a desired future of digital technology and public interest look like in 2030?”

We were all reminded that a “vision takes the form of a 5th scenario, which includes positive elements from the other scenarios, but still takes account of the drivers of change...”

**Policy Options:** There was short exercise to identify plausible policy options that the client, Luminare, might pursue.

**Client Feedback:** The bulk of the afternoon on Day 4 was spent developing a futures presentation for the client. A presentation that was meant to Challenge the client, Alert the client to new developments and Equip the client to break down the key drivers and factors that contribute to the evolution of the project.

Presentations on the Friday were made to the Client over Skype — and they were all excellent presentations given the constraints heaped on participants.

Friday also provided the participants with some space for reflection of the week's events and finally with a chance to sit down with one of the SOIF team to discuss their personal/organisational projects.

## What were my take away messages

Capacity building and getting senior leadership engagement in Foresighting is *\_the\_* most common issue for Foresight practitioners.

A week at a SOIF retreat is an intense week with a very eclectic group of driven individuals — who are genuinely curious about how things work. Nice. The participants ranged across all stages of career development, came from many different sectors and at least a dozen countries...the diversity was amazing and so much talent. Many thoughtful conversations were had during the 12 hour days and information evening social events — many of which, I am sure, will continue long after we get 'back to our desks'.

I just doubled my network of people with Foresight knowledge and I added the first, but I hope not the last, Clown to my *Linkedin* network!

## This futures blog

This blog series is about how we create 'healthy places' and what our possible 'futures' could be given current trends and momentum within society, the economic and political systems, and the environment. I use the plural 'futures' intentionally, because our future is not predetermined (I hope), we can and should work towards the future we want. This blog aims to generate discussion (maybe even some debate) around 'Healthy places futures' in the hope that if we all put our minds to it, a collective vision may emerge to inform any strategy we might put in place to get us to our preferred future. We'll be leaning heavily on futuring tools found on our Shaping Tomorrow hosted website: [phd.shapingtomorrow.com](http://phd.shapingtomorrow.com).

*The future is already here — it's just not very evenly distributed* (William Gibson 1993).