

**PUBLISHED IN FUTURES RESEARCH QUATERLY,
SUMMER 2006, VOLUME 22, NUMBER 2**

WORLD FUTURE SOCIETY, USA

**FROM ANTICIPATION TO ACTION: HOW TO PUT
FORESIGHT AND FUTURE THINKING INTO
CONCRETE ACTION**

by

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We all know that anticipating the future and developing scenarios is paramount for those organizations aiming at sustainable success and not only at long-run survival. Yet, the most difficult step is getting from thinking and planning to concrete actions and to visible, palpable results.

This article gives examples from both a large and a small organization, shows how future thinking has been transformed into concrete results, and how it has changed the organizations and made them future-fit. The examples have one common denominator: regardless of the size or type of the business organization, they all have to cope with uncertainty about the future. Their most important concern is, "What should we do and how can we master the future changes and challenges?" What they are looking for are fewer questions, and more answers and ideas with regard to their own strategy.

Three observations show the dilemma of the strategic planner, who should better be a "strategic implementer":

- What should be done for the future is most often directly derived from today's strategies, and not by taking into account the future changes with their new opportunities and threats. But we like to hope that this past behavior is on the road to extinction.
- Organizations listen to intelligent lectures about the future, ask brilliant experts how the future might look, get various ideas about the change of the world, but their most urgent questions: "What does this mean for our company, our markets, etc.? What should we change and how?" remain unanswered.

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- Corporations do explore their future environments, run remarkable futurist exercises and come to brilliant new ideas. But when it boils down to implementation, the momentum stalls. Either the responsible managers are not able to translate their ideas into a new strategy or they are afraid to tackle the outcome because it requires a tremendous, and thus an uncomfortable, change.

The crucial point is where implementation strategies should be put into action. But how can a corporation successfully implement the outcome of a foresight or other strategic exercise?

In order to understand the process, let us have a look at the scenario method.

WHAT ARE SCENARIO TECHNIQUES?

The hallmark of scenario techniques is to create alternatives in case of uncertainty and to assemble them into consistent scenarios. These scenarios are descriptions of the future corporate environment and cover the so-called “edges” of the scenario funnel.

Why do we have to take very contrasting future situations into account? Because nobody knows what the exact outcome of the future will be. If you are prepared for very different future situations, you will be able to deal with any scenario between the two extreme archetypes.

Scenario techniques link these scenarios to the present corporate situation including existing goals/strategies, and strengths/weaknesses. They help you design strategies to seize future opportunities and turn eventual threats to your favor. In order to deal efficiently with different challenges, threats and opportunities in the future, a master guideline fitting both scenario extremes should be developed.

Other features taken into account are wild cards such as technological breakthroughs in a specific area, an ecological disaster, a stock exchange crash or a sudden regional war. Scenario techniques show you how wild cards may affect your organization and how you can develop preventive measures as a form of “immunization” against the worst effects of these events.

Scenario techniques encompass the following eight steps:

Step 1: Task Analysis

Analyze the subject's structure, the existing goals and strategies as well as strengths and weaknesses. The subject under study can be a company, a strategic business unit, a product family, a product, a subject outside a company (issue scenarios) or you as a person addressing your career and life planning.

Step 2: External Influence Analysis

Here, we analyze external influence areas such as customers, competitors, technology, economy, society, politics and legislation, as well as their interrelationship and the system dynamics (driving and driven forces). We learn as well to use the leverage effect of the driving forces.

Step 3: Projections

Anticipate the future development of the influence factors and create alternatives in case of uncertainties.

Step 4: Consistency Analysis

Assemble all alternatives according to their consistency, so as to form logical and plausible future scenario structures and select the most contrasting ones for the interpretation. Special software for scenario calculation is available.

Step 5: Scenario Interpretation

Describe and visualize the scenarios in an imaginative way, analyze their system dynamics and changes in the future.

Step 6: Consequence Analysis

Identify future opportunities and threats in both scenarios and develop action items that maximize opportunities and turn risks into opportunities.

Step 7: Wild Card Analysis

Analyze possible unlikely but disruptive events (wild cards) and their effects on the subject under study, in order to develop preventive measures to reduce the worst effects of these events and to pre-define reactions.

Step 8: Scenario Transfer

Design a master guideline and a new, sustainable vision, which can be successfully realized under both scenarios. Such a master guideline tests innovative ideas from one scenario against the second scenario, creating a resultant pool of ideas compatible with both futures. A monitoring or strategic navigation system helping to fine-tune the master guideline has to be installed as well.

CASE STUDY 1

The first company is RGB Vienna, a large Austrian banking group, No. 1 in their region, but with a traditional and odd image of a "farmer's bank." The group is composed of many autonomous outlets and has a cooperative structure. Before the beginning of this foresight project the staff's mentality was more "no change" than "yes change" minded.

A new CEO recognized the group's structure, mentality and therefore, its great risks for the future. According to this CEO's analysis, this banking group would never survive in a dramatically changing world. Therefore, he convinced a steering committee to start an in-depth organizational change process.

The core part was a foresight project in order to confront the team with major changes and to make them able to cope with future risks and challenges.

They elected a team of 16 decision-makers, representing all the various strategic business units of the group, for the foresight workshops. The team went through eight of these intensive workshops, each lasting two or three days.

They developed two scenarios, each describing 70 factors of their banking environment, and derived new options for their future, fused into a Master Guideline that is robust under changing future environments.

What are the Key Success Factors of the Project Implementation?

Three factors were paramount for their success:

- An open communication at all management and staff levels before and during the project and in the implementation phase.
- Preparing the team for new thinking, acting and new ideas. This included an intensive training in team building and team work as well as in foresight methodologies and particularly scenario techniques. It also meant analyzing the key success factors of other, very different organizations, such as the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, a successful soccer club, Ajax Amsterdam, the Catholic church, and outstanding examples of industry and service organizations.
- An enlargement of the foresight team in the projections and the consequences in order to open participants' minds and to integrate the creativity of other external and internal experts.

Communication Strategy Before Project Start

The communication strategy started well in advance, before the project kick-off, with a contest for the best project name and project logo. Everybody in the group was invited to participate in this contest.

This meant going public with the project and informing the staff about the project's mission, goals, strategies, processes, etc. This was opposite to what is usually done in companies. In most cases, the top management disappears for some days in strategic workshops and nobody has a clue what they are talking about. In case of doubt, everybody suspects that they will cut costs and lay off people, the biggest fear of European employees.

The project's name was STEP (Scenarios, Trends, Evolutions, and Projections) and the staff member who created this name got a nice incentive, a two-week trip to the USA. The same incentive went to the staff member who designed the project logo, a transformation of the old RGB symbol into a modern future-oriented design.

Various products were created, such as t-shirts, glasses and mugs with the project name and logo. One office was transformed into the STEP office, where everybody could get information and

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details about the project, the results, and even the funny anecdotes of the workshops. Whitney Houston's song "Step by Step" was chosen as the project song. All these products and activities created a strong team and an enthusiastic STEP-spirit, which is still alive some years after the project's end.

Communication Strategy During the Project

The whole staff received regular information about the project process, progress, and results of the steps via their internal magazine and their Intranet.

As they liked the competitive spirit, a new contest open to everybody in the group was then run on the best scenario story and scenario visualization after the communication of the scenarios. And here as well, the winners received the same incentives as for the name and the logo.

In order to find new alliances within the banking group and to prepare people for the implementation, two workshops were opened up to a larger team from the banking group. They worked with 50 participants in six subgroups. Also, external experts and people well known for their critical attitude towards the existing banking system were invited and contributed in a very fruitful way to the results.

At the end of the foresight process, professional film makers produced a film showing the history of the organization, beginning more than 120 years ago until today, the scenarios and the main results, thus inspiring involvement and emotion.

Communication Strategy After the Project

In order to communicate the project and its results according to their philosophy, they ran a road show in the four regions involved. This was introduced by the responsible team member from that particular region. After the film presentation, an information program showed the main results and the projects, inviting appropriate people to participate in the presentation.

Each staff member got a copy of the film either as videotape or DVD and they presented this film to their family and friends. This was the beginning of a mindset change. Now we are proud of our group.

Communication During the Implementation

We installed a coaching group, integrating members of the core team to run or support the following tasks:

- Coach the sub-projects deriving from the corporate project,
- Install a strategic navigation system,
- Communicate the navigation system's results to the group,
- Coach the communication networks.

A permanent communication tool has been established via the corporate Intranet, where the staff are regularly invited to contribute their ideas into projects and to evaluate results.

Where Is This Banking Group Today?

A profound cultural change has taken place. The old conglomerate is now transformed into a group who:

- Shares the same values,
- Lives the same culture,
- Puts into action synergy effects,
- Finds a balance between autonomy and cooperation.

The RBG group has gained a stronger market position in Austria and abroad, mainly in the new Eastern European countries. New services such as logistics and others have been successfully put into action.

The staff's mentality have completely changed. Now they are proud to be part of this group and nobody mentions the odd image of the farmers' bank.

CASE STUDY 2

This was a start-up company, founded by a brilliant engineer holding a patent in laser beam positioning and deviation. It got its first financial support from a venture capital group. Its first products were applications in laser material processing.

After some years they had a staff of 20 people, and the CEO and his team started a foresight process in order to find out what comes after the improvement and better integration of industrial systems. The question was raised: are there other markets beyond material processing?

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After an intensive, but more condensed foresight exercise than the banking group (only two workshops of two and three days), they came to new strategies, which helped them make a quantum leap in their business development. Even as a small company, they stated in their vision, “the world is our market and our knowledge our resource.” The new Master Guideline now comprises two business lines:

- One for the professional market with more applications in material processing (marking, welding, cutting, drilling...) and a new line in medical applications (ophthalmology, dermatology, con-focal microscopy) and new maintenance services;
- A new line of business for the consumer market is under development, using laser applications for health, wellness, fitness and beauty. Here, they have to develop new alliances with image partners in the consumer market.

Within a few years, they have tripled their revenue and founded a company in the USA.

What are the Key Success Factors?

- Open communication with the venture capitalist, customers, suppliers, knowledge partners around the world, both before and during the project;
- Creation of an open IT-platform accessible for all business partners in their network;
- Involvement of key customers and suppliers in the projections and consequences of the scenario project;
- Realization of a common implementation with the venture capitalist, customers, suppliers and knowledge partners. They are now all in the same boat and there is a win-win strategy for everybody or a lose-lose strategy for everybody, so they are bound to be successful together;
- Being clear that they have to think and act globally—the applications are so specialized that economies of scale can only be achieved at a worldwide level.

LESSONS FROM THESE EXAMPLES

However big or small your company is, think right from the beginning in terms of implementation.

- Integrate as many useful business partners or alliances as you can.
- Involve the people concerned and make them stakeholders of the change process. (This facilitates and speeds up implementation, avoids the “not-invented-here” effect, and prevents actions from snipers and project killers.)
- Create emotions, passion and a competitive and playful spirit. Don’t forget we are not computers, but human beings.
- Go public with the project and you and your team are bound to be successful.

FROM THE ORGANIZATIONAL TO THE PERSONAL IMPLEMENTATION

Organizations are not the only ones bound to think and act future-wise; everybody has a responsibility for his/her own future and to prepare it pro-actively. Life insurances, pension schemes, and financial placements all prove that people do save something for a rainy day. Parents prepare for the future of their children and everybody has ideas and plans for tomorrow. So, thinking about the future and preparing ourselves to cope with the changes and the hazards of life is not new to us; we already do it in our private sphere, and it is just normal.

But is this enough or can we do more? If you understand yourself as the CEO of your life, you should go far beyond insurance policies and asset management. You can apply most futurists’ tools in a “softer” version to yourself and so become the creator of your own future.

The before-mentioned method can be fully applied to a person in order to develop alternative futures and to define a sustainable strategy for the next years.

According to the Chinese proverb, “If you want to change the world, start in your own house.” So responsible managers should—before they run foresight exercises for their corporations—develop their personal futures. This sensitizes them much better than any other tool for the key qualities needed for such a process:

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- Consciousness,
- Creativity,
- Open mindedness,
- Change attitude,
- Ethics.