



Scenario-Based Planning: A Tool for Anticipating and Preparing for an Uncertain Future

What is scenario-based planning?

Scenario-based planning is a proven method to help organizations successfully anticipate and prepare for changes beyond their control. Following a step-by-step process, planners research key “drivers of change” for the future; write stories, or scenarios, about the future that account for these drivers of change; analyze the scenarios to determine their implications for the organization; and develop strategies that can be implemented *today* to ensure success *tomorrow*. A scenario is not a prediction; it is a *plausible* future reality that uncovers potential that can meaningfully impact an organization. Scenarios are tools for strategic decision-making. The work and thinking accomplished during the process of writing scenarios guides decision-making and tactical choices during uncertain times.

Scenario planning is NOT a dusty strategic planning notebook that sits on a shelf. It’s practical, with focused insights that complement an organization’s strategies for continuous improvement.

Why is it important?

What will technology be like in 5 years? 10 years? 15 years? What about the state of the economy or the political environment? We can make educated guesses to answer these questions but we all know that the future is unpredictable. And yet we make decisions every day based upon what we *think* is going to happen tomorrow, next year, or in the next decade. For educators, anticipating and responding effectively to the many forces that will impact teaching and learning in the future is critical – for the success of educational organizations and, most of all, for the success of students.

In education, it seems we can no longer look to the past for examples of what to expect in the future. Educators must learn how to think beyond their own experiences and aggregate collective knowledge to envision *plausible* futures. Doing so deliberately, systematically, and with guidance can help educators plan and prepare for an uncertain future, not only to capitalize on opportunity but to stave off obsolescence.

How Does It Work?

Scenarios emerge from a framework created by selecting two “critical uncertainties” to focus upon. Critical uncertainties are generated by exploring the broad range of factors, in multiple domains such as technology, economics, and politics that are likely to drive change in the future. In order to develop a useful scenario framework, one must determine which of the many influences that could nudge the future in different directions are the most critical to the topic at hand. Although much about the future is uncertain, there is information all around us today that helps us make sense of what is likely to occur tomorrow. Trends reveal patterns of behavior that help to resolve some of the uncertainty about the future. Things *will* change. But we can, as Buckminster Fuller charges us, become “architects of the

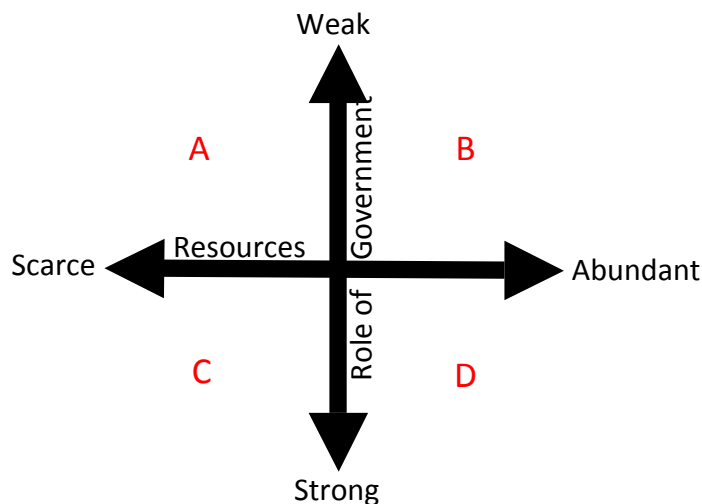
future” rather than victims — if we examine what we know about the world and consider the likely implications of that knowledge.

The scenario framework results in four potential scenarios for the future. Each scenario is plausible, challenging, and different from the others. Each presents a different story about the way the future may unfold as various uncertainties resolve themselves over time and, thus, each requires a different response from the organization. Analyzing the implications of each potential future, and developing a variety of strategic options to ensure success in each, provides the most robust foundation upon which to develop a strategic plan.

What does it look like?

Figure 1 is a scenario framework for a school district concerned about its ability to serve all students well in the year 2020. Two factors have been identified as highly uncertain *and* most critical to the district’s future – the government’s role in education (weak or strong) and the availability of resources for education (scarce or abundant). How these critical uncertainties play out in each quadrant of the framework is described in the scenario abstracts that follow.

Figure 1. A Scenario Framework for 2020



Scenario A: Scarce Resources/Weak Government Role

“Back to Basics”

In this scenario, the economic downturn is longer and harder than most had anticipated, leading to a virtual financial abandonment of the schools by government and society at large. In response, schools strip down to the basics, offering the three R’s all day, four days a week. To expand programs, enterprising school administrators seek ways to partner with business to fill the funding and structural gap caused by the government pullout from education. Opportunities for business/education partnerships promise hope as businesses use education to grow their own workers. Some partner all the way through higher education; Microsoft leads the way in that endeavor, with Microsoft Technical High School becoming the feeder school for the MS Technical School within the University of Washington. Displaced and disenchanting private professionals turn to teaching as a way to work with the subjects they enjoy, and find some job stability.

Scenario B: Abundant Resources/Weak Government Role

“While the Cat’s Away”

In this scenario, the stimulus and recovery funds for education are extended and expanded as both Congress and taxpayers accept the argument that education is the key to recovery. After the stimulus money is spent, the economy recovers, the housing market improves, and confidence rises, leading to positive voter responses to education funding measures at the state and local levels. At the same time, the government’s preoccupation with the economy and fixing health care has led to a new government hands-off philosophy toward education. Finally left alone, education reverts wholly back to local control. States and districts revise standards based on local values and norms, including the expansion of career and technical education programs that feed local industry. Schools still face accountability demands, but their taskmasters are local parents and governing councils rather than state and national agencies.

Scenario C: Scarce Resources/Strong Government Role

“‘Practical’ Makes Perfect”

In this scenario, the stimulus money for education has run out and the economy is showing only faint signs of recovery. To prioritize its limited resources, the government narrows the focus of education to a laser-like emphasis on “ready for college/ready for work” outcomes. At graduation, students need to either get to work and contribute to the economy, or get to college and train for high-end jobs. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act is reauthorized around new National Standards for Education, with added accountability to employers and higher education, in a fiercely competitive and wary market. Trade and technical certifications become embedded in high school diplomas, and evidence of college-level coursework is the norm for college-bound students. Resources are directed to *practical* education; whatever is perceived to be impractical gets shelved.

Scenario D: Abundant Resources/Strong Government Role

“The Path to 2015: Many Paths; One Destination”

In this scenario, using the stimulus funds, schools were able to save jobs and avoid program cuts, halting the downhill momentum of a dire economic picture and providing time to stabilize the system. The reauthorized NCLB Act provides flexibility while maintaining strict accountability demands. These changes are welcomed by a public still hurting from the fallout of the economic meltdown. In return for evidence of a good job, the public ponies-up at the polls and keeps the funding flowing. The new law, based on the new National Standards, allows schools to demonstrate student achievement through longitudinal measures of progress, including portfolios, multiple summative classroom assessments, or “advancement” tests that measure students’ readiness for the next grade level.

Implications, Options, Indicators

After the stories are written, the important work of interpretation begins. In other words, after delving into the “what if” questions that have helped formulate various plausible, challenging alternative future worlds, we must now address the “so what” questions that will inform the strategic planning.

What are the *implications* of each scenario for our organization? We ask ourselves, if we were to find ourselves living in this world, what strengths do we have that would help us survive and thrive? What would our weaknesses be? Are there opportunities for us here? Where are the threats? By going

through this type of analysis, we can see more clearly where the gaps may be in our preparedness for the future.

What are the *options* we might be able to implement as part of a strategic plan in order to prepare for the future? In this step, we imagine that it is the future and that we are living in each scenario. For example, in the preceding sample scenarios, we imagine it is 2020 and what it would be like to be a superintendent in the world envisioned in Scenario D, “Many Paths; One Destination.” Then we imagine that our students are succeeding *beyond our wildest dreams* on the full array of performance-based assessments that now constitute the accountability system. We imagine they are easily achieving their own goals of admission to post-secondary institutions or obtaining high-paying jobs after high school. The notion of “dropouts” is a thing of the past. We list all the activities we can imagine our school district undertaking to create that success. What are we doing? What have we done over the past decade to arrive here?

For each scenario, we engage in this same exercise. Then we take a look at the options for action that we have developed for all four scenarios. Are there any common themes? Are there any actions that appear in all four quadrants? These could be “robust options,” those that make sense to pursue *now* because they are likely to “pay off” in any possible future. On the other hand, is there one option that looks especially intriguing but appears in only one quadrant? We call these options, “bet the farm” ideas. They might look tempting, but it would be wise to carefully monitor the indicators to know if it makes sense to invest in them. After all, scenarios are not predictions! We don’t want to “lose the farm” if a particular scenario does not turn into reality.

Finally, what are the *indicators* that we might monitor over time to see where present reality is intersecting with the future worlds we have envisioned? What events, trends, or other data would we expect to see if any of our scenarios were to come true? In the preceding sample Scenario Framework, for example, a key indicator for each of these worlds is the strength or weakness of the overall economy. In Scenario C, “Practical Makes Perfect,” we might look for trends toward government support for career and technical education requirements. On the other hand, a rejection of the national standards movement in favor of state- or locally-developed standards would be a strong indicator that Scenario B, “While the Cat’s Away,” was moving from “fiction” to reality.

How Can Scenario-Based Planning Help AdvancED Schools and Districts?

In a rapidly changing world, continuous improvement cannot be achieved without maintaining a keen eye toward the future. Educational organizations of all kinds can use the methodology and way of thinking embedded in scenario-based planning to achieve their goals. Whether establishing vision and purpose, defining new markets, or exploring ways to enhance teaching and learning for younger generations, scenario-based planning can help.

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