

Scenario Thinking for an Unpredictable Year

Status quo is not an option.

Typically, scenario thinking is used when thinking out 5-10 years or more. In our current disrupted environment, none of us can even see six months ahead. All we know is that the environment in which we do our work will be different than it was before the pandemic.

According to Katherine Fulton and Diana Searce, Scenario Thinking is a process through which scenarios are developed and then used to inform strategy. It begins by identifying forces of change in the world. Those forces then are combined in different ways to create a set of diverse stories about how the future could unfold. These stories imagine what it would be like for an organization or community to live in each of these futures. Because scenarios are hypotheses, not predictions of the future, they are created and used in sets of multiple stories that capture a range of future possibilities, good and bad, expected and surprising.¹

Step 1: Clarify the Issue at Stake

What is the issue you are trying to solve during the next 6-12 months. Be as specific as possible. Examples might be: How will my organization sustain itself? Or more specific questions like: How will we have to change our services to schools in the Fall? What new services should we be providing the population we serve? How will our fundraising for next fiscal year need to change? Examine explicitly what assumptions you currently hold about your focus issue, and be willing to challenge them.

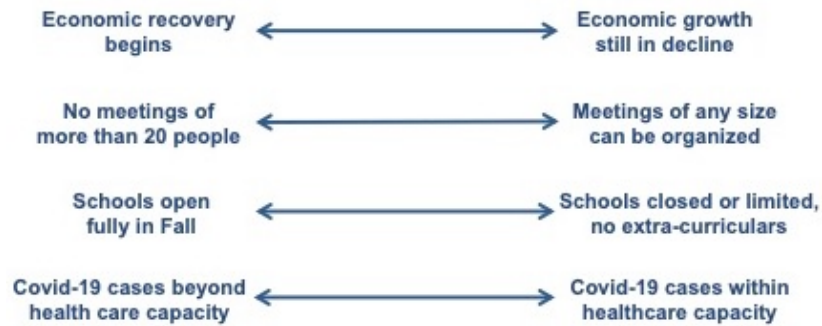
Step 2: Identify Driving Forces

What are the driving forces that will shape your focus issue? Driving forces are the forces of change *outside your organization* that will shape future dynamics in both predictable and unpredictable ways. They may include things like economic growth, unemployment rate, Covid-19 case growth, ability for more than 50 people to gather, extracurricular activities in schools canceled in Fall, suicide rates rising, who wins the election, etc. Brainstorm as many potential forces as possible that will affect your organization's work with the people you engage and serve during the next 6-12 months.

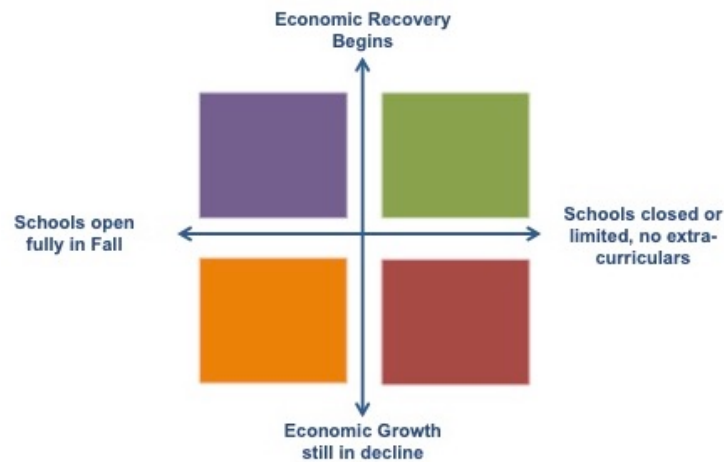
Step 3: Prioritize Driving Forces

Prioritize your driving forces by two criteria (1) The degree of importance to your focal issue, and (2) the degree of uncertainty surrounding those forces. The goal is to identify 2 or 3 priority driving forces, "critical uncertainties," that could be most important to the context in which you do your work. Picture these driving forces on a continuum between two extremes. Examples might include:

¹ This tool is adapted from [WHAT IF? The Art of Scenario Thinking for Nonprofits](#) by Diana Searce, Katherine Fulton, and the Global Business Network Community, 2004. The other primary resource is Global Business Network co-founder Peter Schwartz's ["The Art of the Long View: Paths to Strategic Insight for Yourself and Your Company,"](#) 1996.



Now cross two of your priority driving factor continuums to create a table that you can use to explore four possible scenarios for the future. Make sure the four different combinations of forces will provide you a range of alternative scenarios, four distinct plausible futures. If you have more than two priority driving forces, create a second table with a different combination of priority factor continuums (which will enable additional scenarios to be created). For example, if you take the continuums above on economic growth and schools and cross them, it would form these quadrants:



Step 4: Develop scenario narratives

Write a story of what life will be like in each of the four scenario boxes (e.g., in an environment where schools are closed and economic growth is still in decline). Focus on plausibility not scientifically provable (you can't predict the future). Consider how you and your different constituents are likely to be affected by each scenario. How will lives, work, expectations, needs, and opportunities be different? How might systems leaders operate or respond? What might the path look like between where we are now and each scenario? Break into groups or spend adequate time on each one trying to get as specific and illustrative as possible. Your goal is not to predict, but to spark conversations about possible conditions that may affect your work.

Step 5: Planning with scenarios

Your goal is *NOT* to pick one scenario you think is most possible, but to consider and plan across *ALL* scenarios. How will your work be different in each scenario? What actions would you take now to prepare in each case? What strategies can you employ that could work or be adaptable across different scenarios? Develop contingent, adaptive plans with milestones or future data points that will trigger decision making on which direction you might go, what you create, pause, or resume, etc. The key is that you are not planning on a best or worst case scenario, but preparing for multiple possibilities.