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The Tens—What To Do With Scenarios When Scenario Planning Is Done

Scenario planning is one tool that helps individuals and organizations view the world more strategically. Building scenarios is a means to an end, not an end of its own. By applying these ten ideas organizations will ensure their scenario investment retains its value and maximize the utility derived from the process.

- 1. Watch the Future Unfold** Scenario planning results in three to five co-existing futures. They suggest what to monitor to better anticipate the change. To effectively anticipate the future, organizations must invest in monitoring events as they unfold, mapping them against the scenarios and actively seeking to discover patterns that suggest an emerging future value for a particular uncertainty, or perhaps the collapse of uncertainty into one of the imagined futures. This activity can create a strong advantage.
- 2. Make Better Decisions** Shell's CEO, Peter Voser, says that "scenarios help us to make crucial choices in uncertain times as we grapple with tough energy and environmental issues." Shell's uncertainties are just a subset of uncertainties faced by every organization and industry. Near term decisions rely not only on the active monitoring of uncertainties, but on the scenarios themselves. Formulating options without uncertainties often starts from the ground up. Scenarios offer a common framework from which to explore options and their potential effectiveness or risk.
- 3. Engage and Learn from Customers** Scenarios are stories for a reason: stories engage the imagination. Not only do executives and leaders benefit from applying scenarios to their work, but they may also benefit customers. Share the scenario stories with customers and use their reactions as a learning opportunity.
- 4. Drive Innovation** Scenarios purposefully place people into uncomfortable circumstances. This can be a boon to innovation. Set ground rules that the future presented is the future and no one gets to argue. Take an idea, run it through the scenarios and see how the idea morphs, what challenges people can imagine and what synergies with other ideas emerge. Scenarios offer a powerful technique that eliminates the floundering often associated with rudderless brainstorming.
- 5. Enhance Organizational Dialog** Human resources, managers and others often find it difficult to select an entry point for topics as wide ranging as career paths or ethics. Using the scenarios, and the stories about the futures they represent, can be a great way to set-up a conversation about anything.
- 6. Challenge Assumptions Behind Assertions** Business plans, projects and long-term investments typically make a case for whatever outcome the writer, developer or leader seeks. Scenarios can encourage managers to become innovators by putting their ideas into wildly different circumstances that challenge the assumptions behind those ideas, leading to stronger, better researched and more deeply reasoned proposals.
- 7. Imagine How Emerging Technologies Might Be Used** New technologies seldom align with the vision of their creators. It's even harder for those just being introduced to a technology to understand how or where it will add value, what processes, experiences or jobs it might disrupt. Taking a new technology into a scenario and seeing where it fits into the technology forecast can provide insights about the new technology, and also help refine the forecast.
- 8. Approach Big Problems With New Perspectives** Not all strategic thinking is about making a decision that will start being implemented the moment the decision is made. Big issues like fixing climate change or mitigating its effects require a big canvas with many degrees of freedom. The scenario set offers a big canvas and the individual scenarios create layers with varying degrees of freedom and constraint that would be hard to reproduce in a session that doesn't begin with a consensus reality featuring uncertainties and a robust set of alternative values and contexts.
- 9. Advocate and Lobby** Scenarios demonstrate that the future can unfold in different ways, and that anticipating a future, or architecting one, is a nearly impossible task. But organizations that believe in their products or causes, or the situations in which they hope to find their industries in the next decade, require investment in advocacy, and very often, business or political lobbying. Scenarios can be a powerful tool for telling the story of the desired future while painting the alternative futures, all based in the same framework, from the same starting point. Scenarios can help transform an abstract idea into a tangible one because of the context that surrounds it.
- 10. Create Thought Leadership** Organizations, not just individuals, want to be perceived as leaders. Scenarios can be a platform for driving thought leadership around products, processes or innovation. A story about how any of the previous nine ideas is applied inside of an organization is likely to result in an interesting story on the web, but may just as likely assure investors that the organization is thinking about the future in a robust way. Imagining the evolution of a marketing concept can be as effective in crafting differentiated messages, as it is in product or process innovation.