

# SCENARIOS AS A POWER TOOL FOR PLANNING



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# Scenarios as a Power Tool

Larry Miller is a wise and well-known consultant for organizational redesign based in Atlanta. He says that if you find the most brilliant and creative citizens in a Chinese village and ask them to design a home for you, the chances that you will end up with a Williamsburg Colonial (even if that's what you had in mind) are very slim. These brilliant and creative people will design what they know -- a Chinese-style house. Whether designing a house or redesigning an organization or charting a strategic course of action for an academic department, those involved must have opportunities to stretch their ideas of what is possible. Without these stretching opportunities, it is very difficult to think in new ways.

One way to help faculty, staff and students see new possibilities is through creating alternate scenarios of the future together. I believe it is essential that these alternate scenarios of the future be created as a collective experience. The process of thinking the unthinkable is as important as the scenarios that result.

I have experienced several planning events where several people brought their own future scenarios to the larger group for consideration. Without exception, these scenarios were well-developed, plausible, and engaging. Yet it was difficult for other group members to wrap their minds around the scenarios and/or to know what to do with them. Questions might have run through people's minds such as, "If I say this scenario sounds good, does that mean I have 'signed on' for something?" Even when scenarios were submitted anonymously to get the creative juices going, the groups often recognized the writers and it was difficult to separate the scenarios from their creators.

Also, it became overwhelming to deal with as many as eight or ten different scenarios with vastly different assumptions underlying them. The result was that these carefully developed scenarios were underutilized or not used at all.

In *Anticipatory Management: 10 Power Tools for Achieving Excellence into the 21st Century*, William C. Ashley and James L. Morrison (1995) describe a process through which groups can create scenarios around strategic issues as a collective endeavor. They say, "The purpose of scenarios is not to eliminate, but to illuminate uncertainty" (p. 167). In describing what scenarios are and are not, they say: scenarios are not predictions of the future, but are more like descriptions of possible futures; scenarios are not variations on a chosen future, but are fundamentally different views of the future; scenarios are not vague, but are sharp and focused images (p. 170).

In an academic department, the issue might be the vitality of the graduate program. Ashley and Morrison suggest this sequence of activities for developing four alternative scenarios.

First, list the driving forces that cause uncertainty. Second, rank the driving forces from high to low based on potential impact on the organization and degree of

uncertainty. This should result in identification of the driving force that has the most potential impact and another driving force which is the most uncertain.

Third, create four alternative scenarios using the poles of the two selected driving forces. Figure 1 shows two possible driving forces on a department's graduate program, extramural funds which were judged in this example to have the most impact on the vitality of the graduate program and student interest which was judged to be the most uncertain of the driving forces.

<b>Driving Force with Greatest Impact (Extramural Funding)</b>	High	High Levels of Extramural Funding Low Student Interest	High Levels of Extramural Funding High Student Interest
	Low	Low Levels of Extramural Funding Low Student Interest	Low Levels of Extramural Funding High Student Interest
		Low	High
		<b>Driving Force with Greatest Uncertainty (Student Interest)</b>	

Figure 1. Alternate scenarios for a graduate program

Fourth, create narratives around each scenario, giving each of the four a short title and fleshing them out so each tells a story. Using the lower left quadrant scenario (which might be dubbed “Sinking Fast”) as an example:

- **Identify what events would bring about this scenario and assign tentative dates**

e.g. 1996 — national trend shows decline in graduate enrollment numbers

e.g. 1997 — six senior faculty members retire from department

e.g. 1998 — competing programs lure potential students away

e.g. 2000 — research funds available nationwide cut by 30%

- **Identify implications**

e.g. Loss of senior faculty has reduced ability of department to compete for extramural funds

e.g. reduction in financial resources to support graduate students has reduced number of  
graduate enrollments in the department

e.g. other departments begin raiding remaining faculty

- **Propose actions that could be taken by the department and debate the soundness of each action regardless of the scenario in which it originated.**

e.g. redesign department to capitalize on faculty and staff resources

e.g. merge with a kindred department

e.g. mentor junior faculty

e.g. utilize technology to maximize faculty and staff time

Ashley and Morrison suggest that another alternative is to select the most plausible scenario and plan for it, using the others for contingency planning.

Scenarios might assist at various points in the strategic planning process, depending on the needs of the group. Scenarios could be developed around several strategic issues as a preplanning activity. Scenario development can also be part of the visioning process to assist the group in identifying its preferred future. Scenarios could also appear later in the process, preceding formulation of long-term strategies. Cornesky and McCool (1992) suggest a variation which they call the Scenario Builder to be used when a group has identified changes that should take

place to improve a system or process. Their Scenario Builder can be used as a reality check on a proposed course of action. Regardless of when they are created by a planning group, Ashley and Morrison commend the “power of scenarios to break people out of their comfortable mind set that things will continue as they are and always have been” (p. 188).

Steps for Creating Scenarios

Ashley and Morrison (1995) recommend six steps for creating scenarios:

1. List driving forces that cause uncertainty for the department, office, or organization.
2. Rank the driving forces according to: a) potential impact, and b) degree of uncertainty.
3. Select the two driving forces that have the highest score on both counts (potential impact and degree of uncertainty).
4. Create four alternatives using the “poles” of the two driving forces. (For example, if NSF funds have the greatest impact on the department, the poles would be: higher levels of NSF funds and lower levels of NSF funds.)

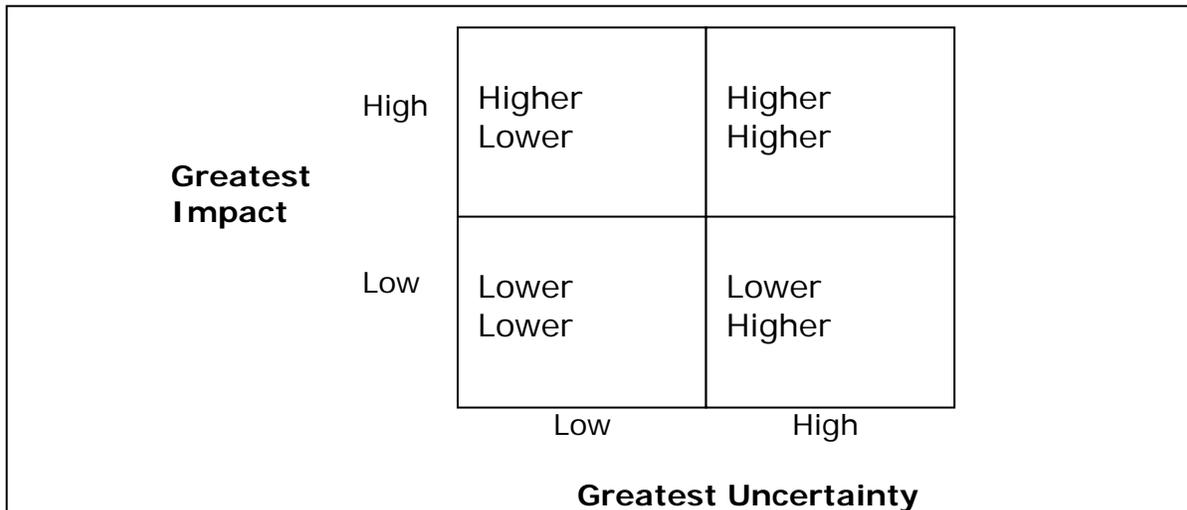


Figure 2. Sample template for scenario development

5. Name each of the alternatives with a short phrase and then create multiple scenarios for each:
  - a. Identify what events would bring about these scenarios and assign tentative dates
  - b. Determine implications for each
  - c. Propose actions that could be taken by the organization in that scenario to capitalize on the good and mitigate or prevent the bad.

6. Decide on whether to develop all the scenarios more fully or to select the most plausible one and plan for it. A bonus of this process is that when a decision is made, the underlying assumptions are very explicit, "This plan is based on our assumptions that XYZ will decrease . . ."
- 7.

**Wild Card Alternative**

Another simpler and sometimes revealing approach to scenario-writing is to create a wild card outcome of a strategic decision. Develop a plausible story (with dates) of how this outcome comes about, and then devise implications and action plans. (pp. 186-187)

Sample for Practice

**The Department of Primordial Studies**

Primordial Studies is a department in L&S that has been around since the 1930's. It has a tenured faculty of 16 members. Two academic staff members maintain the department's laboratories and museum. Currently, the department has 23 graduate students and 5 declared undergraduate majors. Most of the department's five undergraduate courses are under-enrolled except for one which attracts large numbers of non-majors and accounts for most of the undergraduate headcount.

The department has a very robust research agenda and has consistently won NSF grants to support its faculty and grad students. The department is using scenario development to create a strategic plan for the future of its undergraduate program.

1. What are the driving forces impacting the undergraduate program?
2. Which driving force has the greatest potential impact?
3. Which driving force has the highest degree of uncertainty?
4. What are the four alternative scenarios? Give a short name to each.

<b>Driving Force With Greatest Impact</b>	Higher Levels	Higher Levels
	Lower Levels	Higher Levels
	Lower Levels	Lower Levels
	Lower Levels	Higher Levels
<b>Driving Force With Greatest Uncertainty</b>		

Figure 3. Sample template for scenario development

5. For each scenario:
  - a. Identify what events would bring about these scenarios and assign tentative dates.
  - b. Determine implications for each.
  - c. Propose actions that could be taken by the department to capitalize on the good and mitigate or prevent the bad.
  - d. Discuss the merit of each alternative action, regardless of the scenario from which it came.

The template in Figure 4 was created by the Office of Fellowships and Minority Programs, UW-Madison Graduate School, for their scenario planning session.

<p><b>Scenario 1:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What events brought this about?</li> <li>2. What are the implications of this?</li> <li>3. What actions should we take to capitalize on the positive aspects of this scenario and lessen/prevent the bad?</li> <li>4. Discuss merit of each proposed action.</li> </ol>	<p><b>Scenario 2:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What events brought this about?</li> <li>2. What are the implications of this?</li> <li>3. What actions should we take to capitalize on the positive aspects of this scenario and lessen/prevent the bad?</li> <li>4. Discuss merit of each proposed action.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Scenario 3:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What events brought this about?</li> <li>2. What are the implications of this?</li> <li>3. What actions should we take to capitalize on the positive aspects of this scenario and lessen/prevent the bad?</li> <li>4. Discuss merit of each proposed action.</li> </ol>	<p><b>Scenario 4:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What events brought this about?</li> <li>2. What are the implications of this?</li> <li>3. What actions should we take to capitalize on the positive aspects of this scenario and lessen/prevent the bad?</li> <li>4. Discuss merit of each proposed action.</li> </ol>

Figure 4. UW-Madison Graduate School template

## References

Ashley, William C. and Morrison, James L. (1995). *Anticipatory management: 10 power tools for achieving excellence into the 21st century*. Leesburg, VA: issue Action Publications.

Cornesky, Robert A. and McCool, Samuel A. (1992) *Total quality improvement guide for institutions of higher education*. Madison, WI: Magna Publications, Inc.

Miller, Lawrence. (1991). *Design for total quality*. Atlanta: Miller Consulting Group.

## Video

*Scenario thinking: pathways to the future*. (1995). Des Moines, IA: Excellence in Training Corporation.

*Think of plans or solutions like software programs: there's version 1.0 and a series of subsequent updates.*