

FUTURE *takes*

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You Missed It!

Interactive Foresight Exercises II

synopsis of the December 2003 dinner program of the WFS Washington DC Chapter; summarized by Dave Stein

Back by popular demand, NatCapWFS presented an evening of interactive foresight exercises led by two local area professional futurists, Joe Coates and Eric Garland. The exercises were in conjunction with the 2003 holiday season mixer on December 16.

"BRAIN WRITING"

The evening started with an exercise in "brain writing," a variant of brainstorming. The participants were divided into three groups, and each group was time-warped to a future characterized by a "new development," the possible consequences of which they were to identify. The "new developments" were (1) "renewable energy sources provide 27% of all energy consumed," (2) "the cost of obtaining one's own genome is only \$5.00," and (3) "voter participation drops to 28%." The rules of engagement stipulated that each participant list three to five possible consequences of the development and then pass his/her response sheet to the right. Upon receiving another participant's response sheet, each participant was asked to add new consequences and/or build on those already listed. As in conventional brainstorming, critical comments were not permitted, although contradictory consequences were. The process continued until each response sheet found its way back to its originator, at which time the participant responses were consolidated into a group report.

As evidenced by the consequences identified, this exercise was indeed thought-provoking. As in the May 2003 **Interactive Foresight Exercises I**, primary consequences led to secondary and tertiary consequences and beyond. Consequences identified for the "renewable energy" development were as follows:

1. Pollution reduction, leading to reduced incidence of illnesses and increased longevity – in turn exacerbating the population explosion and the social security crisis,
2. Independence from Middle Eastern oil, in turn impacting national interests, US foreign policy, and the US military force structure,
3. A collapse in the Middle Eastern economy resulting in a lowering of the living standard there and perhaps in an overthrow of some regimes,
4. A lowering of personal transportation costs, possibly leading to nomadic lifestyle for more people,
5. An increase in the water supply as desalinization plants became less costly to operate,

6. Increased energy usage as energy became cheaper and more available, perhaps eventually nullifying the advantages of the cheaper energy,
7. Increased international travel, resulting in more inter-ethnic and inter-cultural marriages,
8. Improvement in the standards of living for "have-nots" (people and nations), in turn reducing wealth gaps and socioeconomic polarization.

Similarly, the "genome" group identified possible consequences of their own new development:

1. More pre-emptive identification of individuals at risk for certain diseases,
2. Increased discrimination by employers and by insurers, accompanied by the resulting ethical and legal challenges,
3. Genetic-based dating and selection of spouses,
4. Genetic-based bigotry,
5. New and terrible biological weapons that target specific ethnic groups,
6. Increased use of genetics to study human evolution and migration, possibly leading to the proof or disproof of the contemporary theory of evolution.

Not to be outdone, the third group presented their own insights regarding the possible consequences of low voter participation:

1. An increase in the cost to mount a political campaign, such that the candidate pool is more wealthy on the average and/or special interest groups gain control,
2. A new voting process, perhaps via e-mail or in conjunction with tax return filings,
3. A new law making voter participation mandatory, as is presently the case in Australia,
4. A change in the Constitution (no details specified),
5. Either increased or decreased accountability by elected officials to their constituents (no consensus on this one),
6. Increased alienation of the population, possibly leading to a sense of fatalism,
7. An armed revolution,
8. An opportunity for a despot to seize control.

YOUR SCENARIO OR MINE?

This first of three exercises was followed by a mini-lesson in scenario development, presented by Joe Coates. Mr. Coates began with a brief discussion of the two primary purposes of a scenario or scenario-based study. A study might be undertaken to promote policy discussion that provides input into policy thinking. Conversely, it might be focused on reaching a policy conclusion, which is an output from policy thinking. Some participants may have been surprised to learn that scenario development is not the initial step in a future-oriented study. The study begins with identifying the relevant "drivers" – that is, those factors that shape the planning space and that can impact the optimum choice for a policy, strategy, or course of action. In the commercial sector, for example, a business would want to choose markets and strategies that maximize the bottom line. It is equally important to know the range or scope of each driver (e.g., global, regional, national, or local) and how they interrelate.

With the drivers identified, the next step is to develop scenarios or "pictures" of the various alternative futures that are to be considered. On a typical study team, everyone might write a scenario that takes into account each driver or variable in a non-quantitative way. The scenarios may range from a static future to ones in which the drivers are pushed to their extremes in various combinations. A best- or worst-case scenario is often one in which all of the possible developments happen.

As Mr. Coates explained, scenarios can be written in any of several formats such as a report, a political speech, or a newspaper story, but they need to be complete (in terms of considering all variables) and satisfy a "soundness" test. In addition, they should generate interest. As a picture of an alternative

future "now," each scenario typically has a history of how the world arrived at the now. These histories are often developed by "backcasting" from the future "now."

Within a particular study, scenarios should be selected on the basis of policy richness, as Mr. Coates advised. He further suggested that as a hedge against domination of the study by an "average" or "middle" scenario, an even number of scenarios be written and used. Furthermore, each scenario should have a name that is easy to remember and associate with the scenario, or in futurist parlance, "adhesive." Even the need to manage the management was emphasized, as early involvement of the management will often constrain the study if the management lacks a good view of the external world. Finally, when the study is complete, each conclusion reached should be examined for robustness – that is, the number of scenarios that support it. A conclusion that is highly sensitive to the alternative future that emerges is less general and often less useful.

In the supporting exercise, participants were asked to identify drivers that can impact the future of a well-known automotive company. These drivers (no pun intended) included alternative modes of transportation, demographics, living and working patterns, consumer demand (buying power to purchase and operate cars), congestion, overseas consumer demand, environmental regulations, and traffic congestion. Among the brilliant scenario names suggested were "beyond combustion," "who needs a car?," "[the company] drives worldwide," "what was a [brand name]," and "beam me up, Scottie."

CROSS-IMPACT ANALYSES

Mr. Garland led the third exercise, which featured a cross-impact analysis of drivers that influence the future of the newspaper industry. As in any study, it was first necessary to identify the drivers. In spite of the time constraints imposed by the late hour (or perhaps because time flies when one is having fun!), the participants identified numerous drivers including (1) internet availability and usage, (2) alternative sources of news, (3) literacy rates, (4) credibility of the news, (5) the advertising industry and their choices of media, (6) the readership, (7) the ecology, (8) demographics, (9) production costs per page, and (10) availability of free time to read newspapers. Drivers such as these are often interactive. For example, if the readership goes down, then newspapers become less attractive to advertisers.

To facilitate this cross impact analysis, these drivers were used to head the rows and columns of a matrix or grid, on which the arithmetic symbols +, -, and 0 indicated positive correlation, negative correlation, and no correlation respectively.

<i>Drivers</i> THEN ▶ IF ▼	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	N/A	++	-	+	+	0
2	+	N/A	0	+ / -	0	0
3	0	+	N/A	0	-	-
4	--	-	0	N/A	+	0
5	0	0	+	-	N/A	+
6	+	0	++	0	+	N/A

This methodology not only stimulates discussion, analysis, and out-of-the-box thinking but also highlights relationships that require additional data. Each matrix cell represents a relationship, and a relationship is generally understood, at least to first order, if strong positive or negative correlation (respectively ++ or --) is indicated. In these cases, there is little need to expend additional effort to

characterize or prove the relationship. Conversely, entries of +/- or +/-/0 indicate relationships that are not well understood with confidence, have more than one interpretation, or for which there is otherwise a lack of consensus. For these relationships, additional data are needed, and in "real life," a study team may assign one of their members to obtain the additional data. A comprehensive characterization of these relationships can serve as the basis for a computer model. However, this was an exercise involving only one portion of a normal study, and the hour was late.

EMPOWERED FUTURISTS!

And so, as the participants mastered the lessons of the evening, they moved a step closer to becoming wise in the ways of the futurists. Perhaps their thoughts again turned to the automotive company exercise as they mounted their own iron horses for the trek home. It was an evening to remember, and the "real thing" was far better than can be captured here after the fact – so, why read about it second hand when you, too, can have a front row seat and be part of the action?