

Article 1: The why, what and how of strategic foresight

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This is the first in a series of four articles providing an introduction to the practice of strategic foresight. In this article I provide a very general introduction to strategic foresight practice: why you might want to consider it, what it offers and how it works. In article 2 I outline my particular approach to practice, assuming some familiarity with the background here. Article 3 delves a little deeper into the details of foresight methodology and process design. Finally, in article 4 I discuss ethics of practice, explaining how my approach to strategic foresight practice is grounded in a view of us as living beings striving to better coordinate our collective actions.

Why strategic foresight?

While many objective aspects of human existence continue to improve—infant mortality, child survival and access to clean water and sanitation for instance are understood to be improving globally¹—our prospects for sustaining these valuable developments into the future *and* extending them to others, become increasingly uncertain every day. Today all organisations, regardless of scale or operating territory, are impacted by the confluence of multiple, interacting global challenges including (to name just a handful) anthropogenic global warming, biodiversity loss, land degradation, population increase, migratory pressures, demographic disequilibrium, political conflict, resource depletions including peak oil, financial instability, increasing material affluence and aspirations, clashing fundamentalisms both religious and secular, and information-driven attention overload. For better *and* worse, this is the world that we share. It is no longer possible to avoid being affected by these influences or their flow-on consequences. There are no safe havens in which to take refuge. The challenges with which we're faced today are limited neither in space nor time—they reach everyone, everywhere, and their momentum is such that they will continue to do so into the future.

One option for response is to seek out *conceptual* refuges by ignoring or denying the nature and scale of the challenges. This is, and no doubt will continue to be, a well worn path. Increasingly though, those responsible for leading organisations understand that the ideas and the ways of thinking with which we have arrived in our present circumstances are not adequate on their own to provide sustained wellbeing into the future. The innovations that will allow people to conserve and enhance what they most value will emerge through revitalised ways of thinking. These developments require that we incorporate the lessons of the past, while acknowledging the limitations of ideas that are past their use-by date. The conceptual systems that have guided us to this point require revitalisation, without losing connection with past accomplishments. Strategic foresight practice offers organisations pathways to address these challenges.

Strategic foresight: from individual to organisational capacity

Strategic foresight is the field of theory & practice relating to construction of high-quality forward views to inform decisions and actions in the present. It is specifically oriented

¹ New Scientist (2009) 'Blueprint for a better world: Part 1', *New Scientist*, no. 2725, 12 September, pp. 40-1, 'Is the world getting better or worse?'

towards organisational applications—that is, towards the coordination of action amongst groups of individuals with shared purposes.²

Strategic foresight thinking and practice is founded on the understanding that:

1. As human beings, we have the capacity to form views in relation to plausible futures and to act on the basis of these;
2. This basic capacity varies greatly in the depth of its enactment, both between individuals and within individuals over time;
3. Through appropriate programs, processes, methodologies and techniques, individuals' ad hoc foresight capacities can be *honed, attuned, harnessed* and *co-ordinated* to provide forward views—and hence **decisions and actions in the present**—of consistently higher quality than would otherwise be the case.

Foresight as a native human capacity can be improved upon—made more effective and more reliable—through development and implementation of practices based on insight into the ways that individuals and groups think about and act in response to plausible futures. *Strategic foresight* relates to creation of such enhanced capacity within organisational settings.

Strategic foresight work is typically carried out to inform more established strategy-related activities. The most effective strategic foresight work is carried out on a continuous rather than an episodic basis. In its fully mature form, it is seamlessly integrated with an organisation's ongoing conversation about *preferred* futures, and focuses on building collective agency for enabling such futures through action in the present.

Working with perspectival complexity

This emphasis on *enabling preferred futures* rather than *predicting the future* has its origin in three foundational principles:

1. The future is not predictable
2. The future is not predetermined
3. Future outcomes can be influenced by individual choices³

As the first principle implies, strategic foresight practice deals with systems for which future states are characterised by *irreducible uncertainty*: systems where there are basic limits to what can be known with confidence.

Within certain bounds, and with appropriate techniques, it is possible to create useful forecasts for the behaviour of many systems. Weather forecasting provides one obvious example. Strategic foresight, though, deals with systems that are fundamentally different in nature from the physical systems with which weather forecasters work. Strategic foresight work is carried out in relation to systems that are not only *physical* and *biological* in nature, but *sociological*. In fact, strategic foresight practice often involves understanding an organisation's situation in terms of challenges that can be best characterised as *socio-ecological*.

² Richard Slaughter, a founder of the field, provides an extended introduction in *Futures for the third millennium: Enabling the forward view* (1999, Prospect Media, St Leonards, ch.5.6, p. 287-302, 'Developing and applying strategic foresight').

³ Amara, Roy 1981, 'The futures field: Searching for definitions and boundaries', *The Futurist*, February, pp. 25-29.

Sociological systems are characterised by *perspectival complexity* arising as a result of the plurality of ways that we humans have for “making sense of” or interpreting the realities in which we find ourselves. A consequence of recognising this type of complexity is that there is no longer a single “correct” interpretation of any given situation—the way that things appear to be is dependent on the perspectives held by participants in the situation. Everything that is *known* about a system and its future possibilities arises as a perspective of a *knower* who has a particular outlook.

In the world of perspectival complexity—the world in which strategic foresight is practiced—perspectives and *understanding* are *the* critically important variables, and hence constitute the “raw materials” with which the practitioner works. The degree to which practitioners recognise this will have a strong bearing on the quality of the foresight work conducted.

Accepting the necessary co-existence of multiple perspectives carries with it the imperative to bridge between perspectives through building *shared understandings*. There are three principal types of understanding that high quality strategic foresight work aims to develop:

- Understanding *within* organisation members
- Understanding *between* organisation members
- Understanding between organisation members and the organisation’s wider stakeholder community.

Following from this, expected outcomes from this work include:

- New ways for making sense of *existing* knowledge; for example putting structure around “messes” to create increased order and clarity.
- New knowledge; for example awareness of things that were previously “out of sight and out of mind”.
- Structures, frameworks and models for organising new knowledge, and for integrating it with existing knowledge.

In practical terms, strategic foresight work often involves building maps and models to represent knowledge in an integrated way. Participants in the foresight process identify underlying patterns amongst previously discrete observations. These patterns then form the basis for conversation about causality, function and purpose—in other words, about *why* things are happening as they appear to be, *why* future circumstances might unfold in particular ways and *why* particular types of response might be called for. Working explicitly with perspectival complexity involves taking into account our own ways of making sense of the world in exploring these “why” questions. How do our own established patterns of being, knowing and doing and our values contribute to the situations with which we’re confronted? In turn this holds potential to highlight previously hidden *dangers* and *obstacles*, and expand the *creative opportunity space* within which alternative pathways might be laid down in walking.⁴

In article 2 I look at what all of this entails for my own approach to practice “on the ground”.

⁴ To borrow a metaphor from Francisco Varela and colleagues that captures the essence of the relationship between foresight and strategy described here (Varela, Francisco, Thompson, Evan & Rosch, Eleanor 1993, *The embodied mind: Cognitive science and human experience*, MIT Press, Cambridge).