

Article 2: An approach to strategic foresight practice

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Article 2

This is the second in a series of four articles providing an introduction to the practice of strategic foresight. This article focuses on my own approach to strategic foresight practice, and assumes some familiarity with the background ideas discussed in the first article, in which I provide a very general introduction to strategic foresight practice: why you might want to consider it, what it offers and how it works. 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.

Strategic foresight: laying down a path in practice

A common characteristic unites our global-scale challenges and their local-scale organisational impacts: their natures, causes and consequences, as well as potential responses, are *perspective dependent*. *Who* it is that considers the challenges affects what is seen and understood. Personal histories, values, commitments, cultural backgrounds, thinking styles, mental models, interests, beliefs, expectations and underlying sense-making capacities all shape not only what is seen, but what we are willing to attend to.

Response to these challenges at every level involves coordination of action amongst groups of people with diverse and often conflicting perspectives *on* those challenges. Such coordination depends fundamentally on *shared understanding* amongst decision makers and actors. An important point to highlight: by *shared understanding*, I don't mean either "agreeing completely" or "understanding things in exactly the same way"—in fact I'd contend that no two people will hold identical understandings of any given situation, as a consequences of the myriad factors that shape perspectives described above. So shared understanding is not at all the same as "shared belief"—a cultural attribute that can stifle rather than enhance development of critical insight. What this idea of shared understanding *does* entail is sufficient degree of mutual appreciation for the views of all those involved in shaping a course of action. *Shared understanding* is achieved when all involved can live with the course of action. This is sometimes described as reaching a state of *accommodation*.¹

A basic premise for my approach to practice is that better understanding and more effective processes for creating such understanding will lead to better decisions and actions. By "better" I mean understanding that supports:

- Improved outcomes in terms of objective organisational performance;
- A culture that fosters connectedness, belonging and exemplary performance amongst members of the organisation;
- Purposeful, challenging and fulfilling work that provides for individual growth and wellbeing.

The task of creating shared understanding is certainly not unique to strategic foresight work, and is something that we all engage in day-to-day as we interact with others. Usually though, this is approached in an ad hoc way, typically without active reflection on the consequences of poor performance or the opportunities presented by enhanced performance. Organisations often tend to just stumble along in established behavioural patterns, with everyone assuming

¹ The concept of *consensus* is also relevant here—although this can itself be the subject of such conflicting understandings that its use often undermines rather than aids shared understanding!

that they know “well enough” what others have in mind when they use this turn of phrase or invoke that concept. Very often, I just assume that what *you* mean when you say something is what *I* mean when I say the same thing—concepts and the language in which they are encoded are taken at face value, without inquiring into what is going on within the speaker as she conceptualises and gives voice to her conceptualisations. In this way, a shared language—a set of signifiers and syntax for linking them—can hinder understanding just as effectively as enabling it.

The emphasis that I place on processes for creating shared meaning will resonate with some people more than others. My experience suggests that work of this nature is most effective when initiated through self-generated interest from within an organisation, rather than selling services from outside. In other words, the best way to embark on this work is for a leader in an organisation to perceive a fit between ideas of the general nature that I discuss here and an existing challenge that he or she is grappling with. This often commences with a word-of-mouth recommendation. The significant challenges involved in creating deep and genuine shared understanding in relation to the future identity and operating context for any organisation makes this particularly important. It is essential that the organisation’s members have a sense of personal commitment to the process and personal responsibility for the outcomes, rather than deferring responsibility to the external facilitator. This allows more rigorous challenging of assumptions, as people are generally happier to accept associated discomfort if they have a deeply felt commitment to the benefits that it might bring. It also supports greater ownership of the outcomes.

The ultimate product of any strategic foresight process is improved insight amongst decision makers. Experiential learning principles are key to generating high-quality insight. Insight is most powerful when it arises through direct participation in the foresight work. This has important implications for the way the work is carried out, and for who is involved. I emphasise three key principles in relation to this:

- Those members of the organisation who have delegated authority to make decisions and take actions on the basis of the insights arising via the strategic foresight work should be directly involved throughout. Strategic foresight work can be carried out at any level of an organisation, but the focus of the work and the questions that it explores should be matched to participants’ level of authority for decision making and action. The work is far less effective when its output is a set of recommendations handed up a chain-of-command to people who have not participated directly. The power of these insights is not adequately conveyed in written reports alone.
- The strategic question(s) that will be explored should be developed collaboratively with participants in the foresight process, and other stakeholders in the system of interest as appropriate. The process of challenging existing assumptions in order to surface alternatives to the “official future” should start with the strategic question itself—finding the most appropriate question is essential to the value of the work.

Strategic foresight work is best set within the context of what Otto Scharmer calls “conversational action”². In its fully mature form, it is an integrated part of an ongoing, organisation-wide conversation enquiring into questions of purpose, identity, foundational philosophy, ethics of practice and preferred futures. I characterise this type of engagement as

² Scharmer, C. Otto 2007, *Theory U: Leading from the future as it emerges*, The Society for Organizational Learning, Cambridge.

generative conversation. Strategic foresight is successful when it involves conscious reflection on the myths, world views and assumptions that guide action.

Most people report that learning to envisage plausible and preferred futures that are different from one's own present and past experience is challenging—and almost always very rewarding. Two additional principles for high-quality implementation are important here:

- Ongoing, continuous engagement is better than episodic activity. The most valuable insights often don't arrive on schedule, and can't be forced in any case. Regular generative conversation based on both formal and informal interaction provides the highest likelihood of worthwhile outcomes. In this respect, strategic foresight practice has important parallels with organisational learning and participatory action research.
- External facilitation can provide guidance and inspiration; however motivation to persevere in the face of competing demands for time and challenging relationships comes from within participants.

In light of these principles, my personal aim with any strategic foresight initiative is to make myself redundant as quickly as possible. In my experience, an initiative will be most effective when it continues under the leadership momentum of the organisation's members. This can run counter to some expectations for facilitated processes in which successful outcomes are understood to depend on an "instrumental facilitator"—an individual whose presence motivates a group to perform at levels that it would not achieve on its own. While I place high value on skilled facilitation and endeavour to continuously develop my own performance in this area, the model that I use to guide this is perhaps more closely aligned more with the approach described by Lao Tzu in the Tao Teh Ching:

When the task is accomplished and things have been completed,

All the people say, "We ourselves have achieved it!"

This may be one of the most challenging aspects of the approach to strategic foresight practice that I describe here, and I am mindful that it won't be the preferred approach for all people. Even so, in my view this is the approach most consistent with the broader principles for practice that I have outlined.

In the next article I will drill down a little further, looking in more detail at foresight methodology and process design. From this, you will start to develop an understanding of the practical basis for achieving benefits of the nature that I discuss in this and the previous article.