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## SCENARIO PLANNING: THE POWER OF "WHAT IF?" THINKING



### BIG IDEA In A Few Words

Effective leaders are always asking “what’s happening next?” hoping they will be able to “see around the corner” just far enough to prepare the organization for the future. The art of “looking around the corner” is known as scenario planning. Scenarios help us link the uncertainties we hold about the future with the decisions we make today. Scenario planning is not fundamentally about predicting the future; it is about preparing for several alternate futures so you can take informed action. Scenario planning is an extension of strategic planning that probes the uncertainties of your ministry context for issues and questions that are both very important and very uncertain.

Recently I was coming out of a parking garage with an immediate ninety degree right hand turn that created a blind corner. On top of that, just out of the field of view, there was a small key pad terminal where drivers coming into the garage would enter a code to open the door. Vehicles coming out of the garage are vulnerable to turning head on into any vehicle preparing to enter.

In order to compensate for this blind spot the parking garage had a well positioned mirror that enabled cars in either direction to actually “see around the corner” so



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they could take appropriate action. I couldn't help but find a leadership application in that experience. Effective leaders are always asking "what's happening next?" in hopes they can "see around the corner" just far enough to prepare the organization for the future.

## The Headwaters Of Scenario Planning

In his book, *The Art of the Long View*, Peter Swartz tells the story of temple priests in what is now the northern deserts of Sudan where three tributaries join together to form the Nile, which flowed one thousand miles, flooding its river basin and made it possible for Egyptian farmers to grow their crops. In the spring of the year the priests gathered at the edge of the river to check the color of the water. Clear water, referred to as the White Nile, flowing from Lake Victoria through the Sudanese swamps, suggested flooding would be mild and late; crops would be at a minimum.

If the stream was dark, the stronger waters of the Blue Nile, which joined the White Nile at Khartoum would prevail, suggesting the river would saturate the fields and produce a bountiful harvest. If the stream was dominated by the greenish brown waters rushing down from the Ethiopian highlands, the floods would come early and be catastrophically high. Pharaoh might have to use some of his strategic grain reserves.

Every year the priests sent messengers to the king to inform him of the color of the water. This information not only guided farmers in relation to their crops but also Pharaoh about the appropriate level of taxation. The priests of the Sudanese Nile may have been among the first long-term forecasters who identified the driving forces that influenced the outcome of future events. In the color of the water at the headwaters of the Nile they had a mirror that allowed them to see around the corner and take appropriate action.

What does all this have to do with ministry or missions? After all, isn't God in control no matter what happens next? Of course God is in control. But our trust in the unchanging nature of God does not eliminate our responsibility to "understand the times" and discern what our church or mission ought

to do. And one of the most common topics that surfaces in conversation with mission leaders revolves around questions we have about the agency of the future. What will it look like? How will it be different from today? Similar conversations are happening in relation to the future of how we do church. We intuitively understand how important it is to “see around the corner.”

## Planning Vs Predicting

In the business world the art of “looking around the corner” is known as scenario planning. Simply stated scenario planning is a model for learning about the future in which a strategy is formed by drafting a small number of stories—scenarios—about how the future may unfold and how this might affect an issue confronting the organization. Scenarios help us link the uncertainties we hold about the future with the decisions we make today.<sup>8</sup>

Leaders should consider utilizing scenario planning when a question about the future of the organization is both very important and very uncertain. If you are a church or mission leader you have to understand you are facing a number of very important, very uncertain and potentially very unpleasant future-oriented challenges. You simply can't afford to ignore them.

Scenario planning is not fundamentally about predicting the future; it is about preparing for several alternate futures so you can take informed action. Effective scenario planning would allow you to say, “I have an understanding of how the world might change, I know how to recognize it when it is changing, and if it changes, I know what to do.”<sup>9</sup>

The specific steps of how to engage in scenario planning go beyond the scope of this chapter; my purpose here is to highlight why it is so important for you as a church or mission leader. Scenario planning is an extension of strategic planning that probes the uncertainties of your environment for issues and questions that are both very important to the future of your ministry and very uncertain in terms of how you should respond.

My concern is that too many church and mission leaders will view scenario planning as one more business practice that is being imported unnecessarily to the world of ministry. After all, no matter what happens God is in control. Of course God is in control but that doesn't mean your organization is going to be ready. The fact is there are driving forces, our own tributaries to the Nile so to speak, that suggest the current models for funding the vision are going to have to change, the structures that served us well in the last century are not going to work in an increasingly globalized world and the way we relate to stakeholders like local churches and majority world partners will need to change in the agency of the future.

For those who deny these driving forces are both very important and very uncertain and fail to prepare, "what's around the corner" will be extremely challenging. But it will be just as challenging for those who recognize the winds of change only to invest their creative energies defending the status quo.

## Investing Vs Defending

Noreena Hertz, no relation to the car company, is a Cambridge university economist whose widely ignored prediction of the global financial crisis catapulted her to rock star status. She is quoted in a November 2009 *Fast Company* article about the problems of short term thinking in the auto industry. "In the late '60's when the Clean Air Act was being deliberated in the United States, American carmakers spent millions lobbying against it, while Honda decided to develop more energy-efficient cars."<sup>10</sup>

Recognizing a critical driving force for change, Honda's cost was on innovation and making a product that might fit the future better. U.S. auto makers were spending their money on trying to stop the future from happening and it is pretty clear that Honda came out the winner. The combination of ecological and political driving forces became a mirror that enabled leaders at Honda to see around the corner and prepare for the future.

I want to challenge you as a church or mission leader to learn a lesson from history and avoid burning your social and financial capital trying to prevent the future from happening just because it might

wreak havoc on the status quo. I encourage you to figure out what it will take for your team to learn how to balance total dependence on an unchanging God who holds every possible future in His hands with disciplined forethought that enables you to “see around the corner.”

So let me come back where we started. What are the challenges that keep you up late at night, the very important and very uncertain driving factors that affect the future of your ministry? How might scenario planning augment your strategic planning to help you become the church or agency of the future today?

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## NOTES

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.valuebasedmanagement.net/methods\\_scenario\\_planning.html](http://www.valuebasedmanagement.net/methods_scenario_planning.html)

<sup>9</sup> Peter Swartz, *The Art of the Long View* (New York, NY: Currency, 1991) page 214

<sup>10</sup> Danielle Sacks, *Cassandra's Revenge*, Fast Company, November 2009, page 125

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*Sieze the Vuja de* is a compilation of transcripts from Learning @ the Speed of Life, the video blog of Missio Nexus, by Steve Moore. Missio Nexus was formed out of the merger of CrossGlobal Link and The Mission Exchange and is the largest network of Great Commission oriented evangelicals in North America. For more information visit [www.MissioNexus.org](http://www.MissioNexus.org).

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