



NORTH-HOLLAND

The Art of Scenarios and Strategic Planning: Tools and Pitfalls

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ABSTRACT

The term *strategy* has been misused and even abused. Worse, the word *scenario* is often confused with *strategy* to the point that clarification is needed if we are to understand one another. As a prolongation of the work done by the Rand Corporation in the 1960s, strategic planning, management and *prospective* approaches have been developed to help organizations master change. Over the past 25 years, we have contributed by creating or further developing various methodologies and procedures such as the Mactor and MICMAC methods for use in scenario building. These tools are doubly powerful in that they stimulate the imagination, reduce collective biases, and promote appropriation. One of the main functions of the strategic futures exercise is to eliminate two errors that we usually describe as the “hammer’s risk” and the “nail’s dream.” In other words, we forget what a hammer’s function is when staring at a nail (the nail’s dream) or we know how to use a hammer and imagine that every problem is like a nail (the hammer’s risk). In our case, we strive to give simple tools that may be appropriated. However, these simple tools are inspired by intellectual rigor that enables one to ask the right questions. Of course, these tools do not come with a guarantee. The natural talent, common sense, and intuition of the futurist also count! © 2000 Elsevier Science Inc.

Introduction

Anticipation is not widely practiced by decision makers because when things are going well, they can manage without it, and when things are going badly, it is too late to see beyond the ends of their noses. Fast action is already urgently required! Yet reaction is not an end in itself. Although desirable in the short term, it leads nowhere if not directed towards the firm’s long-term objectives. As Seneca said, “there is no favourable wind for the man who knows not where he is going.” Action becomes meaningless without a goal, and only anticipation points the way to action and gives it both meaning and direction.

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Similarly, *la prospective*¹ cannot generally be dissociated from strategy; hence, the term *strategic prospective* [1]. *Strategic prospective* is not only an exploratory approach (strategic anticipation), but also a normative one. Continuing the tradition of strategic planning and strategic management, *strategic prospective* emphasizes the importance of long-range and alternative thinking in strategic decision-making processes.

However, the complexity of strategic problems, and the need to resolve them collectively means using methods that are as rigorous and participatory as possible to recognize the problem and find acceptable solutions. Of course, we must keep in mind the limits imposed by formalization and remember that people are guided by intuition and passion as well as logic. Our models are inventions of the mind that represent a world unwilling to remain locked up in a cage of equations. And all the better, because without this freedom, any will driven by desire would lead nowhere! As a result, our conviction is: use all the powers of reason while remaining aware of both the inherent limits and virtues. Intuition and reason are not opposite, but complementary faculties.

People cannot be reduced to a rational mind (the left hemisphere); they are also driven by the emotional faculties (the right hemisphere). It is time we stopped opposing intuitive vision and rational thinking, because both are necessary. The choice depends on circumstances. Rational and heuristic schools of scenario planning only appear to be in opposition, whereas, in fact, they are complementary. A sound initial reflection, imbued with relevance and consistency, reinforces the efficiency of action and reaction in the face of events. The same applies to reflexes; they are always better after an intensive workout.

Strategic Planning, Strategic Management, and the Strategic Prospective Approach: How Are They Different?

The concepts of *prospective*, strategy, and planning are intimately linked in practice; as a result, strategic planning, strategic management, and the strategic prospective approach will be mentioned throughout this text. Each of these approaches refers to a set of definitions, problems, and methods whose specificity is weak, given the vague terminology.

How then can we make sense of all this? Are these approaches not all very similar to one another? Do we not already have a series of practical methods, all the more useful in that their limits are known? We can answer these questions without hesitation. A toolbox for futures studies and strategic analysis does exist. Informed managers would be wrong to deprive themselves of the toolbox, as a common language could thus be created; the power of collective thought, increased, and the inevitable biases, reduced. To do this, however, there must be a return to the fundamental concepts and their history.

To be fruitful, the marriage between *la prospective* and strategy must be a part of daily life. It must be appropriated by all the actors involved, from the top of the hierarchy to the bottom. Although the union of *la prospective* and strategy may have been inevitable, it has certainly not cleared up any of the confusion in genres and concepts. Yet the ideas are much closer than is generally admitted. Thus, the definition of planning put forward by Ackoff “to conceive a desired future as well as the practical

¹ We use the French term *la prospective* where no appropriate translation in English is possible. To facilitate reading, the French word appears in italics at the beginning of this document. *Prospective* refers to a preactive and proactive approach, which is described later. The English term *foresight* is perhaps the closest translation, yet the idea of proactivity is less present.

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