

Must Reads for Aspiring Futurists

THE GLOBAL BUSINESS NETWORK (www.gbn.com) helps government agencies, businesses, and public interest organizations create and work with scenarios, most recently helping the Pentagon anticipate how global warming may impact its long-term planning. Here are some of the publications GBN recommends (along with the company's thumbnail descriptions) for those who may see scenario planning in their future:

The Art of the Long View: Paths to Strategic Insight for Yourself and Your Company

by Peter Schwartz
(Doubleday Currency ©1996)

An accessible, quick introduction by one of the most experienced practitioners of scenario thinking.

Creating Better Futures: Scenario Planning as a Tool for a Better Tomorrow

by James Ogilvy
(Oxford University Press ©2002)

An exploration of the ethical dimension of scenario planning—our ability as humans to imagine and realize better futures.

“How to Build Scenarios”

by Lawrence Wilkinson, *Wired*,
September 1995: 74-81

Available online at www.gbn.com. A concise, step-by-step guide to developing scenarios, with examples.

“Chicken Little, Cassandra, and the Real Wolf: So Many Ways to Think about the Future”

by Donella Meadows
Whole Earth Review, Spring 1999

Available online at www.wholeearthmag.com. An overview of the pros and cons of various ways of thinking about the future.

“Scenarios: Uncharted Waters Ahead”

(*Harvard Business Review* 63
No. 5, 1985: 72-79) and

“Scenarios: Shooting the Rapids”

(*Harvard Business Review* 63
No. 6, 1985: 139-150) by Pierre Wack

The classic introductions to scenario planning.

Scenarios: The Art of Strategic Conversation

by Kees van der Heijden
(John Wiley & Sons ©1996)

A detailed, scholarly work by one of the great pioneers of the field.

Learning from the Future

edited by Liam Fahey
and Robert M. Randall
(John Wiley & Sons ©1997)

Scholarly perspectives on scenario thinking from a number of authors.



Present tense? Talk about the future

By telling stories set in the year 2014, Charlotte's civic leaders have found a powerful way to help community members address racial tensions in their city today.

IN NOVEMBER 2000, Charlotte was one of 40 U.S. cities surveyed to measure levels of social capital—the mostly invisible “glue” that holds communities together. When the city's leaders received the results the following year, they were rudely reminded what it feels like to be handed a disappointing report card. While the Charlotte-Mecklenburg region ranked highly for volunteering and charitable giving, it ranked second-to-last on inter-racial trust.

To address this issue, the Foundation for the Carolinas formed a “Social Capital Steering Committee” comprised of 21 civic leaders. Guided by Dianne English, the committee began consider-

ing different ways to engage the community in discussions around the sensitive subject of race. Madine Fails, President of the Urban League of Central Carolina, expressed her belief that focusing on the future—instead of rehashing past and present problems—would be a more productive approach. This prompted Cyndee Patterson, President of the Lee Institute (an organization that conducts trainings in leadership and collaboration) to suggest crafting stories that realistically depict alternative futures for Charlotte.

The committee agreed: to get people talking, Charlotte's leaders would tap the power of storytelling through a process better known as scenario planning. ▶



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Newsletter edited by Carolyn Ramsay.

► Tapping funds provided by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the steering committee engaged consultants who had experience in writing futuristic scenarios. Over 12-15 months, the entire team gathered the data it would need to project how the Charlotte-Mecklenburg region would look in 2014, specifically in six categories:

- *Demographic change*: how much would the population grow and with what impacts on diversity?
- *Economy*: would it grow, stagnate, or decline?
- *Land use*: smart growth or more sprawl?
- *Public education*: more segregation or more balance?
- *Civic engagement*: a continuing decline or a rebound in participation?
- *Community resources and their allocation*: more equitable access or a wider gap between rich and poor?

From this research emerged four very different visions of Charlotte's future (each captured in a story of approximately 1,300 words and briefly synopsized here):

“Fortress Charlotte”

The worst-case scenario. A widening gap between rich and poor has accelerated white flight to the suburbs, leaving the inner city with empty buildings and classrooms filled with the children of the working poor and middle class. The unemployment rate has risen to 10%. Funding for the arts and other cultural programs has been cut to maintain basic city services. Distrust, polarization and gang activity are on the rise while civic engagement continues to decline. “When most people hear this scenario,” English notes, “they say there are elements of Fortress Charlotte in existence right now, and that’s what I think is so powerful about it. It adds a high degree of urgency to this work.”

“Class Act”

One of two aspirational scenarios, in this hopeful vision of the future the region’s economy is thriving and unemployment has dropped to 3%. Thanks to inner city revitalization, sprawl is under control. The quality of public education has improved because people of all colors are investing in the system together. Civic engagement and trust between races and ethnic groups is up. The only troubling thing about this scenario, English says, is that “it doesn’t offer a clear sense of how it’s all going to happen.”

“And the Beat Goes On”

The muddling along scenario. Manufacturing jobs continue to be lost, replaced by low-paying service jobs, and economic growth is uneven. While some improvements in mass transit have been made, sprawl continues in many directions. Inner city development tends towards high-priced gentrification of select neighborhoods as opposed to much-needed revitalization of poorer neighborhoods. “It’s one of the two scenarios we want to move away from,” English says. “We’ve had people of color say this one frightens them the most of all. ‘Same old, same old’ just isn’t good enough.”

“Eye to Eye”

The second aspirational scenario. Thanks to an alliance among communities of color that formed in 2006, the balance of power in the region has shifted, and a more equitable distribution of jobs and resources has resulted. A more diverse, inclusive Charlotte has emerged, attracting talented people from far and wide. “Medical facilities, law practices, restaurants, bars and retail stores are opening in areas that were previously devoid of such services,” the scenario writers report. “A nascent, virtuous

cycle is beginning to form.” Adds English, “In this scenario, people of color and those who have been marginalized intentionally invest themselves in making the community stronger, better, and more accessible.”

On November 14, 2003, the scenarios were formally presented to over a hundred community leaders at the Levine Museum of the New South in uptown Charlotte. As each story was read aloud, key words and phrases (e.g., high unemployment, unequal access, urban sprawl) were projected on screens for added emphasis. After each story ended, a different poet from the community was invited to the podium to read his (or her) poem—pieces written as first-person responses to the scenarios. And then a question was presented to the audience: What kind of community do you see?

The response was so enthusiastic that the Foundation for the Carolinas has agreed to fund “Crossroads Charlotte,” a community engagement process that will ultimately bring the stories to every sector of the city. “People have been provoked to think,” English reports, adding, “participants are telling us this is refreshing,” which is impressive itself considering the delicate and controversial subjects the scenarios touch upon.

Admittedly, the full story of scenario planning in Charlotte is still being written, but the opening chapters have been riveting for locals, and when a large part of the challenge is simply getting people to talk, English and her colleagues can claim at least one happy ending so far. ■

(To read the four scenarios in their entirety, visit www.communitybuildinginitiative.org.)



Charlotte's civic leaders gather in round table discussions to react to the four scenarios.

