



WHITE PAPER

The value of foresight and scenario-based planning for federal agencies.

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The Problem

The planning for the future is trumped by the crises of today.

Many government agencies lack a foresight office, much less a foresight capability. While intelligence activities may be strong, the ability to plan farther into the future for uncertainty beyond the 5 year budget planning horizon is not common.

On March 28, 2021, the front page of the Outlook section of the Washington Post featured an article by J. Peter Scoblic titled *"We can't prevent tomorrow's catastrophes unless we imagine them today."*¹

Mr. Scoblic writes:



"If the events of the past year have demonstrated anything, it is the uncertainty of the future. Which means that, for Biden to succeed, simply having a strategy will not suffice. Even in calmer times, the future rarely holds still for our plans, and in a dynamic environment (see: 2021), there is every chance that unimagined problems will arise, that our current challenges will have unexpected effects and that our solutions will have unintended consequences. In such an environment we need more than strategy. We need strategic foresight.

Strategic foresight ... involves envisioning alternative futures to better sense, shape and adapt to the one that is emerging. It is a flexible way of managing uncertainty. Tools like scenario planning are used widely, if inconsistently, in business and government, yet the White House does not have a dedicated strategic-foresight function.

Imagination — the ability to generate alternatives, challenge assumptions and take the perspective of others — is a key strategic resource for navigating the uncertainty of the future. As the 9/11 Commission wrote in its assessment of the government's failure to anticipate the 2001 terrorist attacks: "The most important failure was one of imagination."

There are pockets of strategic foresight throughout the U.S. government — in the Secret Service, the Government Accountability Office, the Office of Personnel Management, the Forest Service, the Agency for International Development and various parts of the Defense Department, including the Office of Net Assessment, the Army Mad Scientist Laboratory and the Air Force's futures directorate. (I do some foresight work with the Air Force.) But these pockets are scattered."

1 – <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/03/18/future-forecasting-strategic-planning/>

Discussion

Recent activity suggests an increased focus on foresight, especially given COVID-19, social unrest, and other disrupters over the past year.

AUGUST 27, 2020

Biden Tweets “Leadership requires **foresight**.”

MARCH 2021

The **Federal Foresight Community of Interest** (FFCol.org) celebrated its 8 years of existence. The organization has seen up-ticks in memberships over the past year as more government organizations are focused on planning for disruption.

MARCH 1, 2021

The idea of creating a **UN Office on Strategic or Existential Long-range Threats** came out of World Future Day 2021. This global online conference included over a thousand futurists from 65 countries, representing academia, government, private sector, and think tanks. As a result, the Millennium Project published “Global Strategic Threats and The Proposal to Create a Specialized UN Office.” This document calls for a UN Office on Strategic Threats to “centralize and coordinate information and strategic thinking on a global scale. It would be a central point to identify and assess long-range trends and synergies among potential future threats.”

MARCH 24, 2021

OMB A-11 Part 6, discussing Foresight, reinstated by the Biden Administration. It states:

OMB A-11 Part 6, Section 200.22: Foresight. In the context of a **strategic planning best practice**, foresight is generally characterized as **insight into how and why the future might be different from the present**. Foresight practices include environmental scanning, trend analysis, and **scenario-based planning**, and other methods to **engage individuals in thinking about the long-range future**. While foresight is often considered as the “act of looking forward” so as to plan for the future, in strategic planning **it is not the same as forecasting**, which seeks to make statements or assertions about future events based on quantitative and qualitative analysis and modeling. Through incorporating foresight into strategic planning, an agency can develop an appropriate strategic posture by analyzing and preparing for multiple possible futures.

MARCH 25, 2021

The **Atlantic Council** published “**100 Ideas for the First 100 Days of the Biden Administration.**”¹ Idea #65 titled “**Create a Federal Anticipatory Governance Framework**” states:

“With COVID-19, the US has irrevocably entered a much more turbulent security environment featuring permanent disruption, complexity of threats, and accelerated secondary and tertiary consequences. Unless it focuses on identifying risks early or even preventing them, the US will be forced into a never-ending cycle of draining, reactive crisis management.

An anticipatory governance framework, through its network of processes and institutions, can present a potential solution. **By using strategic foresight and timely data-driven feedback, anticipatory governance can help identify strategic shocks early, develop targeted responses rapidly, and allocate resources efficiently to manage them.** The result can be improved, more collaborative decision-making and enhanced US governmental capacity to manage risks.

President Biden should issue an executive order mandating the creation of a federal anticipatory governance framework, connecting key USG institutions, **mainstreaming strategic foresight** in their operations, and setting aside dedicated resources. This whole-of-government effort would be coordinated by the NSC, and include DoD, DoS, NIC, DHS, as well as issue-specific offices where relevant. This framework could be a first step towards shifting the US’ focus from crisis management to prevention, and could be further extended at the federal, state, local and tribal levels if successful.”

1 – <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/100-ideas-for-the-first-100-days/65-create-a-federal-anticipatory-governance-framework/>

Recommendations

Scenario-Based Planning is the #1 Foresight method used to date. It has its origins all the way back to Herman Kahn who worked with the Hudson Institute and RAND in the 1950's and 60's. His insistence that we force ourselves to "think about the unthinkable" gave way to planning for the nation's nuclear weapons strategy. In the private sector, scenario-based planning dates to Pierre Wack at Royal Dutch Shell who examined alternative futures in the petrochemical field. The approach helped Shell navigate the challenges of the gas market collapse of the 1970s, with resilience far exceeding the competition. In the US government, US Coast Guard has the longest history – two decades – focusing on scenario-based planning in their "Project Evergreen."

Use of strategic foresight, enabled by scenario-based planning workshops, allows organizations to examine multiple possible futures. This is critical as the future holds an extraordinary amount of uncertainties. Planning for only one future puts "all the eggs in one basket" – and the results of this can be catastrophic. Instead, organizations should focus on accepting that the future is uncertain, and plan for many possible futures. Doing so increases agility and resilience in times of disruption. The scenarios inspire creativity and innovation, helping to address unconscious bias and helping organizations think beyond the crisis of today.

In a recent RAND review of USCG Project Evergreen, they note in the report:



"People who were involved in... Evergreen I indicated that they had been better able to address challenges following September 11, 2001, and Hurricane Katrina because of the habits of thought that they had gained from their experiences. For those in planning jobs, the insights gleaned during the process provided useful information for human capital planning, budget planning, intelligence planning, and strategy development."

"Their knowledge helped stimulate creative ideas that were grounded in their collective expertise.... Moreover, their involvement also contributed to buy-in by the same personnel after the workshops concluded."

"...scenarios can help link the future to the present and can be designed...to facilitate the discussion of trade-offs, which is often easier to build consensus around rather than arriving at one "right" decision. Scenarios can also acknowledge important tensions between the "now" and the future, as well as between day-to-day needs and contingencies."

From the Experts

As **Dr. Richard Lum** states in his book 4 Steps to the Future:



“The metric of success for scenario work is not whether or not you got the future ‘right;’ it’s whether or not they inspired and informed action that, years later, you are happy to have taken.”

As **Alvin Toffler** (Alvin Toffler was an American writer, futurist, and businessman known for his works discussing modern technologies, including the digital revolution and the communication revolution, with emphasis on their effects on cultures worldwide. He is regarded as one of the world’s outstanding futurists) said in his book Future Shock:



“The inability to speak with precision and certainty about the future is no excuse for silence... it is more important to be imaginative and insightful than to be 100% right.”

Clark Murdock (Clark Murdock is a senior adviser at Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington, D.C.-based foreign policy think tank. Murdock specializes in strategic planning, defense policy, and national security affairs) in his book Future Making says:



“Waiting passively for the future to arrive will ensure that tomorrow’s challenges will be met with today’s capabilities.”

“A firm that doesn’t try to make its future is in denial.”

“Innovation, by definition, means change – and change is hard. It’s also not free. You have to invest in the future, committing time, people, and dollars to exploring and experimenting with new ideas.”

Ready to learn more?

Visit our Scenario Based Planning page at:
<https://www.lblstrategies.com/scenario-based-planning-bootcamp/>