

Preparing for the Future with Scenarios

By Brenda Barker Scott and Stephanie Noël
Queen's IRC



COMMUNITY
OF PRACTICE
SERIES



Our lives, personal and professional, have been disrupted in a way that many of us may have never imagined. As schools and businesses close, people find themselves isolated from colleagues, friends and family, and sometimes facing this challenge alone. Everything that we took for granted seems to be upside down and inside out. And there is no definitive end in sight.

How do we plan for a future with so many unknowns? Even though your boards and leaders may be seeking concrete solutions, it's simply not possible; no one has a crystal ball. None of us can accurately foresee how the next months will unfold, and quite frankly, that is not our work right now. As futurist Amy Webb so pointedly observed, our “goal right now isn't prediction. It's preparation for what comes next.”

One thing we can do right now is to actively contribute to what comes next. That means collaborating to find new ways of working and new ways of connecting. To support your planning, we offer an exercise from our **Designing Collaborative Workplaces** program. It can help you and your colleagues identify and see possible futures, so that you can pull out plausible scenarios, categorize them, and help your team stretch their thinking to develop strategies and adapt to a new way of working.

With so many unknowns, what people need to see from their leaders right now, is that they have a good command of the here and now — even as it changes hourly— as well as the capacity to think about the medium and longer terms. The *Shaping Possible Futures* exercise below, is a low-tech way to help your teams think ahead, to carefully explore alternative scenarios, so that you can prepare for what might be coming next.

Shaping Possible Futures: Short, Medium, Longer Term

Seeing into the future is hard work, especially when we are all pulled to the busy work of the here and now. This exercise gives you the opportunity to take a step back from today's challenges and focus on the future over three categories of time: the shorter term (now), the medium term (two to six months from now), and the longer term (six months out). These time frames are suggestions and can be adjusted to suit your specific needs. You will also identify the essential stakeholders that will serve or be served in your scenarios. Our suggestion is to keep those stakeholders to a minimum core group; for example, you might identify employees, leaders, customers, suppliers or partners, and community.

This expanded lens can help your team see how changing circumstances over time will necessarily shift the needs of stakeholders, and help them extend their focus from managing the here and now to preparing for plausible futures. To ground your thinking, your team might benefit from referring to Joe Pinsker's article "The Four Possible Timelines for Life Returning to Normal," in the *Atlantic Magazine*.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2020/03/coronavirus-social-distancing-over-back-to-normal/608752/>

Step 1: Brainstorm what's happening and will happen – in the short, medium, and longer term.

For your chosen area of focus, gather your team (virtually) and beginning with the short term, ask each team member to generate a list of what's going on, in the world, in their personal worlds, and with their customers and constituents. Give each member 5-10 minutes to generate their own lists, before facilitating a report out, with each person sharing an idea until all ideas are captured. Repeat for the medium and longer term scenarios. This activity should take approximately an hour, and it is important to complete all three time frames, as your insights will emerge from this data. Don't worry if you can't agree on whether a response fits within one or several time frames; if someone says it, place the item in the category. This is a brainstorm.

Short Term (Today and next few weeks)	Medium Term (2-6 months)	Longer Term (6 months - 2 years)

Step 2: So What? Discuss your lists to identify patterns, pivotal circumstances, and insights.

Reflect on your lists in a number of ways. Begin by focusing on each time frame and pulling out key themes around occurrences (the what's happening), as well as the implications of what's happening. Implications can be opportunities, consequences, needs, threats, risks, and/or pivot points (occurrences that can shift the trajectory of what might be). Next, discuss and explore the most important themes by asking questions like:

- What's most likely? How might we test our assumptions?
- What opportunities or threats are the most impactful? How so? What can we do to leverage the opportunity or mitigate the threat?
- What are the one or two most important efforts we can begin, today, to prepare for our best possible future?

Next, explore key themes across time frames to reveal how earlier efforts and occurrences might impact the future. Here it is useful to pull out the core assumptions people hold about the most impactful threats, as those assumptions can be used to generate a best-case, worst-case and moderate-case story line. If it is helpful, for each scenario you can write a short story detailing important occurrences, needs, responses, pivot points, and outcomes. A simplified example of a best-case story might look something like this:

Short Term: We are adjusting to our new virtual world at warp speed. We're ensuring that people have the technology they need to work from home and supporting our team leaders to help people transition. We are all experiencing a number of emotions, including fear, confusion, and unease. This is a time to reassure people, stay positive, and be transparent, even though our direction seems to change daily. Our motto right now is: *we're going with it and taking one day at a time.*

Medium Term: People have settled into working virtually thanks to four best practices: **1)** Teams meet virtually each morning for 15 minutes to seek direction, share progress and access support; **2)** Our senior leaders hold a weekly all hands (or no hands) session to rally the troops and communicate our big news, **3)** Twice a month, every employee has a one-on-one, informal chat with their director, and **4)** Our weekly TGIF coffee-breaks give everyone a chance to connect and share a laugh. Through these forums, we've talked a lot about what's working for us and what's getting in the way, and our leaders are ruthlessly discarding protocols and practices that no longer serve us. So supported, our employees are generating a number of virtual service innovations, which our clients are welcoming, even though we are learning as we go. In doing so, we are actually attracting new business. Our motto right now is: *we're letting go of the old to make way for the new; and it's working for us!*

Longer Term: Rather than going back to the way things were, we've evolved into a new way of being. While employees are delighted to be back on-site and working with each other, we are noticing some important shifts. People are hanging out more in our collective spaces, especially now that we've made them more





attractive and comfortable. We've also learned that, for some employees, working at home can be beneficial, and so we're experimenting with a hybrid policy, whereby employees can choose to work at home on Mondays and Friday afternoons. We've embraced a number of service innovations that build on the best of our virtual and in-person service delivery capabilities and have allowed us to expand our client base. This has opened up new opportunities for our employees, who are using their talents in different ways. Our motto right now is: *we have a renewed appreciation for the work we do and for each other.*

From your conversations identify the working themes/ideas that you will continue to explore and extend. Those working themes may include the most plausible occurrences and the most, helpful, impactful and/or provocative ideas you have for moving forward.

Step 3: With Who? Identify your core stakeholders, their needs, and your response.

For each working theme and set of ideas, agree on the core stakeholders who will serve or be served. For each plausible scenario, reflect on what each stakeholder group needs so that they can fulfill their roles. For example, how might customer needs and preferences shift over time? What's happening with your employees and what might they need so that they can be supported and also serve? In turn, how might this impact the role of leaders?

Step 4: Now What? Plan for taking action.

Armed with your working scenarios, deep dive teams can be charged with exploring the ideas further by collecting concrete data, interviewing key stakeholders, placing small bets and conducting early experiments, or simply watching observing and tracking how the scenarios are unfolding in real time. Ideally, these ideas will enable you to adjust for your short-term strategy, and help you begin to prepare for the medium-term. Your longer-term strategy will most likely be more hypothetical and unsure, however it may offer you insight into a range of potential futures that will no doubt become more certain with time.

To move from ideation to action, discuss your high impact ideas with others and find ways to test your ideas with the people who can make them happen. Apply our 4-D action learning process as you plan forward, so that you and your teams are guided by iterative experimentation and learning along the way. A learning oriented processes encourages iterative rounds of experimentation to evolve new insights. Rather than waiting to execute once a plan has been laboriously prescribed, collaborators learn as they execute, and improvise to correct.

In challenging times such as these, fear and uncertainty can cloud our thinking and stifle creativity. But now, more than ever, we need to boldly explore new ideas and new ways of working. The *Shaping Possible Futures* activity enables us to face the unknowable future with curiosity, calm and confidence.

Brenda Barker Scott, PhD

Brenda Barker Scott is an Organizational Design practitioner, educator, and author. Brenda is an instructor for Queen's IRC and works with clients across Canada to design engaging, high-performing workplaces.

Stephanie Noël, MBA

Stephanie Noël is the Director of Queen's IRC and a passionate advocate for educating and enabling Human Resources, Labour Relations and Organization Development professionals to create healthy, respectful workplaces.



Industrial Relations Centre (IRC)
Queen's University, Faculty of Arts & Science
Executive House, 275 Ontario St., 3rd Floor
Kingston ON K7K 2X5
Toll free: 1-888-858-7838
E-mail: irc@queensu.ca

irc.queensu.ca