



HORIZONS **FORESIGHT** METHOD

Module 2



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THE HORIZONS FORESIGHT METHOD

You are here in the
Horizons Foresight
Method



FRAMING

- Identify the issue or problem of interest
- Consider the larger system(s) shaping the issue
- Prepare a simple domain diagram of what is "in" or "out" as a guide
- Allow it to evolve over the study

ASSUMPTIONS

- Identify "current assumptions" buried in public dialogue and policy documents
- Identify key trends people assume are true
- Summarize key assumptions as a description of the expected future

SCANNING

- Scan for weak signals of potentially disruptive changes
- Conduct interviews and facilitate dialogue to understand the system and develop insights

SYSTEM MAPPING

- Identify key elements or nodes in the system
- Describe key relationships
- Use a system map to identify where change could occur and direct further scanning for weak signals as needed

CHANGE DRIVERS

- Use insights from scanning to identify change drivers shaping the system
- Do cascade diagrams to see 2nd to 5th order consequences

SCENARIOS

- Develop scenarios to explore a range of futures
- Identify potential challenges and discontinuities
- Test robustness of current assumptions and strategies

RESULTS

- Explore policy challenges and opportunities
- Identify credible assumptions and robust strategies
- Identify key uncertainties, surprises and emerging issues
- Better understand how the system or issue could evolve

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Understand why assumptions are a useful focus in the foresight process
- Understand how assumptions are used in the Horizons Foresight Method
- Know how to identify strategic assumptions

WHAT IS AN ASSUMPTION?

- Definition: A statement that is accepted as true or as certain to happen, without proof. (Oxford dictionary)
- Assumptions can be conscious or unconscious, explicit or hidden.
- They shape every step in the thought process:



- Unexamined assumptions are a source of surprise and uncertainty in analysis and decision-making and thus a useful focus for foresight.

ASSUMPTIONS IN POLICY ANALYSIS

- Assumptions shape every step in policy analysis.
- A frequent assumption in most policy analysis is that the future will be like the present or an extrapolation of the present.
- The problem: There is mounting evidence that the world will change over the next decade, driven by ongoing economic, social and technological revolutions. So some of the current underlying assumptions may be wrong and might need to be revised.

ASSUMPTIONS IN MANAGEMENT

- Research shows that managers develop mental models of the systems they manage and rely on these models in decision-making.*
- They use them to run mental movies to explore, develop and test alternative ideas, strategies and visions.
- Assumptions are the foundation on which people build their mental models.
- Mistaken assumptions can lead to poor decisions.

ASSUMPTIONS IN THE HORIZONS FORESIGHT METHOD

- The Horizons Foresight Method is one of the few foresight methods that explicitly tests and, if necessary, reframes assumptions.
- Assumptions that have proved robust across a range of futures are one of the best ways to prepare for an uncertain future.
- Highlighting credible and vulnerable assumptions is one of the most efficient ways to communicate foresight findings.
- Foresight can help improve policy development and decision making by testing the robustness of current assumptions and proposing new ones, for consideration, as needed.

WHEN TO USE ASSUMPTIONS

FRAMING

ASSUMPTIONS

SCANNING

SYSTEM MAPPING

CHANGE DRIVERS

SCENARIOS

RESULTS

Assumptions are involved at two points in the Horizons Foresight Method:

At the beginning of the process, to determine what are the “current assumptions” that consciously or unconsciously shape our thinking about the system and its future. This set of assumptions reflects the expected future.

At the end of the foresight process, the robustness of the “current assumptions” is tested against the scenarios to determine whether they are credible, uncertain or vulnerable.

HOW TO FIND ASSUMPTIONS THAT ARE STRATEGICALLY USEFUL

Some assumptions are more important than others in shaping our thinking. The task is to find the assumptions that are at the core of our analysis.

Given that:

- We make assumptions about the expected future
 - Try to identify the key assumptions buried in public discourse and policy documents.
- We make assumptions to reduce uncertainty
 - Try to identify the critical uncertainties - the things you need to know but don't know about information or outcomes. Then state and test the related assumptions.
- We make assumptions to reduce complexity
 - Try to identify the key systems, structures and processes and then state any assumptions about continuity and change in these areas.

TESTING ASSUMPTIONS

CREDIBLE ASSUMPTIONS

Should guide planning for the future

- Economic power will shift from West to East.

UNCERTAIN ASSUMPTIONS

Should be researched further

- Science and technology will save us.

VULNERABLE ASSUMPTIONS

Should be reconsidered

- Health care will be delivered in the same way.

WHAT ARE THE KEY CHALLENGES OF WORKING WITH ASSUMPTIONS?

- It can be difficult to articulate our own assumptions as we may be unaware of them.
- Issues like worldview, values, culture and knowledge may limit or distort our ability to see assumptions as individuals and in groups.
- It can be difficult to agree on which assumptions matter.
- Frequently, strategic assumptions raise topics such as wealth, power and gender. It is important to have the courage to address and unpack the taboo issues.
- As we learn more about a system, we need to be open to updating and reframing assumptions.

CONCLUSION

- Assumptions are central to thinking, analysis and decision-making.
- Unexamined assumptions are a major source of surprise and uncertainty.
- Using foresight to test the robustness of strategic assumptions across a range of futures helps develop policy and decisions for the world that is emerging rather than the one that is fading.

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