

Scanning Roundtable – Facilitator’s guide

OBJECTIVE: TO SHARE WEAK SIGNALS AND BUILD ON THEM THROUGH DISCUSSION.

This is a simple exercise in which participants take turns sharing a weak signal they have identified and then receive comments from the group. The purpose of the discussion is to strengthen each weak signal by adding more information on the change (e.g. related weak signals) and identifying additional implications, including those arising through interaction with the weak signals and expertise of other participants. Depending on the number of participants (or number of weak signals per participant), a session can take between 60 and 120 minutes (e.g. budget approximately 3 minutes for presentation and 7 minutes for discussion per weak signal). This exercise can be conducted as a one-off but is particularly valuable if repeated over time (e.g. weekly, monthly, or quarterly) as a series of sessions. This will help develop scanning capacity, build a richer shared understanding of the future, and provide a foundation for further foresight work.

Agenda at a Glance

People:

- 1 facilitator
- 5–25 participants
- 1 notetaker (optional)

Materials:

- Projector/computer (optional)

Meeting Space:

- Meeting space large enough for number of participants.

TIME	ACTIVITY
5 minutes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. General meeting introductions (if needed) 2. Criteria for a good weak signal (if needed)
45-105 minutes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Weak signal roundtable (3 minute presentation, 7 minute discussion for each)
10 minutes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Reflect on and/or evaluate the exercise
EST. TOTAL TIME: 60-120 minutes	

BEFORE THE MEETING

Come see how it works!

- If you are planning to hold a scanning round table you may wish to first attend one of the weekly scanning round table sessions held at Horizons to see how it works. Contact Horizons for details on time and location. We also welcome participants via telephone, Skype or one of Horizons' telepresence robots.

Provide training (if needed)

- If participants are new to scanning and foresight, you may wish to conduct an initial introductory training session on scanning for and identifying weak signals. Alternatively, you should at least review information on weak signals (as contained in the agenda below) at the beginning of the session.

Send an invitation with instructions and examples

- Your invitation to the session needs to request that each participant prepare a weak signal in advance. You can include a detailed description of weak signals (as contained in the agenda below) or describe them in general terms (e.g. “an idea that surprised you or challenged your assumptions about the future”).
- Examples of weak signals can be found on the Horizons website: www.horizons.gc.ca
- The suggested format for a weak signal is 150 words divided under two headings:
 - **What?** What is the surprising and potentially disruptive change that has been observed? Include hyperlink(s) to the source of information on this change (e.g. news article).
 - **So What?** If this change was to continue and grow, what are the potential significant and disruptive implications?
- Ideally, weak signals should be shared in advance with the facilitator (via e-mail) or with the whole group (by posting in a shared drive or wiki).

Prepare the room

- Each participant will need a chair, writing surface and ideally a view of each other (i.e. no second-row observers).

- Optional projector/computer for real-time note taking: Ideally, participants are asked to write up their weak signals (including hyperlinks to sources) in advance and either send them to the meeting facilitator or post them in a shared drive or wiki, etc. If this is done, each weak signal can be brought up on screen and edited in real-time during the discussion (e.g. by a designated note-taker) based on comments from other participants. The edited weak signals can then be shared with participants and others in the form of a newsletter following the meeting.

AFTER THE MEETING

- (Optional) Circulate the collected weak signals to participants or a broader audience. This step may require some additional editing, possibly including edits or clarifications from the original author.
 - (Optional) Maintain a database of weak signals for participants or a broader audience.
 - (Optional) Identify a key weak signal that should be explored further and assign someone to develop it into a one-page insight. An insight typically contains a plausible disruptive change and potential significant implications, supported by a few examples of the change (i.e. a few weak signals). Use this insight as the basis for a strategic dialogue on making policy resilient to this potential change.
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ANNOTATED AGENDA

TIME	ACTIVITY	NOTES
5 minutes	<p>1. General meeting introductions (if needed)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce facilitators • Provide context for the session (why are we here?) • Allow participant introductions if they are unacquainted • Consider adding a few minutes to the agenda to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ build rapport through an ice-breaker activity ◦ review or develop a list of ground rules on the wall 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If this is one of several activities, consider using a visual agenda to situate this activity within the day's events. • A list of rules of engagement posted in the room during the meeting is a visual reminder of the group's commitment to support a good discussion.
	<p>2. Criteria for a good weak signal (if needed)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In essence, a weak signal of disruptive change is any development you identify by scanning news items, journals, etc., or hear from a colleague, expert interview, or conference, etc., that strikes you as surprising and potentially significant. • A weak signal is a sign of a change that has occurred and that could, if it were to grow over time, have a significant impact on the system you are interested in. • A handy short-cut to finding weak signals is to identify commonly held assumptions about the future (see assumptions exercise) and then look for weak signals of changes that run counter to those commonly held assumptions. (E.g. if it's assumed that two parties will remain perpetually in conflict, look for indications of nascent cooperation between them.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A regular brief reminder of the criteria for a good weak signal can help focus presenters and discussion. A more extensive introduction to and/or training on scanning and weak signals could be useful at, or prior to, the first session, and for new participants.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The criteria for a good weak signal of potentially disruptive change are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Significance: If the change occurs (and grows), it could have a significant disruptive impact on the system or issue you are interested in. ◦ Plausibility: There is some evidence that the change is occurring or could occur. ◦ Novelty: Awareness is low among affected actors (e.g. policymakers, mainstream media). ◦ Timeliness: The consequences could emerge in 10–15 years (or whatever your timeframe of interest is). 	
45-105 minutes	<p>3. Weak signal roundtable</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite a participant to present their weak signal in 1–3 minutes, covering both the what (what is the change) and the so what (why it matters, its significance, its potential implications for the system and for policy). • Invite other participants to comment on the weak signal that was just presented. Limit discussion to approximately 7 minutes to ensure time for other weak signals. Possible discussion points include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Questions for clarification ◦ Suggestions of other sources of evidence for the weak signal ◦ Possible links and interactions with other weak signals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active facilitation is crucial to the success of these discussions. In particular: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Budget time to ensure that all participants will have an opportunity to present and receive comments on their weak signal. Ten minutes per weak signal (3 minutes for presentation, 7 minutes for discussion) is a reasonable pace.

- Comments on the plausibility of the change (e.g. is the weak signal from a credible source) or on the plausibility of the change growing into something big (e.g. factors that could accelerate or hold back the change)
 - Comments on the novelty of the change. Is this change something that is already widely known? What elements of the change are most novel?
 - Comments on timeliness: reasons why the change may or may not grow and have an impact within the time period of interest (typically 10–15 years)
 - Comments on significance: what are the most significant potential impacts of this change? Are there further downstream impacts or impacts in other systems that the presenter hasn't considered? What are the potential policy challenges and opportunities that could arise from the change?
- Avoid allowing discussions on plausibility to bog down into debates about probability. What matters is if something could plausibly happen and how disruptive it would be, rather than its likelihood of happening.
 - Ensure balanced participation in the discussion (e.g. by extroverts/introverts, experts/generalists). At times it may be fine to allow a free-flowing discussion rather than proceeding around the table or by hands raised. However, be sure to reserve time at the end of discussion of each weak signal for anyone who has not yet spoken to provide their comments. Often the best insights come here.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite another participant to present and receive comments. Continue until all participants have presented and received comments on at least one weak signal each. • If there is time remaining, you may either: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ invite participants to present a second weak signal ◦ ask participants to identify key themes that emerged from the discussion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limit trolling. It is legitimate for participants to challenge the novelty, plausibility and significance of weak signals, if done respectfully. However, you should remind the group that the greatest value often emerges when participants suspend their disbelief and explore “what if” the change were to grow.
10 minutes	<p>4. Reflect on and/or evaluate the exercise</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give participants an opportunity to provide feedback on the exercise. • This might take the form of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ A Q&A discussion ◦ Participant completion of an evaluation form ◦ Informal evaluation—On their way out the room, participants are asked to post one comment on a sticky note for each of three wall headings: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What Worked? - What Could Be better? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scanning round tables are most valuable when conducted as a series on a regular basis (e.g. weekly, monthly, or quarterly). Therefore, it is particularly important to seek feedback and discuss any changes that could improve the following sessions. • Provide evaluation forms or sticky notes as appropriate.

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PH4-164/3-2016E-PDF

978-0-660-05851-1