

## A Missing Step in the Governance Process

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**ABSTRACT** *Steven A. Rosell briefly reviews some of the lessons learned in over a decade of work with leaders from government, business and civil society in Canada, the United States and elsewhere. He examines how scenario planning has become an important tool for leading and governing in today's new governance context, and the need to make room for real dialogue at the front end of our most important decision-making processes.*

**KEYWORDS** *shared frameworks; uncertainty; scenario approach; time; dialogue; governance*

### **The challenge of governance today**

Most systems of governance were once made up of a relatively small and homogeneous elite who shared the same belief systems, similar upbringing and the same social class. They could meet and reach an agreement that would be accepted by the larger society as legitimate and, as such, could be acted on effectively. Most of our governance systems still are designed to operate in this manner, on the basis of 'elite accommodation'. But today many more voices need to be taken into account in order for an important decision to be accepted as legitimate and to be acted on effectively. We urgently require better institutions and practices that are designed to enable people from diverse backgrounds to come together, construct shared frameworks, work through issues and reach a considered public judgement.

The construction of shared frameworks is an increasingly important and difficult step in the operation of a more distributed system of governance. As the number of players and the range of perspectives around the governance process multiply, we can no longer take for granted that the participants have a shared set of myths, assumptions and frameworks of interpretation that are the basis of consensus building, and legitimate collective action. Instead, those shared frameworks need continually to be constructed through a process of dialogue and strategic conversation.

Scenario construction is a valuable methodology for fostering strategic conversation and for building shared frameworks for learning, planning and action.

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### **The Cases**

There is not enough space in this brief article to review the scenario projects from which these lessons are drawn, and most of this case material is available elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> Those projects included:

#### ***Canada 1990s – the changing maps scenarios***

Created by a roundtable of senior Canadian government officials drawn from 15 different departments and agencies and dealing with how governance is likely to change given the new realities of an information society. The scenarios led to an increased concern with issues of social cohesion, first among the participants and then more broadly across government and related policy communities. The Secretary to the Cabinet and head of the public service (who himself had been a member of the roundtable) later reported that one of the most important impacts of the scenarios and the work of the roundtable was how it changed the language used to frame and talk about a wide range of policy issues.

#### ***North and South America, 1990s – which future for the Americas?***

Sponsored by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), leaders from across the region (from government, business, labour, development agencies, the arts, academe, the social sector, and more) met in a series of workshops<sup>2</sup> to explore the trends and driving forces that are shaping the future of that region. The scenarios that resulted, and the process by which they were constructed, created a community of discourse, a common language, among a range of leaders in the hemisphere,<sup>3</sup> and also within the Americas Branch of CIDA. CIDA has suggested that, dollar for dollar, this effort may be the best investment it has made in development in the hemisphere. In the end, it is the people of the Americas who will determine the success of its development efforts, and the construction of shared mental maps, across a wide range of perspectives and interests, greatly facilitated their ability to work together to that end. (See detailed description of

the scenario building process by Francisco Sagasti in this issue.)

#### ***Canada 1990s – the future of the public service***

A special task force of Deputy Ministers<sup>4</sup> was established with a mandate to examine how best to develop the public service in Canada over the next ten years. Three scenarios for the future of governance in Canada were constructed, and the challenges that the Federal government and public service would face under each scenario were considered.<sup>5</sup> Those scenarios (which have come to be called ‘The Governance Scenarios’) then were used to test (‘windtunnel’) policy or management decisions and to encourage a more strategic conversation about the future of the public service, both inside and outside the federal government. For example, the Government of Saskatchewan used the Governance Scenarios as the focus for a successful roundtable which brought together Cabinet ministers, senior officials and union leaders to plan the future of the Provincial public service.

#### ***Canada 1990s – human resource management within the public service***

A range of stakeholder groups, including government personnel managers and leaders of public service unions held a series of workshops on the future of the human resource management system. In both workshops an existing set of scenarios (the Changing Maps Scenarios in the first workshop and the Governance Scenarios in the second), were used to set the context and to help participants to approach issues from a wider, longer term perspective, and to go beyond their usual frameworks. In that context, participants developed a shared vision of the personnel management system they would like to see in ten years, and a common understanding of the current reality. Dialogue then focused on developing an action plan that could get us from the current reality to the vision, and on the roles that the various participants might play in that effort. The workshops represented one of the few occasions

where there has been a dialogue between public service management and unions outside of the usual collective bargaining framework, and they succeeded in establishing a significant degree of consensus and much common ground. One of the principal recommendations to emerge from those workshops is to move from a rules-based system of personnel management and accountability to one that is values-based.

### ***United States 2000 – the Stennis Congressional Staff Fellows (United States Congress)***

In every Congress, the Stennis Center for Public Service, an independent agency of the legislative branch, operates a leadership development programme for senior staff of the United States Senate and House of Representatives (chiefs of staff, committee staff directors, legislative directors etc.). Each class includes balanced representation from both parties and from both chambers nominated by elected Members and selected through a competitive process. A recent class of Stennis Fellows used the Changing Maps Scenarios to help to set the agenda of issues they wished to explore. Fellows first divided into groups and each group was asked to make the best case they could that the scenario they had been assigned was happening in the United States already, was going to continue to happen, and really was the only way things were likely to turn out. This initial exercise accomplished at least three things. First, it enabled the participants to 'live in' the scenarios, to play with them and to begin really to understand their dynamics. Second, it allowed the participants to translate the scenarios from the Canadian context in which they had been constructed into the context of the United States. Third, and perhaps most important, it allowed participants to use the scenarios as 'transitional objects', not only enabling them to explore different (sometimes unthinkable) perspectives on how the future might unfold, but also enabling them to establish a different sort of relationship with each other. In the process of playing with the scenarios, in that process of strategic conversation and dialogue, the mixed groups of Republicans and Democrats, with very different

backgrounds and political perspectives, became a team working together to make the best case for their scenario.

### **Some lessons learned**

While many different approaches can be used to construct shared frameworks and to foster strategic conversation, scenarios seem to be especially helpful in enabling diverse groups openly to discuss their different perspectives, to develop a shared language and to find common ground.<sup>6</sup> Drawing on the cases listed above, and many more not listed, there are a number of lessons we have learned about using the scenario approach to improve the process of governance:

### ***What scenarios can achieve***

- *The value of scenarios as stories:*<sup>7</sup> As 'stories', scenarios enable groups to think the unthinkable, speak the unspeakable, breaking out of established frameworks ('mental boxes') and open up questions that otherwise might be dismissed as heresy. Scenarios can help people to see things that otherwise would be screened out by their established mental maps or by the 'official future' to which their organization or government subscribes. In this way, fresh insight and new approaches can be developed. As stories, scenarios help in speaking truth to power. At a meeting of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) at which the Changing Maps Scenarios were presented, a number of those present commented that scenarios can be especially helpful in enabling hard messages to be delivered to powerful people in ways that will be heard. Scenarios can be a useful way to help powerful people to see and consider issues, and unpleasant possibilities or realities that they otherwise might ignore.
- *The value of acknowledging uncertainty:* Scenarios encourage recognition of uncertainties and risks, and provide a good way to share those uncertainties within government and with wider publics. This also can encourage decisions to be made in a more flexible and provisional manner, recognizing those uncertainties, and

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providing greater room for those decisions to be adjusted as we learn more about their effects. In a world of rapid change, effective decision-making needs to be embedded in such an ongoing process of learning.

- *The value of broadening perspectives and reframing issues:* Overall, the scenario approach provides a way to organize a huge amount of information, and diverse perspectives, into a set of shared mental maps that, in turn, provide the context within which the multiplying players in the governance process can mutually coordinate their actions. Those shared mental maps, those alternative stories about our future, can also help those players to see and address issues whose scope cuts across traditional boundaries and exceeds usual time horizons. Issues of that scope are increasingly common and important today. Moreover, by focusing on the longer term, and by directing attention away from existing disputes, the scenario approach helps participants to move beyond old debates and narrower perspectives, and to work together creatively to envision the future.

### What scenarios need to succeed

- *The need to suspend disbelief:* If, initially, we approach a scenario analytically, the tendency will be to pick it apart using our existing framework. An analytic approach is usually a way to incorporate some data or experience into our existing framework, and what does not fit that framework usually can be ignored or explained away (a bit analogous to an immune response). That is also why a scenario, on first inspection, often can seem obvious: all that we can see, at first, is what fits our existing mental maps. If we really want to understand an alternative framework, we need to be ready to suspend disbelief and to dwell inside it, to explore and play with it for a while.<sup>8</sup> We need to take the time needed to hear and to understand the different framework of another (a process of dialogue), before we bring our analytic process to bear. Only then will we be in a position to construct
- shared mental maps across our different perspectives.
- *The need for a diversity of perspectives and for continuity in participants:* A successful scenario-based learning process requires some continuity in the membership of the group creating the scenarios. It is difficult, if not impossible, to undertake a cumulative learning process if the participants keep changing. In addition, the more diverse the participants, and the wider the range of perspectives and experiences they bring to the table, the richer will be the scenarios and the strategic conversation that result.
- *The need to define scenarios at the right level:* At a more technical level, to be useful, scenarios need to be defined at the right level. If they are too general, they will not make much difference, they will not be sufficiently relevant. On the other hand, if they are too specific, if they focus on the decisions we shall be making rather than on the context within which those decisions will be made, the scenarios will tend to become confused with options, and we can find ourselves chasing our tails (making scenarios about what we shall decide to do). Scenarios are best when they focus at a level one step more general than the decisions that need to be made, when they focus on the relevant environment for those decisions.
- *The need for a playful attitude:* More importantly, for a scenario-based process of deeper learning to work, a playful attitude is essential. One of the things that scenarios allow us to do is to suspend disbelief, to tell stories to each other and to role-play. In that process, a lot of inhibitions can be dropped in a way that encourages creativity and insight. Psychologists sometimes talk about scenarios as 'transitional objects'. A transitional object is something (like a teddy bear) that children use to grow and to learn. They use transitional objects to try out different roles and relationships, to ease themselves into different frameworks of interpretation (to construct and change the frameworks within which they learn). In a scenario process we are trying to recapture some elements of that fundamental learning process, some elements of that basic creativity.

- *The need for a parallel learning structure:* The success of a scenario process depends on the existence of a safe atmosphere and neutral forum that can foster an open, playful exchange among the participants. This is especially true for the public sector and for governance, where the size and complexity is much greater, and where government operates in a fishbowl. However, this type of neutral forum is difficult to create inside the public sector since any scenarios that are spun internally are likely to become public, and it often is difficult for government to be seen to be thinking the unthinkable. In addition, the electoral cycle tends to reinforce a shorter-term perspective that discourages longer-term thinking. As a result, it becomes both more difficult and more important to create a space in the governance process where such learning and strategic dialogue can occur. For all of these reasons, the neutral forum required by scenario processes usually can best be established outside of formal decision-making structures, by creating a parallel learning structure.<sup>9</sup>
- *The need to invest time in the process:* Finally, good scenario processes create deep learning and deep learning needs time. It is important to distinguish between two different levels of learning. At one level we learn within an established framework – the sort of learning that ordinarily occurs within an academic discipline. This is quite different from the sort of learning required to change those frameworks.<sup>10</sup> Scenarios are one technique for changing established frameworks, but that deeper sort of learning takes time. There are no shortcuts. You cannot arrive without the experience of getting there (11) It also takes time to understand a scenario (a mental map) developed by others. To understand a different mental map, we have to try to live inside it. It takes time to be clear on the problem, to develop a shared understanding of the challenges and opportunities we face, before moving to solutions. Paradoxically, however, by going slow we can go fast. By investing time now in the development of shared mental maps (whether using scenarios or other techniques), we pro-

vide the framework within which a wide range of players in the governance process later will be able to adapt more quickly, flexibly and coherently to rapidly changing circumstances.

### **Conclusion: The missing step – creating a space for dialogue**

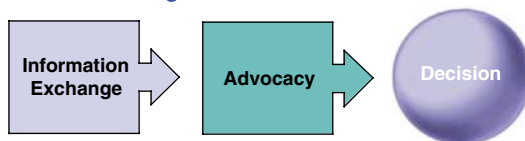
Traditional notions of governance and decision-making tend to be relatively simple – issues arise, key interests advocate different responses and a decision is made. This may work well enough when the issues and the possible responses are reasonably well understood, and where those involved share similar assumptions, language, background and culture. But when, as is increasingly common today, the nature of both the issues and the possible responses is unclear, and when people with very different beliefs, problem-definitions, values or traditions must find common ground, an additional step is needed. That is where dialogue and scenarios come in: (Diagram 1): Dialogue is the step we can take in the governance process before decisions are made, to uncover assumptions, share and broaden perspectives, and find common ground. Scenarios can play an invaluable role in this sort of learning process. A key to using dialogue effectively is to recognize that it does not replace debate, advocacy, negotiation or decision-making; it precedes them. Dialogue creates the shared language and framework, the mutual trust and understanding that enable subsequent debate, negotiation and decision-making to be more productive.<sup>12</sup> In today's world, we need to make room for real dialogue at the front end of many of our most important decision-making processes, and to do so in a more explicit and systematic way.

Effective leadership and governance in the information age depend increasingly on creating shared meanings and frameworks, on a process of deeper learning both within government and across society. Used properly, the scenario approach provides one valuable method we can use to strengthen this process and so to improve how we govern ourselves.

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Dialogue and Decision-Making:  
Adding the Missing Step

### Traditional Decision-making Model:



### When Dialogue is Added:

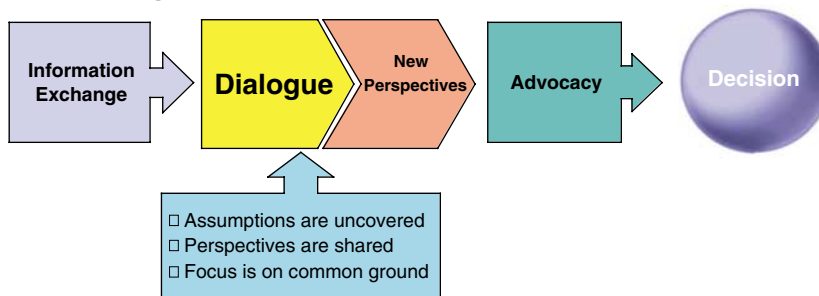


Diagram 1: Dialogue and decision-making: adding the missing step

### Notes

- 1 See Rosell (1999), especially chapter 6.
- 2 Those workshops were held in San Jose, Bridgetown, Santiago, Quito, Washington and Ottawa.
- 3 A senior Venezuelan leader, for example, recently opened a speech by describing Venezuela's situation using the language of the scenarios.
- 4 The Task Force was co-chaired by the President of the Public Service Commission and by the Secretary of the Treasury Board, and included both Federal and Provincial Deputy Ministers, some more junior Federal officials, and a small number of members from business and from the academic community.
- 5 For additional detail on these scenarios, see Canadian Centre for Management Development (1996).
- 6 In this way, scenarios can be an effective tool for team-building as well.
- 7 See also Allan et al (2002).
- 8 In addition, good scenarios often appear obvious, at least at first, in part because scenario stories do not reveal all of the thinking that was done, and the different possibilities that were worked through, in order to construct them. Good scenarios are like icebergs, most of them are hidden beneath the surface. This tendency for good scenarios to seem obvious can be compounded if, initially, we approach them analytically. In those circumstances, the tendency will be to see only those elements of the scenario that fit our existing analytic framework (that are obvious to us), and to ignore or explain away the rest.
- 9 On the importance of such parallel learning structures within organizations, see, for example, Bushe and Shani (1991).
- 10 The second-order, deeper learning process required to change frameworks is well described in the work of Gregory Bateson in his concept of deuterio-learning or Learning II. See Bateson (1972, Part II). This concept was later elaborated as 'Double Loop Learning' in Argyris and Schon (1978).
- 11 I am indebted to Harold Bridger, of the Tavistock Institute in London, for this evocative phrase.
- 12 For a more detailed discussion of these points, see Rosell (2001) and Yankelovich, (2001).

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