

Civic Scenarios as a Tool for Effecting Societal Change

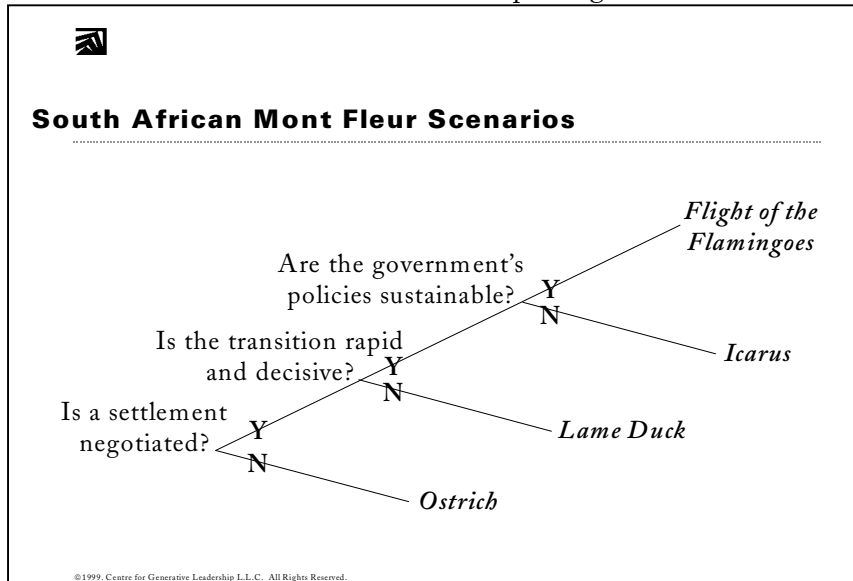
Introduction

This note sketches the experience of Generon (formerly the Centre for Generative Leadership) in using scenario thinking as a tool for effecting societal change. In these projects, a group of influential civic leaders, drawn from a broad range of sectors and organizations, works together to understand what is happening, might happen and should happen in their city or region or country, and then act in concert on that shared understanding and vision. We summarize our experience to date, the kinds of results it has produced, and the process we have developed.

Experience to date

We first used scenarios as a tool for societal problem defining and problem solving when we led the South African “Mont Fleur” project in 1991.¹ During the tumultuous transition away from apartheid, this project brought together 22 prominent people from across South African society, including community activists, conservative politicians, African National Congress officials, trade unionists, academics, establishment economists, and corporate executives. Their objective was to develop a set of alternative stories about South Africa’s future, in order to provoke debate and forward movement in the country.

One scenario (“Lame Duck”) envisioned a prolonged transition with a constitutionally weakened



government. Because the government “purports to respond to all, but satisfies none,” investors hold back, and growth and development languish amidst a mood of long, slow uncertainty. This was an important scenario because in 1991 a coalition government was being negotiated, and the scenario allowed people to see potential dangers in certain ways

of organizing the coalition and how these could be mitigated. Another scenario (“Icarus”) suggested that a black government could come to power on a wave of public support, embark on a

¹ See Adam Kahane, Pieter le Roux *et al*, “The Mont Fleur Scenarios”, *Deeper News* Volume 7 Number 1 (Emeryville: Global Business Network, 1992) and <<http://www.gbn.org/scenarios/fleur/fleurIntro.html>>.

huge, unsustainable public spending program, and consequently crash the economy. This was the first time that a team including prominent left-wing economists had discussed the possibility of a new government trying to do too much. A third scenario (“Ostrich”) pointed out the risk and futility of trying to prevent or avoid a negotiated settlement with the black majority. The fourth one (“Flight of the Flamingoes”) outlined the broad parameters of a positive and successful transition. Overall this project contributed to the building of a common language for talking across groups about the opportunities and challenges facing the country, and hence about a way forward.

Since Mont Fleur we have developed and extended this process in many settings. We have led major societal projects in Canada, Colombia, India, and most recently Guatemala, and smaller ones in the United States, Cyprus, Israel, Northern Ireland and Japan.² We have also borrowed from Mont Fleur in consulting to tens of corporate, governmental and non-governmental clients in North America, Europe and Southern Africa.

Our civic scenario work also rests on two other substantial bodies of theory and practice. The first is the well-developed application of scenarios to corporate strategizing that has grown out of the work of Royal Dutch/Shell’s famous global strategy group, which two of the Generon partners led in the early 1990s.³ The second is Generon’s own research on strategy processes and practices, which over the past few years has focussed on studying the specific bases for entrepreneurial creativity--bringing forth new futures--in the new economy.⁴

Results of the process

On the basis of these experiences, our conclusion is that civic scenario processes produce four types of results:

1. Reframed mental models.

All of us operate from maps or models in our heads about how the world works. Sometimes these maps are accurate and helpful representations of reality and other times they are woefully incomplete, inaccurate and misleading. Scenario thinking helps us to improve the quality of our models by articulating them, sharing them with other people who have different perspectives and models, and trying out other models in terms of alternative stories (scenarios) about how things have, do and might work.

² See Adam Kahane, “Changing the Winds: Scenarios for People Who Want to Change the World”, Whole Earth Review Spring 1999 and <<http://www.wholeearthmag.com/ArticleBin/222.html>>. The Colombian work is summarized in Adam Kahane, Manuel Jose Carvajal *et al*, “Destino Colombia”, Deeper News Volume 9 Number 1 (Emeryville: Global Business Network, 1998) and <<http://www.gbn.org/scenarios/colombia/>> and <<http://destinocolombia.norma.net/>>. The Canadian scenarios are at <<http://scenarios.competitor.net/>> and the Guatemalan ones at <<http://www.citel.com.gt/visionguate/>>.

³ See Kees van der Heijden, Scenarios: The Art of Strategic Conversation (New York: Wiley, 1996).

⁴ See Joseph Jaworski, Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1996) and Leadership in the New Economy: Sensing and Actualizing Emerging Futures (Beverly: Generon Consulting, 2000).

- One of the major reframings accomplished by Mont Fleur was that a successful shift away from apartheid would require navigating not only the political, military and constitutional transitions that were receiving most of the attention at the time, but also an economic one that was not. Furthermore, the obvious economic solution--quickly redistributing wealth from rich whites to poor blacks--could not work.
- A significant reframing of Visión Guatemala was that understanding the country's past, present and future required understanding the reality of the country's indigenous majority, including of their distinct "cosmovision". This enlarged perspective put the previously marginal issue of multi-culturality into the center of the national strategy conversation. The development of such shared understandings in the society at large is a prerequisite to Guatemalans being able to construct a better future together.

The Visión Guatemala Scenarios

The Illusion of the Moth. The moth's path is dangerous; it flies towards whatever light it sees and is therefore often dazzled and even burned. In this scenario, economic conditions do not improve and diversity and interculturality are not really taken to heart, so discrimination of all types persists. National reconciliation is shallow and polarization and social conflict continue. People cry out for political messianism and authoritarianism. Labor instability and unemployment rise and international cooperation decays. The economy is characterized by short-termism. Tax revenues are not sufficient to pay for social necessities. The national spirit is pessimistic, mediocrity prevails, the rule of law is absent, and impunity remains. Overall the process is one of people being worn down, with expectations unmet and solidarity eroded in the face of selfish agendas.

The Zigzag of the Beetle. The back-and-forth flight of the beetle is erratic and directionless. In this scenario, advances in political, economic and social life occur side by side with regressions. There is economic growth along with unequal participation in its benefits; interculturality along with exclusion and discrimination; and citizen participation along with apathy and lack of representativeness. Environmental degradation increases. The state is incapable of achieving real fiscal reform. Reconciliation and dialogue coexist with deep woundedness and fear. Overall the pattern is one of mixed results and no clear progress.

The Flight of the Firefly. Each firefly illuminates its own way and also that of others; together a group of fireflies pushes back the darkness. In this scenario, Guatemalans recognize their history and construct a model where tolerance and educational transformation create interculturality and eliminate discrimination. Holistic development is reflected in a nation with its own identity, and with pluralism, fairness, the rule of law, and genuine consensus. A democratic state grants equal opportunities to all. A fiscal pact reduces gaps between sectors. Citizen participation and productivity increase. Optimism spreads with the real reconciliation that comes with sustained and fair economic growth.

2. Broadened networks of relationships.

Societal change cannot be effected by one person or institution alone. The people who together have the power to act have to have in some measure a shared perspective: a common mental model and vision and story. Scenario processes that are organized as open and constructive conversations among stakeholders help build this shared understanding, trust and sense of community.

- In South Africa, the Mont Fleur process--together with countless other projects, workshops and fora--built the foundation of relationships on which the “miraculous” 1994 shift to majority rule could be built.
- In Visión Guatemala, the team members’ empathetic seeing and listening produced the agreements that are summarized in the scenarios and their accompanying morals, and more importantly opened the door to honest and open dialogue, including about areas of wrenching disagreement. The team has therefore become an important symbol and model of cross-sector networking and collaboration.

3. Regenerated energy and commitment.

Achieving collective forward movement requires energy, which in turn requires hope.

- In the fearful and confused South Africa of the early 1990s, the Mont Fleur team’s message that a positive *Flight of the Flamingoes* future was possible had a strong impact. One of the team members said, “We mapped out in very broad terms the outline of a successful outcome, which is now being filled in. We captured the way forward of those of us committed to finding a way forward”.
- The Visión Guatemala team went further in explicitly developing a preferred scenario or vision in *Flight of the Fireflies*. They were conscious of constructing these stories not merely as a tool to study or anticipate the future, but rather, by engaging in dialogue with their fellow citizens about these stories, to contribute to shaping the future, to helping a better Guatemala to be born.

4. Renewed action and momentum.

Ultimately change requires not only new thinking and relationships and energy but also the new action that these developments allow and catalyze.

- Although the link between scenario processes and specific actions is difficult to establish, Mont Fleur probably contributed to the way in which some of the South African political parties approached the pivotal and ultimately successful constitutional negotiations, and certainly to the surprising shift in economic policy of the victorious African National Congress. Even in 1999, one of the members of the team, upon being appointed Governor of the South African Reserve Bank said, “We will not be an Icarus”.
- Visión Guatemala has sparked even more ambitious and purposeful action, specifically in the promotion of dialogue processes to re-knit the country’s torn social fabric (see examples in the final section below).

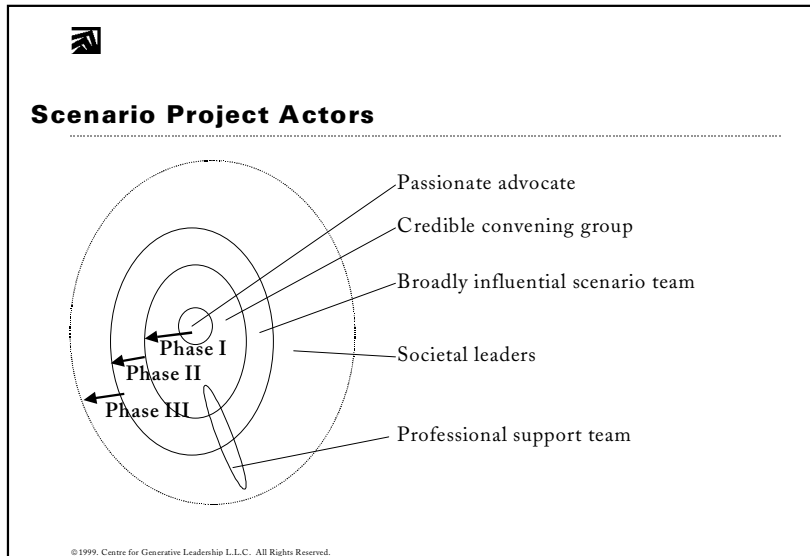
Best practice process

The civic scenario process we have developed over the years has three phases, involving successively larger circles of people:

Phase I: Convening

In this first, critical phase, a passionate advocate assembles the necessary project resources, including:

- A small group of convenors/trustees plus supporting endorsers. They provide the initiative, credibility, independence and wisdom to launch and guide the project, and invite others to participate. They must be seen to advocate the process rather than any particular outcome.



The Mont Fleur convenors included Archbishop Tutu and key black political figures. In Visión Guatemala the convening group consisted of six of the country's most prominent citizens, including a Cabinet minister, a leading human rights activist, the ambassador to the UN, and a top businessman.

- A scenario team of 20-30 carefully selected members. They are the ones who construct the scenarios and vision. As a group, they must have the power to effect change, and must represent as broad as possible a range of relevant perspectives, with none dominating. They must participate in their personal capacities, not as formal representatives of any organization or interest; be diverse enough (demographically, socially, politically, geographically, etc.) for most stakeholders to be able to see their views reflected; be respected thought leaders in their own communities; be senior enough to be influential but not so senior as to be unable to participate in such an informal exercise; and be curious, thoughtful and open minded (not fundamentalists). In general the convenors also become members of the scenario team.

- A project coordinator/director plus a professional support team. The coordinator champions, organizes and manages the entire process. He or she must be zealous, competent and ethical. This is a full time commitment. The coordinator leads a professional support team including administrators, facilitators, documentalists, etc.
- Necessary funds and in-kind contributions.

Phase II: Constructing

In this phase, the scenario team does the core work of the project by developing a set of stories about what is happening and might happen (the scenarios) and what they want to happen (the vision). This work is challenging because the stories must simultaneously be:

- Relevant: illuminate current circumstances and concerns and link into current mental models
- Emergent: make the invisible visible and challenge current mental models
- Plausible: be fact-based and logical and improve systemic understanding
- Clear: be distinct, accessible and memorable.

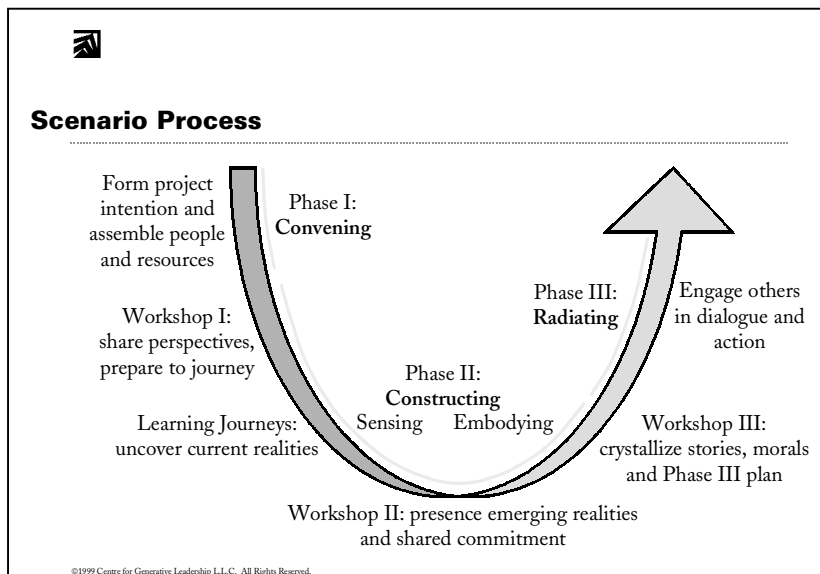
Phase II has four major milestones:

Workshop 1

The team starts their work by getting to know one another; sketching preliminary driving forces, scenarios and visions; clarifying the project purpose; and identifying subjects they need to know more about to better understand what is happening and might happen.

Learning Journeys

One of the most important and difficult parts of this work is for us to see what we are not seeing. An excellent way to do this is to venture out of our usual settings and circles to observe and interact with relevant and different realities. The team splits up into small groups with each person going on at least one Journey to Remarkable Persons, Organizations or Places--ones that can help us see the world from new perspectives.



Workshop 2

The team comes back together for a second, intensive workshop to retreat and make sense of what they have learned. Additional Remarkable Persons are invited. At this workshop the scenarios and vision are created.

Workshop 3

At the final workshop of Phase II, the team refines and agrees the texts of the scenarios and vision and

the morals and conclusions arising, and makes a Phase III plan for broadening the work, enacting the vision, and contributing to changing society.

The work of Phase II can be documented in various ways. First, a full record of each workshop, including graphic recording and an edited, unattributed transcript, can be prepared to augment and deepen the learning of the team. Second, a summary of the conclusions of the team, in terms of the scenarios, vision, morals and conclusions, can be developed in written, video, presentation and Internet forms, for use during Phase III. Third, a Learning History of the whole project can be written in order to uncover and learn from the process successes and failures, in order to better accomplish Phase III.

Phase III: Radiating

In this phase the team uses its work as a trigger and catalyst for contributing to enacting their vision for and with the larger society. The substance, process and duration of Phase III must emerge from the discoveries and creations of Phase II and therefore cannot be specified in advance. In previous projects, however, Phase III has consisted of:

- Working with print, television, radio and Internet media to disseminate the work.

- Engaging around the scenarios and vision with other societal leaders from various sectors and various levels, both one-on-one and in different kinds of meetings and workshops. The Visión Guatemala project has trained 65 “multipliers” of the scenario process--younger leaders drawn from all sectors--and prepared multi-media presentation materials on the Phase II stories and process. With these resources, the work has (as of the end of 1999) been shared with more than 3000 people, including key leaders in political parties, business, Mayan groups, cooperatives, universities, non-governmental organizations, the media, workers’ organizations, the military, and the church.
- Connecting with other, more traditional political, negotiating and problem solving activities. Visión Guatemala team members played an important role in that country’s 1999 national elections, as candidates, political platform drafters, and non-party public figures.
- Promoting specific initiatives identified as critical for achieving the vision. In Guatemala team members have worked on, among other activities, educational reforms in universities and in the public school system and local development projects in Quetzaltenango, the second largest city.

The ultimate objective of Phase III and of this work as a whole is to engage the whole society-- hearts, minds and bodies--in the process of creating a better future. Our experience so far is that the civic scenario process helps this happen.

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