VISIONS OF THE FUTURE
Building up alternatives

Script of the future

Scenarios are a way of systematically presenting alternatives for the future. A scenario is a story that describes a desired future or a future to be avoided. A scenario is also a script for the making of the future.

A good scenario should include a description of possible actors, actions and contexts. It should be materially possible, or at least should appear materially possible to some people (see Idea card 1/99 Look Ahead Boldly). A scenario should be psychologically believable and socially acceptable. Scenarios often alter our conception of what is possible.

Different strategies for action should be described equally. When evaluating the impacts of alternatives it is advisable to include the non implementation alternative - what would happen if nothing were done. The non implementation alternative shows the present way of doing things continuing unchanged. Alternative decisions may be contradictory; they may be something worth aiming for, frightening or even utopian. The main point is that the alternatives depict the future as described and experienced by different groups of people.

We can influence the future

Alternative visions of the future are created when we search for different ways of responding to challenges and when we prioritise or assess human impacts. The alternatives show us that the future is notpredetermined. When we describe the implementation process of an alternative, we see what factors influence the future and how we ourselves can influence the outcome.

(Foto Marja Kivioja)

In this card three methods for creating alternatives are presented. Although of different length, all three methods are relatively simple to carry out. (They do not require special software or processing facilities.) They are based on an interaction between residents and professionals from different sectors. Such an interaction enables us better to influence the form the future will take. If people from different sectors have a similar concept of problems, opportunities and objectives, they will find it easier to come up with solutions. Only concerted effort can lead to the desired future.

Futures workshop, "Field of thoughts" as an example (Annikka Tapaninen et al.)

A futures workshop can shed light on potential futures, on our opportunities to strive for the future we desire and on what we do not yet know.

The "field of thoughts" is an elaboration of the two-team method. The workshop starts with introductory talks, either separate presentations or a talk by each participant. This stage kindles the interest of the participants in the topic. Next all participants write their main thoughts about the topic on slips of paper. These may concern target setting, or they may be proposals for action, opinions or something else, depending on the topic to be discussed.

In practice, large self-stick notes and thick felt pens have proved most useful. The self-stick notes are easy to move around; it is important, though, to make sure there is a flat wall or board available where they will stay in place. Large flip chart sheets can be used if necessary. Also, participants should be so close to the notes that they can read what is on them.

Once everyone can see the notes, the words on them are read aloud. Usually participants understand the main message on the notes thanks to the introductory talks and it is no longer necessary to spend time examining the thoughts. Some questions seeking an explanation may be necessary, but it is not the intention to discuss the topics at this stage. The participants can read their own notes or the leader can read them all, whichever seems appropriate for the situation. If there are difficult conflicts within the group it might be better if the leader does the reading.

Then the notes are grouped by topic. The content is discussed only in so far as is needed to decide which notes belong together. Experience has shown that even a large number of notes on highly diverse subjects can be got into order in under an hour and that each thought will eventually find a place in the whole. The ideas on some notes may be worded in exactly or nearly the same way, but none should be rejected. In the end, there may be only one note in some groups.

In this method, thoughts are isolated from their presenter and cease to be contentious. The main issue can be presented with a few brief words as in a heading. If all goes well, participants get new insights and see links between disparate

thoughts. New entities and contexts are formed. An idea on one note will clarify or explain the words on another. It may seem chaotic as the notes begin to get into order. Nevertheless, creating a logical and identifiable whole gives the participants a feeling of success: they got there by working together!

Characteristic of this method is that the thoughts are not evaluated or criticised; neither is any effort made to pick out the best, most compelling views. The way in which the notes are grouped may also help to resolve conflicts. Statements such as "keep youngsters in order" or "give youngsters space" represent contradictory views about how young people should be treated, but they can be placed in the same group as both refer to young people. The leader must have confidence that the method will produce sensible results; however, he or she must also be sufficiently sensitive to the situation too have the courage to go about things in a different way should it prove necessary. Once the notes are all in order, there are usually about half a dozen groups. Only then are the groups given headings. Finally a decision is reached about what the follow-up measures should be. These may amount to a single coherent action programme or to a variety of sub-programmes, each one requiring a different action. By way of summarising the discussion, it is usually enough if participants write up the content of the notes for themselves. What is important is that agreement should be reached on the follow-up measures required.

Brainstorming generates ideas about the future		
Theme: values	Selfishness, internationalism	Soft values, ecological outlook
Theme: Production of services	Municipality produces, private sector produces	Insurance, clients themselves produce
Theme: Interest groups	State, municipal administrative branches	Private
Etc	Etc	Etc

Futures table method
(Yrjö Seppälä)

This method has been used to provide insight into the future of care for the elderly (Kauppinen 1997). The process is divided into five stages:

1. Collecting the existing data
2. Producing futures-oriented text in a brain storming session
3. Producing text of the various visions as team work
4. Compiling a summary report
5. Writing up the post-mortem

The work, which is done in teams, may take three days. An appropriate size for a team is 5-8 people. It is important that teams building up different visions should be homogeneous, each one consisting of experts from only one field. Such teams can work and make decisions quickly; moreover, their images of the future are different from those of other teams. In the post-mortem, the teams can be mixed to ensure a greater variety of views.

The leader of a futures-oriented brainstorming ssion collects ideas from seminar participants on every possible angle of a potential future in the light of various themes, e.g. "values of the future", "production of services" or "interest groups". There may be as many as a dozen or so ideas about one theme. These visions are compiled into a futures table, which is studied and filled in together with the seminar participants. All relevant ideas brought up in the brainstorming are added to the table. (For example, the theme "values" may find that the future will be dominated by community-oriented values, hard values and selfishness, economic competition or internationalism.) Ideas can be sorted and placed in groups depicting different futures through these themes. Finally, 5-7 groups that best describe the theme from different perspectives are created.

The groups are then given names that provide an idea of the vision of the future. (For example, "internationalism" from the theme "values" and "low-cost care countries" from the theme "production of services" could be combined under the vision "as a part of Europe".)

The ideas can also be grouped by first giving the vision a name and then collecting the ideas characterising this vision from the ideas put forward for other themes.

The visions that emerge describe the possible implementation or form of a specific theme in the future. A brief account can be written of each vision, looking at what this particular alternative will be like and describing the path leading to it.

The ideas are arranged such that the columns form a coherent vision of the future, which is given a name	as a part of Europe - alternative future	Civil society - alternative future
Theme: values	Internationalism	Community-oriented values
Theme: production of services	Euro-cooperation	Cooperation with interest groups
Theme: interest groups	Migrant workers	Voluntary work

Action scenario work (Tarja Meristö)

Action scenario work is an eight-phase process. The work is best carried out before the strategy is planned, as that way a broader perspective and new opportunities are available when the actual strategy is formulated.

The process starts by defining the strategic task. Having a definition ensures that the scenarios are not simply unrelated visions of the future, in which case they might be 'good to know' but would have no real significance for the future of a business. In particular, mapping out basic beliefs brings the necessary commitment to the process: something that everyone unreservedly believes in and on which all decision-making can unconditionally be based. Both the strategic task and the basic beliefs indicate where one stands and how one should proceed towards the future. Next it is necessary to dissociate oneself from the present situation and sector, and to chart the changes in the operational environment at a general level and at sector level.

The list of changes usually tends to be long and to cover a wide variety of issues. Therefore for example A SWOT analysis is therefore conducted to isolate the key factors, which are then submitted to a more rigorous analysis. They are used to construct a futures table in which the factors form the rows and the alternative values assigned to each factor the columns.

The tables serve as the foundation on which the scenarios are built. In principle the number of scenarios is unlimited, but due to constraints imposed by time and other resources, only a few alternatives considered to represent the whole range of alternatives for the future are chosen. It is usually recommended that even numbers of alternatives are selected, say, two or four, for the final analysis. Thus there is no ready 'middle-of-the-road' compromise and attention has to focus on the extremes, too.

The idea of action scenario work is only fulfilled when the strategic task is examined in the light of the final scenarios, conclusions are drawn, and any changes or measures called for are implemented.

Most problematic are issues, threats or opportunities that appear in only one scenario. They cannot be reckoned with for sure but neither can they be ignored. Therefore the strategy must be planned flexibly. For example, instead of asking the usual question about the volume of resources that should be committed to the attainment of a certain goal, it is better to ask about the volume of resources that should be left uncommitted or that, at least, should be easily released from somewhere else to permit a response to a threat or the exploitation of new opportunities.

Flexibility can be increased by breaking up the solutions into smaller parts. In the case of large one-off investments, flexibility can be sought by asking when the last possible date for the investment is. In that way extra time can be gained to find out about any foreseeable changes in trends.