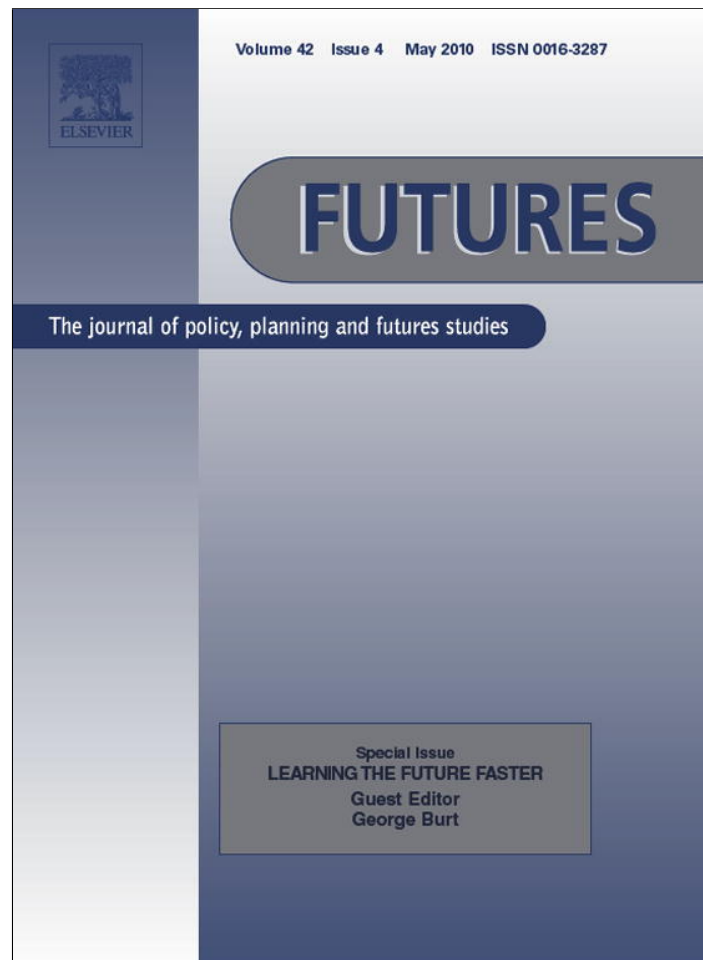


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## Exploring client scenarios associated with scenario planning

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### ABSTRACT

All scenario planning projects have a 'client' and one of the most challenging tasks facing a scenario planner is the client's role or position in the way projects are conceptualized, delivered and received. The scenario planner has to establish and manage a 'successful client relationship'—but what actually constitutes that for a scenario planning project?

The client acts as the conduit between the scenario planner and the organization for which the scenario planning project is being undertaken.

The 'client as conduit' implies several challenges for the scenario planner including:

- The client's awareness and understanding of scenario planning as a method for their organization to learn from the future [1].
- The client's level of commitment to learning from the future.
- The size and context of the scenario planning project.
- The position of the client within a network of people and/or resources required to run a scenario planning project.
- The client's involvement or position within the scenario building team created in the project.
- The benefits and risks accruing to the client through the execution of the scenario planning project.
- The client organization's capacity to act strategically; its power to perform.

This paper will explore, through storytelling, different pictures of client relationships associated with scenario planning. The stories are developed from a deep and extensive well of scenario practitioner and consulting experience over the last 15 years to explore and discuss these client issues, and how clients for scenario planning projects have evolved, and how they may enhance or restrict scenario planning projects in the future.

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### 1. Introduction

Scenario planning uses imagined stories to observe, think, plan and act out [2] about possible futures. Storytelling methods can also be applied to explore, analyse and re-interpret past and current situations and events [3]. Storytelling methods may unearth deep and rich insights into the mental or cognitive perspectives of decision-makers associated with

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business strategies and implementation [4,5]. They may also illuminate the original thoughts of the decision-maker for particular activities [6].

In this paper a narrative storytelling method is applied to explore, analyse and interpret a range of client roles and actions associated with the commissioning and implementation of scenario planning projects. A set of six stories were created using an actor in the role of a scenario planning consultant who is undertaking the scenario planning projects. However, the actor is directly based on a real scenario consultant and his reporting of experiences through his consulting agency with various real clients – mostly in Australia but also in Europe – over the last 15 years of scenario planning project practice.

## 2. Scenario planning “clients”

Scenario planning projects are commonly initiated by CEOs and senior managers from diverse parts or units of organizations, and they usually make contact with a scenario planning consultant. If terms are reached with the consultant regarding involvement in the project, then typically the “initiator” becomes the consultant’s “client”. A *client* is, thus, defined the person who is

- “a customer or receiver of services” [7], and is
- “using the services of a professional person or organization” [8], and who usually
- pays a fee the services provided.

The scenario consultant should understand how the client is actually to be involved in the scenario planning project. The client is critical in enabling the scenario project to contribute to the development of sensemaking, sustained learning, new transformational strategies, and especially to the exploration of new ideas and opportunities that are critical to future of the client and his colleagues in the organization.

The client is often commissioning the project to initiate or enhance strategic conversations [9] around new and emerging ideas, within the client’s organization. The conversations, consciously or unconsciously, are component of feedback and processing loops within a learning organization [10]. Scenario planning projects and methodology can be used for a learning organization to set up views, stories or scenarios about the future—and to learn from the future [11].

Scenario projects are complex and the most successful projects, as this paper goes on to show, are those in which the client is an active participant.

The scenario action learning model (observe, think, plan and act) which we have developed means that sustainable transformative outcomes are experientially based. The impact of the scenario experience on the way we see the world is difficult to pass on to people outside the project team.

If the client is an absent participator in the project, the rent still gets paid but the experience is diminished.

The scenario consultant therefore needs to understand and assess a number of issues associated with their client including:

- The client’s awareness and understanding of scenario planning as a method for their organization to become a learning organization that can actually learn from the future.
- Size and context of the scenario planning project.
- The position of the client within a network of people and/or resources required to run a scenario planning project.
- The client’s actual involvement or position within the scenarios created in the project.
- Benefits or risks accrued to the client through the execution of the scenario planning project.
- The client organization’s capacity to act strategically; its power to perform.

Six stories have been developed around the consultant to highlight different client relationships. We also relate the stories directly back to experiences from the coal-face—from the lead-author’s consultancy company, the Neville Freeman Agency, based in Sydney, Australia.

## 3. Six walks in the scenario woods

The central actor in the stories created for this paper is an experienced scenario planning consultant. Roberto Echo is prepared to recount his experiences with different clients, expressed as different ‘walks in the scenario woods’ [12]. Echo likes to repeat himself, to tell us why he loves his clients, their scenarios and the stories that go with them.

But Echo is no J.K. Rowling ripping the veil off the Wizard of Hogwarts to reveal all, but is more likely the Wizard of the ‘Art of the Long View’ [13], asking us to join him, the Spin Master, and become part of his strategic conversation He believes it is possible, after all, to see the wood for the trees. A “wood” seems to an appropriate context for identifying and describing different client stories—as Jorge Luis Borges put it “a wood is a garden with forking paths” [14]. Roberto’s six walks in the scenario woods are outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
Six walks in the scenario woods.

The King and I
Elvis Has Left the Building
Double Jeopardy
Trading Places
Whose Life is it Anyway?
Safety in Numbers

### 3.1. Walk one: *The King and I*

The first walk, led by our fearless ‘facipulator’<sup>1</sup> Roberto Echo, is one which includes the client as a member of the itinerant band developing alternative futures. He is a “fellow traveller” of that band.

The client is, thus, a hands-on member of the team, whose direct involvement is a significant ‘plus’ for Roberto because his client is undergoing the same experiential learning process as the other scenario builders. Shared learning is the thing that catches the conscience of the king! Our regal client is not only an active participant but is also the paymaster. Roberto has an immediate rapport with the client as both a committed participant and also as the source of the funds. They walk arm-in-arm along the pathways taking them through the woods.

At the start of the walk Roberto thinks confidently that great, robust scenarios will be developed and the walk should be relatively easy and event-free.

However, as the walk progresses, Roberto finds that the client wants to direct the walk and to manage all timing and location of stops through the forest, along the safest path he can find. Roberto finds it difficult to encourage the client to take risks and to look for more interesting, imaginative directions through the forest. “All I am worried about is risk”, the client confides.

Deep into the walk, the client begins to realise that the path he thought was “safe” actually is hard work, with increasing clumps of thick bush and deepening sand. There is not a clear “safer” way forward, and the client becomes depressed and frustrated. The client wants to change the walk and demands immediate evidence that the walk from here will be successful.

Roberto has encountered this dynamic before at work in scenario projects commissioned by not-for-profit organizations, by industry representative groups and professional associations. Here the CEOs want to drive change in their organizations and the structure is such that direct involvement is the key. So identifying the framing questions for the project; mapping the environmental context and defining the business idea all take place with the direct involvement of the client.

Roberto works alongside the client to encourage him to “stay the course” and learn about the woods and what might be in there to excite the client’s stakeholders and to change his team’s view about the world in which they operate.

#### 3.1.1. Discussion on walk 1

Generally, client relationships which involve direct rapport with the Neville Freeman Agency have resulted in the generation of scenarios for which the organization has a strong sense of ownership. However, on the liability side of the balance sheet, these projects suffer from two ever-present flaws.

The first is that the direct involvement of the clients means that scenario planning consultant always has one eye focused on them. This creates a tendency to micro-manage the project unproductively and to suppress the taking of risks. Scenarios, like all storytelling, involve a contract in which disbelief is suspended. As we are always telling our clients, believability is not the yard-stick but the three ‘Rs’, Rationale, Robustness and Relevance. The scenario planning consultant has to take action to both regain management of the actual scenario planning processes in a way that an appropriate level of commitment—and imagination is reignited and maintained.

Secondly, the clients, as the scenario journey deepens to the depths where frustration and loss of comfort emerge, may not resist the temptation to restructure the project as they go forward. A typical interchange during the process of deepening our understanding of the task will be ‘this is not working; I think we should take another look at where we go from here’. A common corollary to this is the demand made by clients that scenarios should be ‘evidence-based’. Nothing kills creativity more quickly than this demand. How, for example, can an emergent discontinuity which drives the ‘aha’ moment be open to proof? Or, incidentally, find its place on some econometric model. There is, nevertheless, a great compromise on the evidence issue. And this is achieved by requesting, as all good scientists do, that our work should be ‘evidence-informed’<sup>2</sup>. We, thus, need to look at what the evidence suggests and see that as only part of the contextual thinking about complex problems.

The future is not at the end of a trend line. Scenarios are not about facts but about connections. They are not about new knowledge but about new insights. The client who participates in a project is often under great pressure to provide ‘factual’ justification for the expenditure as the process evolves instead as letting go and ‘trusting the force’. The scenario planning consultant has to remind the client that a key feature of a project is to create critical conversations about the uncertainties

<sup>1</sup> A ‘facipulator’ is a consultant who facilitates a process while applying some manipulative skills to ensure the wrong paths are not taken.

<sup>2</sup> Our thanks to Professor Martin Westwell, director of the Centre for Science Education at Flinders University, Adelaide for this perceptive approach.

which the future holds rather than developing completely factual and predictable scenarios—to extend our minds and not just expand our profits.

### 3.2. *Walk two: Elvis Has Left the Building*

Roberto's band of scenario builders set off on the second walk. There is a notable absentee—the client who has commissioned the project and is responsible for paying Roberto's bills!

The client apologises to Roberto and explains that he has been detained outside the forest with another urgent commitment. But all is not lost as he has delegated an agent, one of her middle management reports, to go on the walk with Roberto and to keep an eye on things. ... The agent has been briefed by the client about the woods, and has attended Roberto's "pre-walk" briefing sessions. He is aware of the purpose and preferred path for the walk. The agent begins the walk with Roberto reasonably in step with him, but they are not quite arm-in-arm.

The agent is pre-occupied with meeting the client's needs. In fact, he believes that his success in doing that will help him in his desire for promotion within the organization.

About 1 km into the walk the path runs unexpectedly into thick scrub. Nobody knows where they are or where they are going despite Roberto's requesting them to trust him and the process. The agent becomes quite dispirited and starts to forget key parts of the briefing of what his boss had told him about her expectations and deliverables. To make matters worse, the agent is very uncomfortable that there is no mobile network coverage in this part of the woods. He cannot make contact with the client so as to check how he is doing.

Despite the agent's concerns, the scenario builders are having a great time. As they travel further into the woods, they begin to see unexpected vegetation and new plant species. And they are taken by the way familiar plants have adapted to the darkness and dampness of the habitat interrupted by pools of sunlight in the middle of the day. They are struck by the way the paths to be taken seem to emerge so clearly despite the use, if any, they have had in the past. The sharing of these navigating experiences with their fellow-travellers seems to make the connections between the group members so much stronger than they had been at the beginning.

Through sheer willpower and using vast experience, Roberto drives the band through the woods managing with difficulty to keep the nervous agent 'on-side'. The complexities of the flora and pathways suddenly vanish as the band of builders come out of the wood to encounter a new more open landscape, clearly etched against a brilliant blue sky.

There to meet them is the client. Waiting to quiz Roberto and the agent about the journey and the experiences the team has had along the way.

#### 3.2.1. *Discussion on walk 2*

Clients who commission a project and then absent themselves from it are a significant threat to the project. The delegated agent does not have the commitment or often the ability or disposition to deliver on original project objectives. The agent may actually be "set up" by the client.

On a recent project in the financial services sector, the Neville Freeman Agency warned the agent that the outcome of the project was seriously diminished by the absentee landlord.

If the project succeeds then "well-done me", but if it fails then, of course, the agent can be blamed.

In our experience, the absence of the client has significant impact on the 'scenarios to strategy' step because the scenario planning consultant cannot now be not sure how the outcomes are going to be integrated into future planning activities. The project may end up with a structured set of actionable strategies and a scenario building team that sees the world differently but the consultant may not have any influence on the steps to be taken by the executive leadership team throughout the project.

All too often, such projects end with a sense that the consultant has provided a stimulating process whose deliverable is the opportunity for people to take time out of the day-to-day to have a think about the future. The critical outcome – Pierre Wack's 'reperception' of the present [15] – is not achieved and the impact slowly dissolves.

A Government client in Victoria, absent from the scenario building process, introduced the team to the project at our first workshop with the words "I have been in the public service for 25 years and nothing has changed. I don't expect there to be any changes that really matter in the next 25".

He added that he did not want to see any Buck Rogers<sup>3</sup> style futures thinking. The consultant's task was a perpendicular ascent from that moment. Team members were irritated by the 'instruction' so much so that one group introduced Buck Rogers as a character in their scenario story. The scenario project team's key achievement was the bell-like understanding that the department's strategy statement had been built at the wrong level. That is it was too generic to drive strategy that could be differentiated for alternative futures.

They grasped the common delusion that vision/mission statements are useful shapers of strategy. This is rarely the case; they drive the 'old enemy' – the preferred future – and are only of accidental benefit.

Needless to say, this outcome was lost on the client who still believes in the usefulness of a strategy to champion both sustainability AND productivity for the citizens of their jurisdiction in any future we might imagine.

<sup>3</sup> I.e. 25th century science fiction.

Where the client absents from the project, extreme intervention may be required by the consultant including cessation or cancellation of the project. Where absencing is unavoidable (illness, death or leaving an organization), then continuation of the project is dependent on the delegated successor's commitment and expectations being reset and aligned with the scenario planning consultant.

### 3.3. *Walk three: Double Jeopardy*

As the third walk starts, the client is striding purposefully alongside Roberto. He is striding towards the future with the team, negotiating the many forks in the scenario woods. The walk starts well with good progress along a path with challenges but great scenery and lots of interesting fauna and flora. Curious and clever plants, was how one team member described them.

Unfortunately for Roberto—all is not as it seems. Three days before the scheduled walk in the woods the client received a set of instructions from a “colleague” working in a different band, who does not want anything to do with the walk, or – indeed – for anyone to mess about going for walks in that forest. The colleague suggests that the client takes a path of about 500 m that actually goes in a circle, but takes up a lot of time and ends up back at the start of the walk.

By the time Roberto realises that the path is going in a circle, or heading for a gate out of the forest about 300 m in the walk, it is too late, and the walk has become a waste of time. Despite the walk being such a waste of time, he has to go through the motions and focus on saving face. He puts all his energy into making the experience for the team as rewarding as it can be and allows the strategic aspect of the process quietly subside.

Ironically, the members of the scenario team were blissfully unaware of what was going on. The wine and food were very good and they really enjoyed the walk—telling each other the project was not half as hard as they thought it would be. ‘Makes you wonder what all the fuss is about’, commented one member as they drank their third glass. ‘Cheers to the future!’ agreed another.

Roberto and the client have to complete a report at the end of the walk, before they actually go out of the gate at the end of the wood. The client describes the type and quality of the walking path and the condition of the band members at various stages of the walk. Roberto sees much value in what was not actually noted in the report.

At the end of the walk, the band meets another band of scenario walkers. Roberto's band knows most of the walkers in the other band and they are glad to see them. Roberto's client strides straight over to the client in the other band, gives him the report and leaves the scene with the other band. Roberto has not heard from that client since the walk.

#### 3.3.1. *Discussion on walk 3*

An example of this scenario was experienced by the Neville Freeman Agency where a senior manager from an Australian subsidiary of a global corporation with its headquarters in the USA, commissioned a scenario planning project with mainly local objectives, but with some possible application outside of the local market. A few days before the scenario planning project was due to commence, the manager received a set of instructions from his chief at head office in the USA, who recommended that the scenario planning project be cancelled and that the local operation not undertake such projects in future. In another similar example, the USA executive ordered cancellation of the project because a global project was about to be commissioned and there may or may not be local involvement in that project. Unfortunately in both cases, either due to contractual and personal logistical commitments, or because the client still for whatever reason, wants to project to go ahead, the project still commences as scheduled.

This project is effectively doomed at commencement and there is not much that the scenario planner can do to rescue it. The scenario planner may seek to wind up the project as soon as possible. An exception may be where the client can deliver benefits from the project that are valued and recognized at the local level, and may be seen as having value further down the track at a global level.

### 3.4. *Walk four: Trading Places*

This walk starts along the path much like *The King & I* with the client walking arm-in-arm with a very happy Roberto.

The client, who had attended Roberto's professional training course a few months back, is keen to experience the scenario planning process in action—especially how they might imagine into being of the various routes they could take to make their way through the woods. He is also keen to learn from Roberto how this journey compares with the others led by him and what are the common pitfalls.

The band of scenario builders are walking very well as a team, analysing and solving problems, collaborating on path selection, and developing creative ideas and solutions.

The client is extremely attentive to Roberto, confirming that he is gaining a great deal from the journey. He seeks explanations of each step in the process and how it is best managed—taking copious notes, almost as if he is compiling his own professional learning dossier.

After working as a single team for half the morning, the team breaks up into eight smaller groups in order to explore different parts of the forest. They agree to form a base camp and to return later.

The client prefers to move from team to team rather than stay with any one group. And when towards tea time, they re-group at a base point to report on their experiences, he is automatically co-leading the discussion with Roberto.

They set off again. Suddenly a fork appear in the road ahead.. Without warning the client asks Roberto to step aside. He moves the whole team 50 m from Roberto and propositions them. “I’d like to take over the leadership role—in effect to be your internal consultant. I know Roberto has done a great job so far, but we now have the capability to do this on our own. ‘He discusses the merits of his case with the rest of the band and they eventually agree that he has gained enough knowledge from Roberto to be able to complete the rest of the walk through the woods without him.

Roberto is dumped, a lonely figure left at the fork. ... He contemplates how the Paduan learner from *The King & I* has become a Jedi knight or even Darth Vader!

He wonders if he will get a cheque for the final part of the project as agreed in the services contract. The force has definitely left Roberto.

Meanwhile, the team now led by the client decide to cut their way through a dense area of scrub to the left of their chosen forked path. To their surprise, they arrive at the edge of a deep ravine with no bridge to the other side. And to their amazement the path behind them has disappeared as the trees begin to advance slowly towards abyss below.

#### 3.4.1. Discussion on walk 4

The scenario planning consultant’s attempts at introducing scenario thinking into the organization are so successful that, on this journey, the client “trades places” so as to become the internal scenario consultant thus achieving at a stroke an important step in capacity building.

The newly trained scenario planner may go further and actually leaves the organization to provide outsourced services back to his original employer. This development is not uncommon. The Neville Freeman Agency views this transition or dance as the “GBN Two-step”. The Shell internal planning team learned and developed scenario planning with external providers, then internalised the consultant role before outsourcing themselves in 1989 as Global Business Network.

The key learning from these stories is that the scenario journey often disrupts the comfort and identity of the leading participants. We cannot recall any successful scenario projects which have not had this consequence on most of the scenario planning team. The exception usually is the client who has commissioned the project knowingly to disrupt comfort and identity to explore the future. However, many clients get more than they bargained for in the sense that their own perspectives of scenario planning may be re-enforced such that they see a vocational or work opportunity in being a scenario planning consultant themselves.

Intervention for this situation is often cooperative as the client appreciates learning about scenario planning and further down the track may require further futures work and more learning on futures methodologies. The Neville Freeman Agency has developed hundreds of scenario planners through its scenario planning training courses (originally as Australian Business Network and GBN Australia) and maintains contact with many of its “alumni”.

Sometimes intervention may be negative where there may be short-term organizational relationship threats and problems with continuing and completing scenario planning projects. Where this situation prevails, some form of relationship distance or separation may be required.

#### 3.5. Walk five: Whose Life is it Anyway?

Roberto starts this walk with the client. He is delighted that the client is participating in the scenario building team as this always improves the ‘buy-in’ from senior executives who are not participating and makes the team members feel that the organization owns the process.

Roberto, however, has some doubts about the project. In his planning for the walk, he spent time, as was his custom, identifying with the client the strategic pathways and discoveries that the client would the band to explore on the walk.

Roberto came away from these planning meetings with the client with a view that, while the band would gain benefits on the walk, they were not prepared and perhaps not capable of completing the walk all the way through the woods. Roberto thought about directing them to what would be the easiest path in the woods, but the band would not discover or learn much about flora or fauna or the woods on the way.

Even if the team made it through the woods, would they be able take lessons from teh walk and put them into practice after the walk? This is ‘silo’ country mused Roberto. His client did not have the muscle to control its own destiny, let alone change the world. He realised that the people who would be really keen to be on this walk are not in the band!

Nevertheless, Roberto starts the walk with the band, and they are initially very positive exploring the flora and fauna and different pathways. Roberto is conversant with the pathways they will travel and knows that what is found in terms of landscape, flora, fauna and new ideas must be recorded and packaged for others outside the project who will receive the final report in the hope that it will have an impact on their strategic planning.

Roberto’s skills as a facipulator are seen at their best in this project. He ensures that the band works very hard and completes a challenging walk through a long stretch of mixed forest. He makes a great deal out of the experiential learning and scenario thinking aspects of the project.

Roberto is satisfied with the band’s efforts—but deep down he knows that several other people within the client’s organization are better prepared for the walk and would have been much enthusiastic and capable of learning more on the walk. They would have been better at applying lessons and scenarios gained from the walk, long after they had left the forest. The band makes it through the woods to other side, and Roberto thinks of ways as to how he might encourage other walker’s from the client’s company to go on a future walk with him.

### 3.5.1. Discussion on walk 5

In this scenario, the client in effect represents several other “clients” within an organization. There may be problems when the client passes on scenario planning output to other people in the organization who either feel that they should be in the original scenario planning project or who want to initiate their own scenario planning projects.

During the planning phase for the project, the scenario planner identifies with the client the strategic domains at which the framing question and scenario stories would be ‘pointed’. If those domains are effectively defined, will the scenario planning project team have the power to act and thus implement implications emanating from the project?

In this scenario there are too many activists *outside* the client’s ‘system’ whose strategic behaviour impacts on what the client’s organization may or may not do.

The scenario planner has ensure that new ideas are recorded and packaged for others outside the project who will receive the final report in the hope that it will have an impact on their strategic planning. The ‘scenarios to strategy’ stage in the project will have a limited application within the organization, but will be an important feature in marketing the results to other key stakeholders.

A representative real-life example for the Freeman Neville Agency with this scenario: following 9/11, one of the authors of this paper saw the need in Australia for a scenario process on the future of security, including exploring anti-terrorism and counter-terrorism; Australia’s global role (as the prospective member of the Coalition of the Willing) and its role in Asia (as the ‘trustworthy’ regional country with great infrastructure and a stable currency).

This was seen as a whole of government exercise and identified 17 government departments as individuals who had a stake in the future of security. The consultant called a meeting with representatives from 12 of the departments. He interviewed the others.

The project came unstuck because he was unable to find a client who had a sense of ownership for the whole thing. Only two departments – justice and the prime minister’s office – had a whole of government role and as for the rest, from defence to customs to quarantine; they had no interest in other people’s turf.

This journey is one in which distinguishing the wood from the trees is hard. It is evident in situations where the whole (e.g. Government) is not the sum of the parts (the Departments) because the parts reject the whole as a strategic entity. Silos spring to mind—in fact any institution which is inward looking and ignores the need to engage with those around it.

Scenario planners should be clear from the outset as to who the initial client is, and from “Business-to-Business” perspective, who the upstream or downstream clients may be—and what they may do with inputs or outputs from the commissioned scenario planning project. Sometimes follow-on scenario planning opportunities may present themselves. At the very least some understanding of what these other clients may do with strategic outcomes from the project is required.

### 3.6. Walk six: Safety in Numbers

There is plenty of enthusiasm as Roberto leads the band on the commencement of the last walk through the wood. The client is very interested in exploring different paths, and the flora and fauna. Roberto has traversed the forest many times and is confident that he can steer the band through the woods to the other end. Roberto is also aware that there is a walk that crosses through a patch of very dense forest, known as the Forecasters Dark Den. It is deceptive as it looks so bright at the edges of this section of the wood.

At first the client and the band seems to be very interested in new ideas and processes to explore them. However, about 300 m into the walk, they choose to a path that seems to be well-formed and heading clearly across the wood. As the project proceeds, the client and their band of participants start to close out the sunlight of creativity; quickly zooming in on thoughts fairly easily predicted or modelled using standard forecasting techniques with little imagination.

As the team walks through the wood you can hear the chatter of the calculators and the adrenalin hit delivered by the ‘outcomes’. The client and their shooting party become certain they can shoot some big game in the dark forest because after all they have great computers and even better modelling software with them.

There are no surprises for the client or the shooting party from the scenario planning project—and eventually, Roberto stumbles out of that patch gasping for breath, relieved to be back in the light again. Sometime later, remnants of the shooting party emerge, completely blinded by the light outside the dark forest, having not shot anything, except perhaps one or a few of their own party by accident.

Some of the party now well into the dark forest, have declared that there is really no future, and no point in looking at futures or visions or strategic intent or conversation—and that they need to get out of the forest as fast as possible and make sure that they have something to show for that time in the forest. Eventually, a remnant manages to make their way out of the forest injured and confused and in a state of irrelevance.

One or two of them actually find themselves outside the forest in a better place than before, leaving the forest with lots of rubbish, holes and degradation—which others will have to clean up after them.

Unfortunately though, many of this group disappear never to leave to Forecasters Dark Forest, being victims of the curse, crystallised in a word that claims Safety in Numbers, but where the future has bypassed them. Safety in Numbers in this part of forest has become collective doom for them.



### 3.6.1. Discussion on walk 6

In this story, the scenario planner has to deal with a client who is really only interested in a surface or superficial exploratory scenario project as input to a heavily driven quantitative forecasting environment. There was a time about 20–25 years ago, when scenario planning almost died as a business methodology, as too many executives became excited with the thought that scenario planning might actually be able to accurately predict the future!

Flushed with tales of successful scenario planning at Shell, they then wanted “sure-shot” stories to be immediately fed into corporate planning systems, into budgets and launched as certainty for success. Most of these projects foundered, ushering in a Dark Age for the art in the late-1980s and early-1990s. We still from time-to-time encounter both scenario planners and clients (more likely ex-clients of other scenario planning consultants!) still scarred from that dark and grim period.

There has been a renaissance for scenario planning over the last 15 years as a methodology to develop conversations about the future. However, there is intense pressure to reduce creative thinking quickly to plans, budgets and results. In other words commitment to methodologies such as scenario planning may be actually quite superficial.

This story highlights where the scenario planning team puts the quantitative cart before the qualitative horse. Conversations are expected to be reduced immediately into deterministic fully budgeted plans. Thinking the unthinkable takes second place to econometric financial models, spreadsheets and all forms of quantification.

There are times that even when the Client starts with noble intentions to commission a strong creative scenario planning project, changes in management or ownership derail the project. An enlightened subsidiary or division or company manager may encourage and/or commission a scenario project and indeed participate enthusiastically with time and funding.

Then that manager is promoted or moved, or that entity is acquired or assimilated. The new manager does not care about creative ideas or the future, and does not want to know about visions or the future—but wants a very good financial result in the next 90 days, and if they can achieve that for about a year or two they might just get promoted or moved so that they are not around to fix the carnage that comes after that. The scenario planning project becomes impossible to execute in its original form and may even be terminated. Often with that, the company's ability to creatively think about future possibilities dies and so does its competitive position.

This scenario is very difficult for the scenario consultant as once the project is underway, it may be unavoidable, and in any event often the scenario consultant is dropped along with the project. The consultant might be able to last if the client survives and prospers through the project even if it does end up achieving different objectives—if the client is still committed to scenario planning as a valuable learning approach, whether the client is still with the original organization or has moved onto “greener pastures”.

## 4. Conclusions from walking in the scenario woods

The six scenarios for the client which we have outlined above highlight a range of client issues confronted by scenario planning consultants. A storytelling approach provided an imaginative platform to explore these issues, with each story supported by discussion on real issues and interventions related to that story.

Roles played by clients and how they are managed by the consultant are related to client disposition, commitment, involvement and participation to and in scenario planning projects. Trust granted by the client drives outcomes and impacts benefits defined and delivered from scenario planning projects.

Our major learning is that while change may occur as a result of the experiential transformation that scenarios deliver to their participants, unless those scenarios are allowed to work on and with the world view of the people in the client organization (for example on the ‘official future’)—then change will not happen. The scenario planner works on building up experiential learning through people working together and that it is the impact of this on their world views which drives change, through transferring those views outside of the project planning group. If they learn then that cognitive development can rise up from an individual level, to a group and possibly to an organizational level [16]. The positioning of the client may act as positive conduit for such transfer of views, or as a barrier to transfer—particularly where the real client is not directly involved in the scenario planning project.

The client should ideally start a strategic conversation with the consultant as a moderator to encourage the conversation to be created and shared beyond the client. That conversation should spread throughout the scenario planning project team, but go further almost virally to the rest of the organization.

Scenario building is in fact a business literacy whose purpose is to achieve convergence through strategic conversation [17]. That convergence cannot take place if the power players are physically and mentally absent from the circle. In other words, the client must be committed to starting—and continuing the strategic conversation.

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