The 4 Whys of Scenario Thinking
Tap into the benefits of future scenarios

M-BRAIN WHITE PAPER
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Introduction

“By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail”

Benjamin Franklin

Most plans are useless – but as Eisenhower points out, planning is still indispensable. In the current business environment, where speed and disruption rule the game, you can’t afford to sit still and wait for events to unfold. Instead, as Geoffrey A. Moore (2015) notes, you need to choose whether you’re playing offense (i.e. you become the disruptor and catch the next wave) or defense (i.e. you come under attack and need to prevent the next wave from catching you). In other words, you must put yourself in the driver’s seat and develop foresight about the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

As it happens, many animals can predict the consequences of events they’ve experienced before. This is also what artificial intelligence is trying to achieve: algorithms and other sequences that can be learned by a machine are used as the basis for new intelligence. Yet it is only humans who can think creatively ahead, ‘pre-experiencing’ the future through mental simulation.

Unfortunately, we humans are not as skilled in foresight thinking as we believe we are (Pink 2018). Many organizations find themselves too busy to think about the future. Their mentality revolves around having and doing ‘now-instanta-real-time-asap!!!’, and tasks are more about urgent firefighting than contemplative planning. Many organizations resist efforts to think about and prepare for the future. And yet at the same time, everybody would love to have that omniscient crystal ball. Being one step ahead of competitors, sensing customers’ unarticulated and potential needs, understanding trends — these are all areas in which organizations want to excel.

Here comes the good news: there are tools available out there to do just this! Although few organizations build and utilize scenarios in a systematic way, scenario thinking is a reliable way to develop collaborative foresight skills both at individual and organizational level.

By analyzing scenarios, an individual, business leader or strategist takes a deliberative approach to planning for the (certainly) uncertain future. Strategy is all about the future — and thus involves uncertainty. The success of organizational strategy is to a large extent determined by how well uncertainty regarding the business environment is understood and managed. Scenarios require human judgement and creativity, but the processing is performed in a systematic way and, ideally, with a group of contributors representing a variety of viewpoints.

Organizations can use scenarios to support strategic, operational, tactical and financial planning in a world that is becoming increasingly complex and volatile. These scenarios — detailed descriptions of future worlds — are beneficial in their own right, as they facilitate the development of strategies that work across various scenario options and enable the organization to reimagine its business boundaries. However, many of the benefits of scenario thinking come from the thinking process itself.

With this whitepaper, we invite you to learn more about how you can practice and benefit from scenario thinking. We reveal our insights on the advantages of scenario analysis by introducing you to the 4 whys of scenario thinking.
Why #1: Challenge Thinking

When we know things for certain, we’re confident and self-assured, but when uncertainty sets in, tentativeness and doubt may start to gain ground. Since the future is always uncertain, these disturbing feelings are often present when we think about our outlook. It’s our attitude towards this disturbance that can make a big difference.

Scenario thinking, when performed systematically, is a great way to challenge how we think. It challenges both individuals and organizations to reassess their standpoint and consider alternate perspectives. And when practiced regularly, challenging current thinking is likely to result in many positive outcomes.

Increased Creativity

In uncertain situations, we need to use our imagination to come up with different versions of how that uncertainty might play out. Coming up with imaginative and creative solutions may, for example, help you break the routine of typical strategic planning by forcing you to think creatively beyond the normal quarterly time frame. You’ll be encouraged to think beyond the known facts and rethink your assumptions in key domains of your strategy.

Natural Testing Platform

Ideally, challenging the existing mindset will result in new ideas and innovations, many of which will be worth testing out. The alternate existences created by new trains of thought can act as testing platforms for strategies, business plans and budgets, for example, offering you valuable information on the feasibility of your ideas. In this era of lean creation, testing and failing, challenging existing thinking models is an essential asset which shouldn’t be overlooked.

Clarity and Confidence

As always, the benefit from working systematically comes, most of all, from the clarity and confidence it brings. It makes your perspectives and viewpoints visible to all. It also highlights the blind spots in your thinking and forecasts. Since blind spots are also fertile soil for biases, exposing your blind spots helps to tackle the biases currently guiding your thinking. Eventually, the clarity and confidence you’ve gained help to play an essential role in restating and finding competitive advantage.

Challenging thinking isn’t always easy. It usually means stepping outside your comfort zone, and there are, after all, many benefits to staying in this zone — it’s the area you know works for you, and the place where your existing skills can be used to the fullest. It’s also a safe place to reflect on your knowledge and experiences.

The Learning Zone Model developed by the German adventure pedagogue Tom Senninger is a helpful model to illustrate how challenging ourselves and moving outside our comfort zone takes us to the learning zone, a space where we grow and learn.
For some people — and organizations — stepping out of the comfort zone and challenging current thinking comes quite naturally. For them, living with uncertainty is less disturbing and more intriguing. Their learning zone is vast, while the panic zone is limited.

However beneficial it is to be in the learning zone, it’s good to keep in mind that entering the panic zone isn’t helpful. Emotions that surface in the panic zone are fear and anxiety, which seldom result in positive outcomes. Progressing through a sufficient amount of future-oriented thinking challenges in the learning zone will make you and your organization more resilient and help to keep you from being thrown into the panic zone even in abruptly changing situations.

For many organizations, making proactive changes to operations doesn’t come easily. This is where scenario thinking comes in. As a method infused with thinking challenges, it helps to advance an organization’s efforts in growth and future-oriented decision-making. It spurs us to break away from routines and reinvent ourselves — when and where necessary. Scenario thinking helps us ditch complacency and fear of the unknown (things that tend to keep us in our comfort zone) and encourages us to open up and question our thinking.

For others, the distance between the comfort zone and the panic zone is much shorter. If the learning area is limited, it’s more difficult to find the right level of discomfort to get there.

Despite these inherent differences, it’s possible to become better at challenging your thinking and entering the learning zone. As you become familiar with what you’ve learnt, your comfort zone will slowly expand and, over time, challenging your thinking will become easier.
Why #2: Collaborate and Debate

The best strategic planning includes more than just the usual analytical elements — as Brandenburger (2019) puts it, it requires creative thinking. On the other hand, Steve Jobs believed creativity to be “about connecting things”.

Scenario thinking is a platform for an organization to engage, crowdsource and connect insights from internal and external stakeholders. Both collaboration and debate offer concrete ways to challenge the way we think and do things. Through collaboration we tap into the collective knowledge and skills that are available to us, and through debate we force ourselves to come up with and communicate ideas that might not come naturally.

First Promote Collaboration...

The organizational benefits of collaboration are frequently discussed in academic publications and online media. Experts such as Stan Garfield (2017) extol the many benefits of collaboration. In terms of scenario thinking, collaboration enables better and faster decision making. It also stimulates innovation and growth, and ideally prevents future repetition of the same mistakes.

Practical tips such as the following can help to enhance collaboration skills within your organization:

1. Nurture your culture and environment

The basis for an organization’s culture is created by its management. Strong leaders seek to influence culture through leadership, and the result is determined by how they do this (Fagaly 2018).

Essential to collaboration is a safe environment where everyone’s voice can be heard. Psychological safety is an important driver of high performing teams. Therefore, there should never be any room for impolite or rude behavior. As Murphy (2017) suggests, we should work with employees to know how to give feedback to someone who breaches trust through uncivil actions.

A friendly environment in which colleagues can get to know each other helps to promote collaboration (and ultimately, better work) and makes it easier to build a cohesive team.

2. Use community and collaboration tools

Tools and technology play a major role in how we collaborate, particularly when remote work is becoming increasingly common and teams can be spread all over the world. It’s important that teams have, at minimum, a place to store data, a team calendar and a chat functionality. Murphy (2017) emphasizes office spaces that promote group activities, i.e. brainstorming sessions. People should also be able to share ideas outside official meetings.
3. Get everyone on board

Collaboration is easy when people already know each other and work well together — but what if that isn’t the case? According to Ryan Meghdies, a member of YEC Next (a growth-driven community for early-stage entrepreneurs), the most effective way for a team to collaborate is to have a strong leader. It’s the leader’s task to assign team members to develop ideas individually and then bring them back to the group. The leader keeps individuals organized by running meetings, setting deadlines and assigning specific tasks according to individuals’ strengths. According to Uchechi Kalu Jacobson, another member of YEC Next, sharing stories between team members helps build better understanding and empathy within the group.

4. Communicate

Last but not least, communication is one of the most powerful ways of enhancing collaboration. For people to work effectively together, they should all be fully aware of their common goal and must value each other’s work, expectations and responsibilities. As Shan Rizvi from YEC Next puts it: “Tell people how everyone’s work contributes to the fulfillment of the larger goal.”

... then Bring in the Debate

Scenario thinking both needs and prompts collaboration. Yet collaboration on its own isn’t enough — at worst it may lead to groupthink. As Sustein and Hastie (2015) note, “many groups turn out to be foolish”. Discussion may lead participants in the wrong direction, and instead of correcting the mistakes of group members, groups often amplify such mistakes. Sustein and Hastie list the causes of group failure (e.g. amplifying errors, falling into herds, getting into extremes, emphasizing jointly shared information), and provide methods for making groups wiser (e.g. self-silencing leaders, role assignment, perspective changing, ‘red’ teams which assume an adversarial role or point of view).

Scenario thinking aims to support and raise the quality of organizational decision making. But how can the pitfalls of collaboration be avoided to make an organization’s future-oriented thinking smarter? Debating offers ways to raise collective intelligence within an organization (Chikeleze, Johnson and Gibson 2018). Whether carried out in a formal structure or on a conceptual level, debating requires alternative perspectives, contrarian teams, and playing devil’s advocate.

As Chikeleze et al (2015) note, debate improves engagement in learning, listening and arguing skills, content knowledge, and empathy for different perspectives. It also elevates critical thinking skills, including the ability to raise vital questions, gather relevant information, reach well-reasoned conclusions, make accurate decisions, assess the credibility of sources, identify cause-effect relationships, and effectively communicate with others in figuring out solutions.
Why #3: Create the Future

Having explored how systematic scenario thinking can help to challenge thinking and build a more collaborative organization favoring intelligent debate, we can now move on to the benefits that arise from the actual creation of scenarios.

When developing and exploring these possible future worlds, we’re searching for trends, events and driving forces that may lead to a future radically different from the situation today (Rialland et al. 2009). A major benefit of scenario thinking is that it helps organizations learn about and anticipate possible alternative futures. While expected scenarios are interesting for verification purposes, it is surprising scenarios that prove to be the most important and significant (Peterson et al. 2003).

Building alternative visions of the future is about trying to explore what could happen rather than simply making predictions. When answering the question ‘What should we do if this happens?’, organizations can plan a range of future actions. Dealing with uncertainties and changes related to the future is the reason why scenario thinking is such a powerful tool (Rialland et al. 2009). Organizations report a wide range of benefits summarized in three main points when it comes to the motivation for using scenario thinking (Kroneberg et al. 2001):

1. **NEW WAYS OF APPREHENDING THE FUTURE**
   - Removal of blinders (out-of-the-box thinking and beyond a “most likely” future)
   - Exploration of new ideas and opportunities
   - Identification and understanding of key future drivers of change

2. **A TEST-BED FOR STRATEGIES**
   - Identification of robust goals and strategies according to alternative scenarios

3. **“A MAP OF THE FUTURE”**
   - A common mental framework for discussing future issues
   - Faster response to a changing environment

**Scenarios Help Identify Opportunities and Foster Innovative Ideas**

The development of new products, new markets and new policies shouldn’t be based on today’s assumptions and contingencies (Rialland et al. 2009). Kroneberg (2000) argues that the scenario thinking process prepares the organization for future threats and opportunities and enhances the possibilities of first mover advantages as well as further business robustness.

The proactive management of innovations has proven to be a central driver of sustainable long-term competitiveness (von der Gracht et al. 2012). In essence, innovation is focused on the future. However, it might come as a surprise for organizations to learn just how time-consuming the innovation process can be. There might be several changes in technology, markets and society during the lead time of the innovation process, i.e. the period between the first idea for an innovation and its market introduction. The original idea for the innovation might be influenced positively or negatively by these changes. However, innovators can take into account the possible changes affecting the innovation process by using scenarios to visualize the future. The innovation process can then be adjusted on the basis of the information gained about the future (van der Duin 2007).

Schoemaker (1995) points out that scenario thinking requires intellectual courage. Being proactive and asking ‘what if’ questions is pivotal in order for us to envisage
the implications of a situation in which elements of future scenarios come true (Kroneberg 2000). Peperhove et al. (2018) point out that the objective of future-oriented brainstorming sessions is to stimulate creative and out-of-the-box thinking.

**Scenarios Serve as a Test-ground for Strategies**

By using scenarios, organizations can establish a broader framework for strategic planning. Scenarios can be applied to various areas of strategic planning but are mostly helpful for strategic vision and strategic options planning (Baraev 2009). Scenario thinking methods are suitable for mid- and long-term strategic planning, whereas other methods such as forecasting are more geared towards the short-term horizon and a relatively stable environment (Baraev 2009, Rialland et al. 2009).

According to Mason (1994), scenario-based exploration of strategies is comparable to a learning process. He argues that our experience-based mental models rely on past knowledge and may not be carrying new information. This can lead to poor strategic decisions. Along with Schwartz (1991), he argues that a key success factor is how fast an organization can learn, and that using scenarios in strategic discussions can enhance learning ability (Kroneberg 2000). Van Der Heijden (1996) argues that “using the newly developed scenarios the team mentally makes new combinations of scenario elements, leading to the invention of new and original strategy.”

The following are typical questions for an organization to answer based on the foresight created through the scenario thinking process:

- If scenario A or B were to materialize, what would be the threats and opportunities for our industry or business?
- If scenario A or B were to materialize, which strategy and actions should our organization take?
- What does our organization have to monitor in scenario A and B?

In this respect, scenarios provide a future context and test-ground for the strategies we’re designing today. There are two distinct ways the framework established through the scenario thinking process can help your organization’s strategy development:

1. By identifying a robust strategy that is flexible, open and viable in any of the scenarios.
2. By identifying a focused strategy that is optimal in one specific scenario (Rialland et al. 2009).

**Scenario Thinking Enhances Change Readiness**

The assessment of scenarios — either to test existing strategies or mobilize resources for further action — enhances change readiness. Change readiness can be defined as the immediate or long-term response to enforced changes in the business environment. It expresses an organization’s flexibility or responsiveness towards current and future challenges. Change readiness consists of three main dimensions, which are insight, culture and structure (Rialland et al. 2009):

- **INSIGHT**
  Knowledge and complete understanding of changing environment

- **CULTURE**
  Attitude towards change and creative thinking

- **STRUCTURE**
  Organizational configuration for acquiring critical insight and transform it into decision

The various dimensions of change readiness determine an organization’s ability to create competitive advantage. Your organization can gain this advantage through a continuous process of analyzing and understanding environmental and market opportunities (‘sensing’) and reconfiguring the organization accordingly (‘seizing’) (Rialland et al. 2009).
Why #4: Become More Resilient

Resilience derives from the Latin verb resilire (to jump back) and means “an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change” (Merriam-Webster). No matter what geography, industry, organization or human activity you represent, your environment is increasingly VUCA (volatile, uncertain, chaotic, ambiguous; Bennett & Lemoine 2014), and you need to develop resilience.

Risk management experts Kunreuther & Useem (2018) point to six drivers of disruption calling for more strategic company risk management: interdependencies, short-term focus, regulations, urbanization, higher probability of shocks, and pressure for transparency. According to Sheffi (2015), resilience is necessary to thrive (or even just survive) in this kind of environment with its constant disruptions, creative destruction and black swans: “By being more resilient than competitors, better at preventing disruptions, more effective at mitigating impacts, and faster at managing scarce postdisruption supplies, a company can dominate its industry.”

Wei-Ji

Being resilient is about the ability to manage the unexpected, to bounce back, and to be adaptive. In the Chinese language, wei-ji means crisis, and consists of two characters: ‘wei’ (danger) and ‘ji’ (critical point, opportunity). Difficulties, disruptions and even catastrophes often have a positive side, as they can present an opportunity to become stronger and learn new and better ways of doing things. At best, resilience leads to antifragility — a term coined by Taleb (2012). Antifragility is more than resilience or robustness. It’s something that benefits from shocks, thrives “when exposed to volatility, randomness, disorder, and stressors” and loves “adventure, risk, and uncertainty” (Taleb 2012).

Being truly resilient requires being fast, as disruptions are frequently sudden shocks. The current business paradigm considers the ‘start-up way’ to be the winning approach, and this is something that established organizations must also embrace. This Silicon Valley business style puts emphasis on fast decision-making, and its mantras include “being fast is more important than being right” and “move fast and break things” (Kupor 2019). Being fast is also important in terms of becoming adaptive; Ries (2017) notes that “in today’s marketplace of uncertainty, whoever learns fastest wins.”

Scenario thinking tools help your organization to prepare for the future by considering and testing several possible options and outcomes.
One key aspect of resilience is flexibility and the willingness to explore different solutions. Individuals and organizations that are ready to adjust and test new routes can navigate successfully in crisis situations and changing circumstances. Some nimble and experimentation-oriented companies find opportunities in disruptions. Analysis of financial recession from the 1980’s onwards has revealed that companies which were well prepared (e.g. made alternative scenarios) and willing to change paths not only recovered in the three years following a recession, but also flourished and outperformed competitors (Frick 2019).

Nations can also show great resilience and flexibility in the face of sudden external shock. Diamond (2019) notes how Finland went through a long period of experimentation after World War II to live in peace with the Soviet Union, and as a country illustrates “flexibility born of necessity and willingness to tolerate initial failure, and to persist in experimenting with solutions to a crisis until it finds a solution that worked.” Finnish national and foreign politics from the Winter War of 1939 to the collapse of Soviet Union in 1991 show true resilience!

So, what does scenario thinking bring to resilience? Scenario thinking supports better preparedness for the certainly uncertain future. It’s a guaranteed way to build both an individual’s and an organization’s resilience capabilities in the VUCA environment, as it:

- Enables more confident and faster decision-making.
- Alters mental models and improves mental agility by encouraging acknowledgement of the unexpected.
- Raises observation capabilities and helps identify unfolding scenarios at an early stage.

To further demonstrate how scenario thinking can help in becoming more resilient, we introduce two example frameworks below: The Likelihood – Consequences – Detectability Framework from Sheffi, and an adaptation of the 15 steps towards mastering catastrophic risk developed by Kunreuther and Useem.

The foundation of any quality scenario analysis is based on understanding the consequences (organizational impact) and the likelihood (probability) of potentially disruptive events. The third dimension is the detectability (predictability) of events. Evaluating these three dimensions helps an organization plan how to detect, prevent and respond to disruptions, and thus reduce their duration, likelihood, and magnitude.
Prepare for Disasters

Prioritize risks and set a warning system to monitor them: A key phase of scenario work involves categorizing risks according to their predictability and impact. Your organization can then prioritize the most impactful risks — whether clear trends (‘known knowns’), or uncertainties (‘known unknowns’) — and systematically monitor the horizon to anticipate these events.

Scenario thinking tools help your organization to prepare for the worst-case-scenario.

Anticipate the worst: When building future scenarios for an organization, it’s very tempting to consider only ‘realistic’ scenarios, i.e. scenarios that seem to make the most sense in the current environment and seem most probable based on currently available information, past insights and experiences. However, to become resilient, an organization should also put effort into considering the truly worst-case scenario — however unlikely it might seem.

Conduct post-disruption reviews: Both on an individual and organizational level, we often tend to get over disruptions and quickly move on. Yet setbacks can also offer an opportunity to become more resilient if disciplined learning is practiced systematically after ‘close calls’ and severe disruptions.

Kunreuther and Useem (2018) outline ‘15 steps towards mastering catastrophic risk’. The following practical tips, which are based on Kunreuther’s and Useem’s work, can help your organization to enhance preparedness and build resilience using the scenario thinking mindset:

ONLY PARANOID SURVIVE

— Andy Grove —
Embrace Uncertainty and Change with Scenario Thinking

Scenario thinking is about deliberative thinking — its opposite is intuitive thinking. Both thinking styles are needed in business decision-making. Intuitive thinking works well when complexity is low and you possess reliable data about the possible outcomes of different options. Deliberative thinking is necessary for decisions on low-probability but high-impact events — something that you can test with scenarios.

Intuitive thinking is hardwired into human behavior; it’s the easier and more ‘natural’ way of thinking for us. The danger of intuitive thinking, especially in a business decision-making context, is that it involves systematic biases and simplified decision rules.

We at M-Brain follow a systematic scenario analysis framework which offers a tested route to plan for possible futures. We also have a team of strategic analysis experts who are skilled at guiding the client through the scenario analysis journey — from mapping trends and signals all the way to scenario design and development.

At M-Brain, we guide our client through all levels of trends. We start with megatrends (things we know we know), move on to trends (things we believe we know) and continue to weak signals (things we know we don’t know, i.e. elements we consider uncertain or unknowable). Ideally, we even reach the point of considering unknown unknowns (things we don’t know we don’t know, a.k.a. black swans).

The scale of collaborative analysis goes from ‘what we can see now’ to ‘what we are currently blind to’. Together with our client we build the perspective, consider the opportunities and threats, and help find solutions for the organization to test.

Scenario analysis is performed to explore several possible futures in a systematic way. Some think it’s about predicting the future, although it’s actually about finding insights into trends that are already observable today. Scenarios are aimed at challenging the prevailing mindset in order to better understand customers and market developments — and to create business opportunities out of that understanding.

To continue to be successful in business tomorrow, we all need to be part-time futurists and trendspotters today.
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TO THE READER

This white paper introduces four reasons why you should engage in systematic scenario work. It provides insights on how you can benefit from scenario thinking, a method which facilitates the development of strategies that work across various scenario options and enables your organization to reimagine its business boundaries. It also highlights what your organization can expect to gain from both the scenario thinking process and the actual scenarios that result from that process.

Organizations can use scenarios to support strategic, operational, tactical and financial planning in a world that is becoming increasingly complex and volatile. By analyzing scenarios, an individual, business leader or strategist takes a deliberative approach to planning for the (certainly) uncertain future. Strategy is all about the future — and thus involves uncertainty. The success of organizational strategy is to a large extent determined by how well uncertainty regarding the business environment is understood and managed.

Are you seeking to identify the opportunities and threats ahead of you? Do you need to better understand the future of your business environment? M-Brain can help to map the trends affecting your business and guide your organization through a systematic scenario analysis process.

To learn more, contact Nora Kärkkäinen, VP Business Development, M-Brain: nora.karkkainen@m-brain.com.

If you want to learn more about M-Brain intelligence solutions, please visit our website.