

***The Art of the Long View* by Peter Schwartz, 1991**

Reviewed by Lisa Abbott

This book describes the theory and practice of using scenarios as a way to foster organizational learning and assist long-range planning. The author has used this method extensively with major corporations as a way of pushing leaders to see beyond the boundaries of their own perspectives, assumptions and expectations.

Schwartz describes the process of scenario planning in a step-by-step fashion. His approach offers a stimulating and creative way for groups of people to:

- Define a common question
- Reflect on individual biases and assumptions
- Engage in broad and creative research
- Think critically about the most important factors/driving forces
- Act out the implications of decisions in multiple futures
- Develop a shared analysis and plan of action that is “sound for all plausible futures”

The paperback edition of the book also contains a section on using scenarios in on-going “strategic conversations” within organizations. Rather than using them as a one-shot method for evaluating a specific decision or direction, Schwartz encourages leaders to make them a consistent, informal and creative part of organizational dialogue and learning.

This book is rich in insights and ideas for improving the quality and rigor of collective learning and decision-making. The most interesting parts of the book address the reasons why the author (and others) developed and use the scenario methodology. Namely, they became convinced of the need to break through existing – and limiting – mindsets and assumptions within the groups and corporations they worked with.

Schartz cut his teeth working for global corporations such as Shell, Motorola, and Pacific Gas and Electric. But his analysis is entirely relevant for grassroots organizations that strive to create collective strategies and encourage meaningful participation from a diverse range of community members. As he says, “The scenario method is designed to produce the kind of mutual understanding that allows people to act toward common ends.”

“Scenarios are thus the most powerful vehicles I know for challenging our ‘mental models’ about the world and lifting the blinders that limit our creativity and resourcefulness.” (p. xv)

“Scenarios are not predictions. It is simply not possible to predict the future with certainty...Rather, scenarios are vehicles for helping people learn.” (p. 6)

“When decision-makers begin to look at the future, denial acts as an automatic shut-off valve: ‘I can’t consider that.’...Stories can be a powerful way of avoiding the dangers of denial...A good scenario asks people to suspend their disbelief long enough to appreciate its impact.” (p36)

“Each of us responds, not to the world, but to our image of the world. This ‘mind-set’ includes attitudes about every situation in our lives and every person we come across. In many cases, these mind-sets have been built up, slowly, from childhood and may not have much to do with actual reality...Thus, every scenario effort starts by looking inward. You begin by examining the mind-sets which you personally use – consciously or unconsciously – to make judgments about the future.” (p. 50)

“It’s all part of a process of self-reflection: understanding yourself and your biases, identifying what matters to you, and perceiving where to put your attention. It take persistent work and honesty to penetrate our internal defenses...To achieve that, we need a constant stream of rich, diverse and thought provoking information.” (p. 59)

“Fun-particularly in the organizational context – is a necessary prerequisite for learning, particularly for the type of strategic learning that is the source of an organization’s strategic advantage.” (p. 223)

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