



# Scenario Planning: Rapid Planning in a Time of Rapid Change

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How do you plan for the future when the future is uncertain? The COVID-19 pandemic has made this important and timeless question essential. Although this global crisis is affecting each nonprofit organization differently, all are looking toward a future with profound unknowns. As a nonprofit leader navigating this changed landscape, you might consider putting off important decisions. However, even though the timing is not optimal, it's as critical as ever to be decisive — provided you are informed by the strategic thinking you need to make the best possible choices.

## The status quo is not an option

In times of rapid change and crisis, one may view planning as a luxury investment that is hard to justify. Yet as leaders, we must continually adapt to changes we can't foresee. A robust strategic plan — one that considers multiple possible future scenarios — can provide the insight, innovative ideas, and decision-making tools needed.

Strategic planning enables an organization to function from a proactive place rather than a reactive one ([more on this point here](#)). It does this by helping us hone in on an organization's core strategy and mission. In a time of major uncertainty, it's more important than ever to focus on your mission and make thoughtful decisions on what efforts to prioritize.

Our sector has already shown remarkable innovation and adaptability, as organizations shift their programs, services, and communication methods to accommodate the constraints of this pandemic. The results of planning-informed decision making are significant: organizations and leaders remain connected, relevant, and effective, even in times of unprecedented change.

## The time to plan is now

In planning for the future, we must recognize that life has changed before and will change again. When we acknowledge this, old frames of reference lose their relevance, and new visions become possible. We have a head start on adapting, creating, and responding to change.

As a strategic planning consultant, I am often asked by clients whether they should postpone planning due to an internal or external change, such as an upcoming key leadership transition, a departure of a major funder, or a political or policy change. With few exceptions, my guidance is that we should proceed with planning. Even today, in the midst of the pandemic and with the unprecedented level of uncertainty we face, my advice is the same: strategic planning, and the effective decision making that grows out of it, should continue, even though the process may look very different than what was initially planned for.

As an example, my consulting firm launched a strategic planning process for a local nonprofit a week before the Northern California shelter-in-place orders. In-person planning meetings became impossible, and the group was suddenly immersed in redesigning its service delivery. Nevertheless, the organization decided to remain invested in its strategic planning process. With video meetings and more flexible workflow, the organization is moving ahead thoughtfully and analytically with the critical and timely decisions it needs to make.

## Scenario planning: How it can help you plan in times of rapid change

Scenario planning is an excellent tool to use for planning during uncertain times. It's a disciplined and iterative process of envisioning possible futures and examining what each might look like, so that you can make informed decisions and choose a course of action.

Scenarios are stories about how the future might look for an organization. They can be driven by internal factors such as a decision the organization has made about whom to serve — or external ones, such as the length of the pandemic or the outcome of an election. There is also a third option, where a scenario is driven by a combination of the two.

For example, one of our clients is planning based on programming scenarios where restrictions on large gatherings extend for another month or for another year. Other clients are examining scenarios that involve reorganizing staffing and program offerings.

Used in combination with a disciplined focus on mission and theory of change, scenario planning can help leaders find new clarity in their strategic directions, even in the face of daunting and extreme uncertainty.

### How to engage in scenario planning

These key steps can help you begin scenario planning:

1. **Identify external uncertainties:** Consider the external forces of change that may impact your organization — particularly those you have no control over, such as the outcome of an election or shelter-in-place restrictions.
2. **Identify internal uncertainties:** Explore the forces of change inside your organization that you do have control over but that may currently be uncertain. This could include decisions about hiring, whom you serve, or other changes in your organizational focus or mission.
3. **Explore multiple, alternative futures:** Create short, detailed scenarios describing plausible futures and the impacts they would have on your mission. Then visualize fully how your organization might pivot within each scenario. With your team, discuss the opportunities and challenges inherent in each scenario.
4. **Assess the scenarios using a strategy screen:** After identifying possible scenarios, determine which scenarios and courses of action are most viable. For this, we use a strategy screen. The strategy screen includes ratings for how high each scenario and accompanying course of action scores on criteria, such as how well the scenario: a) maximizes the impact of your organization's mission, b) draws upon your organization's strengths and expertise, and c) attracts resources (including financial, human, and brand resources) to your organization. You can adjust the criteria in the strategy screen to fit your particular nonprofit. We then rate each scenario on a scale of low to high (0 to 3) against each dimension on the strategy screen. Courses of action with the highest total score are contenders for the most serious consideration.

Scenario planning helps deepen our understanding of the world we're operating in by creating the opportunity to envision and plan for various outcomes. Once you've explored and assessed various scenarios, you can use them to stimulate discussion, accelerate collective learning, set strategic direction, solidify decisions, and bring alignment among staff and board members.

### **The power of “what if?”**

*“I'm no prophet. My job is making windows where there were once walls.” — Michel Foucault*

In scenario planning, we ask “What if?” We do not need to become prophets. Scenarios are not predictions, but rather possibilities to plan for and explore. They help expand our thinking so we can better anticipate and imagine what might happen, thus preparing the team to more skillfully manage various outcomes. We cannot identify every possible future state; nor should we try to do so. The goal is to think through a range of possible outcomes and options for responding. In the process we build flexibility and resilience to navigate changes that may be coming our way, and to proactively bring about changes we'd like to create.

Even during this time of crisis and uncertainty, looking systematically for risks and opportunities provides the power to plan effectively for a future as a thriving, resilient organization. Though external circumstances might not be optimal, your mission cannot wait.

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