

From alternative pictures of the future to an organizational intervention: A commentary on Rowland and Spaniol

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Rowland and Spaniol's (2021) in-depth piece on Kees van der Heijden's seminal text, *Scenarios*, cued several memories for me, sparked a bit of self-reflection on my learning journey as a scenario planner, and encouraged me to reconsider *Scenarios* in the context of Open Strategy.

1 | ENCOUNTERING KEES VAN DER HEIJDEN THE FIRST TIME

I first met Kees in 2008. I was working on my PhD in foresight. George Burt recommended I take a well-known scenario planning course, noting that this would be the last time Kees van der Heijden would offer it. I do not recall if this actually was the case, but it, along with a modest PhD discount, convinced me to join this training in Glasgow, where Kees van der Heijden and George Burt were delivering the lessons as a team.

Of course, by then van der Heijden's work had already influenced my PhD research on foresight. Those descriptions of scenario planning practices at Shell (Schoemaker, 1993; Schoemaker & Heijden, 1992; Schwartz, 2004, 2012; van der Heijden, 1996) were not only essential for my research but, at that time, also for establishing credibility in the/my German context vis-à-vis the field of foresight—a context in which scenario planning had not been even modestly institutionalized.

While I was grateful to have attended this particular scenario planning training program, in retrospect, I now realize that I had not yet truly connected to many aspects of the training and will

note that I was not actually able to apply the training for the next several years.

2 | THE JOURNEY WITH SCENARIO PLANNING

My journey with scenario planning did not start until some 2 years after the training. By then, I had completed my PhD and joined the strategy department in the global headquarters of an insurance company, Allianz, in Munich, Germany. At Allianz, I was asked to establish foresight processes. After several discussions, we collectively decided to conduct a scenario planning exercise, focusing on current trends in the organization.

This was the moment when I returned to my training materials, specifically, to *Scenarios: The Art of Strategic Conversation* and *The Sixth Sense* (van der Heijden, 1996; van der Heijden et al., 2002). At this point, my applied learning journey began by applying scenario planning in Allianz and, subsequently, in other organizations, something that I have now been doing for more than 10 years. This included also working for Paul Schoemaker's consulting firm Decision Strategies International (DSI, later acquired by Heidrick and Struggles) and later with Felix Werle, a former member of the Shell Scenario Planning team, and his consulting firm the Institute for Innovation and Change Methodologies. Throughout the course of this ongoing learning journey, I have continued, without exception, to apply the practice of scenario planning in a manner that closely reflects the work of Kees van der Heijden.

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3 | MOVING AWAY FROM REPORTS TO INTERVENTIONS

While my first encounters with scenario planning centered on producing detailed reports and then, subsequently, trying to rapidly explain those scenarios to senior managers in the span of 20 min times, this has changed. This shift progressively led me, in my own practice, to personally and professionally understand what Kees van der Heijden meant by two deceptively simple terms, “strategic” and “conversation.”

Rowland and Spaniol (2021) refer to Pierre Wack, and, specifically, his idea that scenario planning is about helping an organization to re-perceive itself. And while Lang and Ramirez (2021) point out how difficult it is for decision makers to work with scenario reports that have been produced for them or have been produced outside of their organization in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, I too slowly started to realize, in my practice, what the essentials in scenario planning really were. Upon gaining this insight, slowly over time, I was finally able to connect more completely with my scenario planning training and, more specifically, the writings of Kees van der Heijden.

For me, what is essential in scenario planning is twofold:

1. Including the decision makers of an organization in the process of creating scenarios.
2. Focusing less on the scenarios themselves and more on what happens during those conversations, specifically, those strategic conversations.

Rowland and Spaniol (2021) mention that the scenarios developed by Wack et al., which predicted the rise of OPEC, were developed for but not with the leadership team. Kees van der Heijden shifted the scenario work away from presenting polished scenarios to initiating a process that allowed the managers of Shell to participate in developing the scenarios.

While I have often been asked to present scenarios to decision makers who were not involved in the scenario-building process, I truly cherish the moments spent discussing scenarios with a management team that has been engaged in the process, that has co-developed the scenarios that are designed to help them with the decisions that will shape the future of their organization. In these discussions it becomes apparent how essential the involvement, in different ways, of decision makers in the process is and how much effort needs to go into designing the workshops of a scenario planning process to create a setting for this kind of involvement.

Helping a management team not only to reflect their mental models and assumptions about their business, strategy, or industry, but also on how they make sense of changes in their environment, is a great moment for me to witness as a facilitator. In these moments, I understand what Kees meant about fostering a “strategic conversation.”

And this leads to my second point. While I do argue that the scenarios developed out of a scenario planning process are relevant and can be used in many different ways, I found that the process leading to these scenarios, the “strategic conversations,” are the real value of doing scenario planning at an organization. This especially comes to mind when participants start to reach a decision on the two key drivers that will be the basis for the construction of the scenarios. Participants often wonder what will happen to their strategy if they go with one or the other choice. While, of course, coming to a decision at this point in a scenario planning exercise is crucial, I have often observed that the organization benefits in particular from the conversations.

4 | SCENARIO PLANNING IN THE CONTEXT OF OPEN STRATEGY

Many years after the publication of Kees van der Heijden's *Scenarios: The Art of Strategic Conversation* the field of Open Strategy has emerged (Whittington et al., 2011). For me, this discussion not only emphasizes the relevance of involving decision makers in the process but also enlist the support of an organization's other stakeholder groups. While one can see how scenario planning can be perceived as an approach to facilitate Open Strategy in an organization (Schwarz, 2020), the relevance of scenario planning to “strategic conversations” becomes even clearer. Through having “strategic conversations” on the changes in the business environment, creating a shared understanding of the challenges ahead, challenging one's own mental models, an organization is embarking on a journey of change and transformation. Many aspects that are mentioned in Kotter's (2012) seminal work on leading change in organizations are also touched upon in the process of scenario planning. One could actually argue that a scenario planning process can be understood as a process that enables an organization to embark on a change journey by creating a sense of urgency to act and to develop a vision for an organization.

I find it striking, on the one hand, how much or how little time (depending on the perspective) it took me to understand the value of “strategic conversations,” but how relevant these two books by Kees van der Heijden still are. Rowland and Spaniol (2021) refer to an interview with Paul Schoemaker in which he states that in the 1970s it took Shell's competitors eight years to understand that times had changed and by then it was too late. This is exactly what makes the idea of having “strategic conversations” so timely when organizations are faced with fast-changing business environments, increasing complexity, and an uncertain future.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that there are no conflict of interests.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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