

Project Visions and Visioning



This article is developed within the scope of the **Project Visions and Visioning**, an effort to enhance Foresight learning through collaborative work.

Envisioning the future ? clarifying the process

Visioning - a complex process, but many times perceived in a superficial light, confused with a simple future scenarios imagination process or with the capacity to forecast great ideas for the future. However, visions are more than some sort of scenarios or goals for the future. The practice of envisioning is the base for obtaining visions, is a method of approaching the future. Acts of envisioning are the result of cognitive and analytic processes on one hand, but highly connected to ?the psyche, the spirit and the mental culture of the envisioner? (Ziegler, 1991, p. 516). From a dictionary we can see that envisioning is described as being ?the ability to form mental images of things or events, to picture in the mind, to imagine? ([reference](#)). This is the base of the process, but it definitely exceeds this step and it also goes beyond a simple process of forecasting or planning in the accepted or expected way.

The idea of vision started to gain grounds beginning with the last decade of 1970, in organizational and political fields within democracies (Ziegler, 1991, p. 519), and nowadays is an elementary process in any successful field. Envisioning is not only for futurists, but is accessible to all of us, as it can be used in so many envisioning occasions from corporate strategies, team-building and personal life to urban planning, health, education reform or cultural future projects. It is used to generate detailed scenarios of the future and it is a participatory process that exceeds departmental boundaries, trends, statistics, requirements, norms, management or leaders? expectations (*Ibidem*, pp. 517-518). It is not an adaptive process, but a creative and innovative one. However, envisioning is not equivalent to elaborating wishes, but to develop visions through a process that requires discipline, a hard inner work, imagination, identification of dissatisfactions or needs and problems, deep questioning, deep and non-judgmental listening and deep learning. Participants to this type o processes are prepared to listen, clarify, critique (*Ibidem*, p. 517), complete and then develop visions.

The process of envisioning starts from a set of premises, as it follows: - ?the future is not the domain of knowledge but of action? (the envisioning process addresses concrete and relevant aspects so that it can bring solutions into practice) - ?the future is a metaphor for the human imagination? (we can approach it through various scenarios relevant in given contexts) - participants in an envisioning process are ready to take risks with each other, share images, listen and clarify irrespective of differences or disagreements regarding their visions, search for shared visions without modifying personal visions - envisioners want to take part in the process and are not asked or obliged to perform - implies personhood, as the only players are the persons, not the organization or the community, even though they benefit from the results (*Ibidem*, pp. 521-522).

These premises are not exhaustive and they should be perceived more as a guideline in unfolding the process in a proper way, ensuring thus the expected quality of results, the best material to develop visions and then operate with these visions, implementing the scenarios. We have seen what envisioning might be, but which steps should be included in the process, are there any starting points and defining features? The answers are provided as it follows, but before that maybe we should ask why to practice envisioning? Apart from the many fields that benefit from the results of the process, maybe the answer should lay in actions as solving, completing, filing in, because in the end these visions are meant to respond to needs, dissatisfactions, problems, and incorporate solutions.

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Therefore, a key element that constitutes the starting point in visioning is *dissatisfaction*, and some defining elements that characterize the process are *participation* and *commitment to action*. Identifying current dissatisfactions, in particular areas and contexts, enables envisioners to find a starting point, a base for developing scenarios. It involves participation as vast and different experiences and biographies of those taking part in the process will result in a diversity of alternative futures that will contribute to complex visions. Also, the process of creating visions should result in determining transformations, elaboration of programmes and changes. The results of an envisioning process might not be liked, approved or easy to put into practice (*Ibidem*, pp. 523-524).

Moreover, the practice of envisioning the future involves five stages: - discerning concerns (involves deep questioning and deep learning); - focused imaging (involves successive stages of deep imaging as well as deep listening to yourself and to others); - creating shared vision (participants learn discerning and dialogue as ways to negotiate their agreements, ramify details, implications, meanings and perform analytic work); - connecting the future with the present (exercise of perceiving images, scenarios as achieved, and identify the steps that lead to achievement); - discovering strategy paths and formulating action (enables the elaboration of policies, programmes, innovative actions, transforms the visions into reality) (*Ibidem*, pp. 524-526).

All these features should not be transformed into boundaries, since after all envisioning the future is about ?the making of new myths, is about telling stories about the future that compel us to change our ways of doing and being in the multiple action-settings within which we organize ourselves for collective enterprise? and the key words that define envisioning are heal, repair and transform (*Ibidem*, p. 526). The visioning process involves creating a ?compelling picture of desirable future states that often represent quantum changes from the past. They develop memorable imagery and stories about the nature and benefits of this future, and work backwards to understand the journey that could carry people to this vision.? ([reference](#)). Within the process, various factors might interfere in the proper scenario building such as tradition, fear of ridicule, stereotypes, conditions, roles, norms, complacency of some stakeholders, fatigued leaders, short-term thinking, fear of having ordinary ideas, ?naysayers?, all considered as representing vision killers ([reference](#)). Visioning is considered to generate goals, to offer the possibility of fundamental change in comparison to problem solving gives us the sense of control and generates creative thinking, ([reference](#)) and therefore all these factors that block imagination, creation or scenario building, should be eliminated or reduced as much as possible. Otherwise, results might not come into our help or produce real advantages for the area they are meant for.

The process has several benefits such as eliminating boundary thinking, assuring continuity and avoiding the stutter effect of planning, identifying direction and purposes, emphasizing the need for changes, encouraging openness to unique and creative solutions, providing efficiency and productivity ([reference](#)). However, visioning is not the only method that helps in studying the future. Apart from visioning, there are methods as trend analysis, cyclical pattern analysis, environmental scanning, scenarios elaboration, backcasting, technological forecasting, futures research ([reference](#)). Visioning can compile all these methods if performed in a professional way so maybe we can choose it over the other methods.

Moreover, visioning is an important strategic tool, which starts from analyzing the present and then, developing visions that correspond to concrete needs or dissatisfactions, ending up by doing the most wanted task of healing and repairing through the selected ways of bringing transformation, of implementing the right change, this constituting also, the main reason for a large scale practice.

More on visioning as strategic tool, from Professor Andrew Kakabadse, [here](#)

?One of the more difficult lessons to learn is to recognize current reality as it now is, which often is different from what you think it is supposed to be or how you want it to be.? ? Robert Fritz (David Sibbet, p. 1). Thinking about the future is often a social process. The future becomes what enough people believe it will become. Only rarely can the visions of individuals be translated into a reality for others without their agreement. In this sense, the present is the outcome of past agreements about what the present would become. (Frans Berkhout and Julia Hertin

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University of Sussex, p. 51).

Visioning encourages re-evaluation of traditional approaches to business planning by examining: ? Where are we now? ? Where are we heading? ? Where do we want to be? And ? What are the steps to take in order to get there? (John Miles and Mike D'Alton, p.331)

According to Zingerman's guide, a vision is a picture of what success looks like for us at a particular point in the future. That means it's: 1. Inspiring. To all who will be involved in implementing it 2. Strategically sound. We actually have a decent shot at making it happen 3. Documented. We really need to write our vision down to make it work 4. Communicated. In order the vision to be effective it doesn't have to be only documented, but also shared with people. (Zingerman's guide to good leading, part 1 [reference](#))

Although it can be taken not like a serious decision making, everyone has to be prepared for the future in order not to be surprised by future problems.

Visioning provides an alternative approach. It is a way to think about the possible occurrence of future events in terms of what ?could happen? rather than making accurate predictions about what will happen. This allows us to ?think the unthinkable? and to be more prepared for what might lie ahead. Also, it means that we can consider many possible options and not be stuck with a single line of inquiry. (John Miles and Mike D'Alton, p.331) So, the imagination is well needed. But, it is important to mention that in the final analysis the visions must be attainable.

All organisations, irrespective of their nature and profile, have to develop strategies of planning the future. This is needed in order to serve the best interests of the stakeholders involved in the organization's processes. Though it may seem an easy task, this type of prediction is particularly troublesome due to the speculative and random nature of the day-to-day events that influence them. This is where the term 'visioning' comes up. An organization that is undergoing the visioning process, needs to question traditional approaches to business planning and pose questions regarding its present and how the future can change. (Ibidem, pp. 331)

"Visioning is a leap into the unknown" (Ibidem, pp.331) and is limited by applied imagination. Visioning in the corporate world involves an analysis of future needs, opportunities and threats and predicting on what should be done to face and underpass them. Visioning has nothing to do with scientific methods and due to this, some voices may consider that it cannot be taken into account for decision-making processes. This is why visioning, which remains a necessary practice, must be transformed from daydreaming into a discipline.

The visioning process has to be different from those of planning and designing, which are sometimes even based on physical materials, to strengthen their factual support and credibility. Such planning processes were developed for periods of 10 or 20 years, a very long term given the ever changing environment, from economic, political, etc. perspectives. What visioning comes with is a way to take possible occurrences into consideration, focusing on what could happen rather than making valuable statements about what will happen. Visions are also about what one wants to happen.

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In terms of methodology, despite minor differences in the existent perspectives, visioning starts with the Initiation stage. At this stage, the project team needs to discuss the project objectives and the visioning process, by also

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analyzing the available resources and expertise. Information gathering is the next step to be undertaken in the visioning process, consisting in a thorough documentation that is relevant to the study and everyone in the project team should be conducting this type of work. The team should base their research on demographics as well as on the key drivers and forces, both externally and internally. (Ibidem, pp.332)

The visioning process involves the development of multiple future scenarios and is not based on a single try or perspective of the future. Given the analysis of a wider range of potential situations, visioning becomes stronger. These scenarios were called by Berkhout and Hertin, "Foresight Futures" and they depend on factors such as "the full range of core values from a society that is dominated by a drive to private consumption and personal freedom, through to a society that has 'community' values shaped by concern for the common good." (Ibidem, pp.333) Also, the Foresight Futures "reflect variation in governance ranging from autonomy and retained sovereignty through to state-like interdependence." (Ibidem, pp.333)

For more details about Berkhout and Hertin's Foresight Future, [\[1\]](#)

In order to understand the process of visioning, we will discuss with reference to the Highways Agency's "Vision 2030", project which have been developed as an investigation into the long-term challenges and opportunities for the UK's Strategic highway network. The highways Agency (HA) being the operator for motorways and other trunk roads in England has the possibility to influence and control how the strategic road network is used. For Vision 2030 the general approach taken was to identify the key drivers and factors that will have an influence on mobility-specifically social issues, technology, political and regulatory aspects, and macro-economic drivers - all of which will influence our future travel (John Miles and Mike D'Alton, p.331).

The methods used for the Vision 2030 project can be broken down into five distinct stages: Initiation; Information gathering; Visioning and future scenarios; Evaluation; Deliverables and conclusions (John Miles and Mike D'Alton, p.332). Initiation: is the phase where all the team is brought together and discussing the project objectives and the visioning process. The initiation stage requires the team to do some groundwork reviewing present state of knowledge, topics relevant to the proposed study, etc (John Miles and Mike D'Alton, p.332) Information gathering: is the usual stage in any project, when you need to find out more about what you should do, what is the initial phase of the project. The approach taken in Vision 2030 has been to identify the key drivers and forces, both within and outside the control of the Highways Agency, which will influence the mobility needs of commerce, and the public, and which will shape the HA's future business strategy and scope of service. (John Miles and Mike D'Alton, p.332). They took into consideration the demographic aspect, the lifestyle, environmental issues, the source of energy and least but not last the growing demand for transport, between 1996 and 2031 car traffic could grow by more than half again according to the central estimate of the National Road Traffic Forecasts. Visioning and future scenarios: as it was already mentioned the visioning process can have multiple scenarios, according to the imagination of the projectors. Much good work has been done on this subject and there is a methodology immediately available that yields what is required. These are known as the Foresight Futures, and the paper Foresight Futures Scenarios³ by Berkhout and Hertin sets out in detail how to use them. (John Miles and Mike D'Alton, p.332)

For the Vision 2030 project three alternative socio-economic scenarios were developed each associated with a future of the transport network. They are: "Global Economy" - a market-driven approach; "Sustainable Lifestyle" - a community based way of living; and "Control and Plan" based on greater regulation of movement. Each of the scenarios was elaborated through the use of the PESTLE tool which is a framework for examining external market forces (Policy, Economic, Societal, Technological, Legal and Environmental). (John Miles and Mike D'Alton, p.333) The main criteria for developing the project were with reference to the "green highway" (a balance between natural and built environment), safety measures, the customer accessibility to information, and of course the customer satisfaction.

The Vision 2030 Final Report can be found [here](#)

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