

# A Practical Guide to Futures Study

## NCSL Task Force on Legislatures of the Future



NATIONAL CONFERENCE *of* STATE LEGISLATURES

*The Forum for America's Ideas*

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The National Conference of State Legislatures serves the legislators and staffs of the nation's 50 states, its commonwealths, and territories. NCSL is a bipartisan organization with three objectives:

- To improve the quality and effectiveness of state legislatures,
- To foster interstate communication and cooperation,
- To ensure states a strong cohesive voice in the federal system.

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# PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

An executive committee, composed of state legislators and state legislative staff, governs the activities of the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL). The staff contingent of the executive committee is joined by other staff from across the country who represent various professional disciplines to form the NCSL Legislative Staff Coordinating Committee (LSCC). The LSCC meets four times a year and oversees NCSL activities and programs that are designed to foster the professional development of state legislative staff. In addition, members of the LSCC conduct studies and examine issues about the effectiveness of legislative staff and the improvement of state legislatures. *A Practical Guide to Futures Study* and its companion document, *Legislatures of the Future: Implications of Change*, are the products of such a study.

*A Practical Guide to Futures Study* was conceived and written by a subcommittee of the LSCC Task Force on Legislatures of the Future and is derived from task force meetings and activities that took place from the fall of 1998 through the spring of 2000. The following task force members generously contributed their energy, ideas and time to the development of the guide.

Clare Cholik, subcommittee chair, South Dakota  
Bob Erickson, Nevada

Marcia Goodman, Connecticut  
Jim Greenwalt, Minnesota  
Bob McCurley, Alabama  
Phil Twogood, Florida

Max Arinder, director of Mississippi's Performance Evaluation and Expenditure Review Committee staff, served as chair of the LCSS Task Force on Legislatures of the Future. His creative guidance, perseverance, knowledge and commitment to the purposes of the task force were crucial to its success. The task force, LSCC and NCSL members are grateful for and fortunate to have the leadership that he contributed to this project.

Brian Weberg, director of NCSL's Legislative Management Program, supported the task force subcommittee in its work. Sally Kittredge, senior staff assistant at NCSL, provided invaluable creative assistance in the development of the publication's layout, graphics and design. NCSL editor Julie Lays crafted the task force language into a concise and readable text, Leann Stelzer deftly orchestrated the process of turning the words and pages into a professional publication and Scott Liddell formatted and designed the publication.

# NCSL TASK FORCE ON LEGISLATURES OF THE FUTURE

The Task Force on Legislatures of the Future was created in 1998 to study how legislatures may change in the future and to develop ideas to meet the challenges caused by change. The task force developed scenarios that describe possible futures that legislators, legislative staff and other observers can use to identify and guide future changes in ways that are most beneficial to state legislatures. The following legislative staff served as members of the task force:

Max Arinder, Mississippi, Chair  
Steve Watson, Nevada, Vice Chair  
Clare Cholik, South Dakota, Vice Chair  
Jim Ashford, California  
Robert Erickson, Nevada  
Patrick Flahaven, Minnesota  
Marcia Goodman, Connecticut  
Jim Greenwalt, Minnesota  
Connie Hardin, Tennessee  
Bob McCurley, Alabama  
Gary Olson, Michigan  
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Susan Clarke Schaar, Virginia  
Robert Shapiro, Ohio  
Philip Twogood, Florida



# 1. INTRODUCTION

Legislatures must be proactive in approaching their future. As the world changes, individuals and institutions must be able to quickly recognize the driving forces behind change and adapt to those pressures in reasoned, appropriate ways. A reasoned response to change can only be made in light of the legislatures' core values. To do less is to risk losing our democratic institutions in the process of change.

In the summer of 1998, Tom Tedcastle and John Phelps, then staff chair and vice-chair of the National Conference of State Legislatures, appointed a two-year task force to study the future of state legislatures. The specific charge was to return to the NCSL Legislative Staff Coordinating Committee with recommendations on what can be done to ensure that the legislative institution is be prepared to face the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The task force's challenge was to identify the horizon events or knowledge that hold the greatest promise for change, test our time-honored systems, traditions and values against those likely futures, and make recommendations for constructive change. Given the impossibility of knowing precisely what the future will be, the task force concluded that acceptable strategies for change will be the ones that play out well across several possible suggested futures.

This guide is an effort to capture the processes used by the task force to develop its views on change. Each chapter is

designed to take the reader step-by-step through the activities the task force used to generate thoughts on the future of state legislatures and to identify the resulting implications for change. From your earliest decisions on the focal issues to final notes on implementing action plans, the guide will allow you to conduct your own study of the future, uncover the possibilities that it has in store, and prepare actively to make the most of change when it comes.

Good luck with your search. You are in for an exciting and challenging experience.

## 2. ESTABLISH A FOCAL ISSUE

Researching the future begins by identifying a focal issue or vision. The researchers must decide the primary questions they want to answer and how they expect to benefit from their work. The idea of clarifying one's vision might seem rather simplistic, but in fact it takes a good deal of time and consideration. It is an important first step in the process. If it is skipped or not done well, each step thereafter is more difficult, if not impossible to complete.

*It is crucial to establish a vision first.*

Establishing an appropriate scope and breadth for a focal issue depends on individual circumstances, but there are some guidelines to keep in mind. If the focal issue is too broad or ambiguous, the research group will not be able to put their arms around it, and the research may lack focus. On the other hand, if the focal issue is too narrow or specific, the researchers may find themselves too limited or confined in their work. Finding that ideal middle ground is difficult, but in the long run, it produces the best results.

*Establishing the scope and breadth for the vision comes next.*

Once established, the focal issue or vision is the guiding light, defining the goal the group hopes to achieve or the question into which they hope to gain insight. Every member of the research group must have a clear understanding of it and stand ready to provide the work and time necessary to see it through to a successful conclusion.

The NCSL task force defined its focal issue as "What actions will be required to keep state legislatures relevant to the demo-

cratic process in the year 2025?” It goes a long way in defining the goal of the task force and outlining what is important to it. The task force had much more focus and direction with this question than if, for example, it had settled on the broader question of what legislatures might be like in the future.

*How far into the future dare we go?*

The focal issue must also clearly state the time frame. The research group must decide how far into the future it wants to reach. There are various time periods for studying the future. Most people tend to concentrate mostly on short range planning, focusing ahead only from one to five years until the next election or budget cycle, for example. Middle range planning involves looking ahead from five to 20 years, and finally, long range planning generally involves looking 20 or more years into the future. Again, the length of time varies with the circumstances. Generally, futures research involves looking ahead at least six years and usually more than that. Wise researchers do not let fear prevent them from looking far off into the future, but they also always remember that the further out they go, the more uncertainty they face.

The NCSL task force chose a timeline of 25 years. It did this knowing that rapid advances in technology would certainly make the legislature a very different institution by then, but also knowing that what legislatures do today could affect the course of legislative development during this time period.

*We can shape the future if we have a vision.*

As Earl Joseph of the Minnesota World Future Society stresses, we are creating the world in which we'll live in future years by what we are doing right now. We can shape our future if we have a vision of what we want and remain committed to that vision as time progresses. The power to effect change resides in the present moment.

The final steps in researching the future are the development and implementation of an action plan to “blaze a trail” to the future. Without a clear vision or focal issue, that trail is more likely to take an uncertain and undesirable path.

### 3. IDENTIFY STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES, OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS

Once the research group has clearly defined its focal issue, the time is right for a bit of introspection and a quick survey of the environment in which the group will work. What knowledge and skills do group members have? What weaknesses will have to be remedied for the project to be successful? An early, candid assessment of group knowledge and skill often reveals hidden strengths and helps target areas of expertise that the group will need.

*Evaluate internal as well as external forces.*

Similarly, the group needs to evaluate the opportunities and threats posed by the larger world outside the group. Does the study have the broad-based support necessary to sustain it and make it successful? What environmental resources can the group use to its advantage? What external factors pose the greatest threat to its success? Taking the time to generate and answer such questions will pay long-term dividends and will prepare the group to seize the opportunities and protect against the threats it encounters along the way.

**SWOT Analysis.** The NCSL task force chose to use a modified analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) as its basic tool for evaluating the strengths and weak-

*What is a SWOT analysis?*

nesses within the research group and for clarifying opportunities and threats posed by the environment.

**Strength**—A resource or capability the research group possesses that enhances its ability to effectively achieve its objectives. For example, a strength may be an outstanding health studies collection or a creative staff member. Evaluating strengths is significant because it provides the research group with a clearer sense of the tools and resources that are readily available for action.

**Weakness**—A limitation, fault, or defect in the research group that will interfere with its ability to achieve one or more of its objectives. An example might be the lack of expertise in particular aspects of the subject matter at hand. Evaluating weaknesses is important so the research group knows what deficiencies it must address and what expertise it must acquire.

**Opportunity**—An attractive arena for activity that is not currently being used to promote or further the group's objectives. It may be a trend or change that affects the larger community and fosters a demand for a service not previously or adequately provided. Evaluating opportunities allows the research group to recognize and seize upon these unique conditions as they progress in their work.

**Threat**—An unfavorable situation in the external environment that is potentially damaging to the group's current or planned strategy. Examples include cutbacks in federal funding and a weak economy. Evaluating threats enables the research group to develop strategies to outmaneuver the threats and successfully reach its goals.

*Brainstorming and "snow cards" can help identify opportunities and threats.*

Though there are many methods for conducting a SWOT analysis, brainstorming can be one of the most helpful. By freeing the group to explore both itself and the environment in which it must work, brainstorming promotes the free exchange of ideas. It brings concerns to the forefront for discussion and resolution. Using exercises like facilitated "snow card"

sessions to structure responses, members of the group can allow both their enthusiasm and their apprehension to flow in an environment free of “group think” or pre-judgment. In such an environment, restraining forces, critical uncertainties, and unbridled optimism are all likely to become evident and add to the group’s ability to structure the project for success. In addition, since the SWOT analysis occurs near the beginning of the research process, brainstorming the four SWOT elements is a good way to break the ice and start dialogue in the process.

Some examples of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats identified by the task force SWOT analysis are described below.

*Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats identified by the task force.*

**Strengths of the task force**—Extensive knowledge of legislatures, representatives from a variety of legislative offices and states, and a universal commitment to the continuation of the legislative institution.

**Weaknesses**—Inexperience in the process of future research, lack of representation from many states, insufficient group time to devote to the research.

**Opportunities**—To create a process that allows legislatures to prepare for the future, to improve civic education for the public, to revise the legislative process to better accommodate change, and to use technology to its fullest potential to communicate within legislatures and with the public.

**Threats**—The inability of legislatures to take long range approaches to institutional problems, difficulty in presenting and articulating the results of task force activities in an interesting and persuasive manner, shortage of advocates for futures research in state legislatures.

## 4. DEVELOP A SENSE OF HISTORY

*Learn from the past,  
but don't rely on it  
solely.*

After the focal issue is narrowed and the SWOT analysis is complete, take a look back in time. British statesman Edmund Burke once advised, "You can never plan the future by the past." Later, however, the prominent English poet Lord Byron helped balance Burke's thought by claiming, "The best prophet of the future is the past." Thus, researchers are left with the wisdom to learn from the past, but not to rely on it solely when planning for the future.

How far back in time a researcher may want to go is dependent on many variables. Some focal issues might have a history extending back hundreds of years while others may have little or no history. Researchers might also encounter the problem of not being able to trace the history due to incomplete or inaccessible records. Generally speaking, going back 20 to 50 years is adequate under most circumstances. Situations vary widely, however. Those performing the research must ultimately make the best use of the information available without spending an inordinate amount of time unearthing records that may end up being useless.

*Break down the focal  
point into workable  
parts.*

Once the time frame is selected, the researchers may want to break down the focal issue into various segments, or components, and examine the change and progression of each. The task force, for example, went back about 30 years in its research. Rather than attempting to study the history of the

state legislature as a whole, it broke it down into the six main aspects listed below and performed a historical analysis of each.

- Legislators
- Legislative Staff
- Legislative Procedure and Operations
- Legislative Infrastructure
- Legislative Role in Policymaking
- Public Support for State Legislatures

While studying the history of each component, it is wise to examine the influence of various factors on the individual components. Depending on the focal issue, factors such as demographic trends, political climates, economic conditions, geographic conditions, and advancements in technology may all be relevant and worthy of consideration. The factors can also make it easier to detect any patterns that may have developed over time. When focusing on legislators, for example, the NCSL Task Force on Legislatures of the Future used factors including political partisanship, occupation, length of service, and demographics.

*What factors apply?*

Rather than trying to examine the history of the focal issue one year at a time, it is usually better to analyze the influencing factors and document changes over longer intervals of time. For instance, if a researcher is covering a period of 20 years, it makes sense to document changes in five-year intervals. A year-by-year analysis is cumbersome, time-consuming, and probably not worth the effort.

*Document the history.*

Within each time interval, it is important to look for major events that affected the focal issue in a significant way. Once they are uncovered, these benchmarks are often very telling. Analyzing them in detail is important. For example, in the history of state legislatures, the 1960s Supreme Court decision on one person, one vote had a major effect on the development of the legislative institution.

When all the relevant historical data is collected, the futures researcher must then decide how best to document the history. It is important to keep a complete record of the findings even though it may not be widely used. In case any questions might arise, maintaining all the research materials provides proof that past events have not been distorted or misrepresented in any way. If the documents are arranged in chronological order or some other orderly fashion, it makes locating particular documents much easier. It might also help to prepare a table of contents or an index for the materials.

In addition to the complete historical records, it is useful to present the historical information in a succinct format such as an executive summary. The summary will be very useful to those involved in the research later. Include graphs and charts to illustrate statistical data. They make it easy to uncover trends or patterns. It is also worthwhile to highlight important events for each component and the major changes that took place in each of the intervals.

*A sense of history is developed upon completion of the historical analyses.*

Upon completion of the historical analysis and the compilation of the data, a sense of history is developed. This phase is complete and attention can again return to the future, but with an eye on the past as well.

## 5. IDENTIFY AND ASSESS DRIVING FORCES

In order to consider the full range of possible or probable directions that the future may take, it is crucial to identify and assess key trends that extend out from present conditions. These long-term, dynamic trends influence the course of future events. In other words, they play an important role in the way the future may develop. They drive the plots of the scenarios that will be developed later in the futures exercise. Thus, these trends are called “driving forces.”

*It is crucial to identify key trends.*

The accurate identification and assessment of *relevant* driving forces greatly improves our ability to construct meaningful scenarios of the future.

**Driving Force:** A trend or forecast that has a high likelihood of affecting or changing the course of future events and the focal issue. Driving forces, often referred to as the STEEP categories, typically are defined as follows.

*A driving force is a trend that will most likely affect future events.*

**Social forces**—includes demographic trends (population, race, age), values, lifestyle issues, and other relevant societal trends.

**Technological forces**—includes developments and trends in computerization and automation, biotechnology, transportation, communication, and other science and technology developments.

Economic forces—includes macro and micro-economic trends relevant to the focal issue.

Environmental forces—includes forces in the natural or physical environment such as global warming, water quality or availability, land use, work space, flooding or other natural phenomena.

Political forces—includes both formal and informal political trends such as issue and public policy trends, changes in decision making rules or procedures, viability of public institutions, election trends, and other politically-driven matters that affect the focal issue.

*Most driving forces overlap into two or more categories.*

The STEEP categories are useful in the organization of driving forces. However, most driving forces overlap into two or more areas. Computerization trends, for example, may foster significant economic trends.

Driving forces generally fall into two types: 1) predetermined forces; and 2) critical uncertainties. Each type is important in the development of scenarios and in the successful execution of a futuring exercise.

*When we have confidence in the direction of a driving force we call it a predetermined force.*

Driving forces that are “predetermined” are those that fall outside society’s control and that will affect any scenario or story that we develop about the future. Predetermined forces are rooted in present conditions. We can be fairly certain about how these forces will play out in the future. Many demographic trends are predetermined forces because their future course is based on births that have already occurred. For example, we can be fairly certain about the number of baby boomers, generation Xers, and generation Yers who will populate the United States in the year 2020 because they all have been born and because we have confidence in actuarial projections.

Critical uncertainties are driving forces that are not so certain, or predetermined. One or more of these uncertain driving forces

will have significant implications for the scenarios and for the focal issue. It is unclear what direction or trend this type of force will take, but a swing in one direction or another has a profound impact on the future and the focal issue.

*Critical uncertainties are scenario building blocks.*

In the NCSL futures exercise, the task force identified three critical uncertainties in its examination of the legislature of the future.

1. The direction society takes in the use of direct democracy;
2. The level of confidence society maintains in the legislature as a problem solving institution; and
3. The position society takes in demanding government services.

Each of these three driving forces has a highly uncertain future, but the outcome of each one will have profound effects on the viability and relevance of state legislatures.

Chapter 7 of this guide contains more detail about how the critical uncertainties are used to develop scenarios. It is important at this step to recognize that the identification of the driving forces helps to reveal critical uncertainties that will, in large part, define the course of the futures exercise.

In *The Art of the Long View*, Peter Schwartz calls the driving forces “scenario building blocks.” He adds:

“Driving forces affect the scenarios in both obvious and subtle ways: some are more significant than others, but sort through them carefully, and keep in mind that public perception of a force can often be more critical than its mere existence.”

There are many methods for identifying and listing driving forces. Brainstorming can be a good first step. Predetermined forces and critical uncertainties are likely to become evident at the brainstorming level.

*Brainstorming is a good first step toward identifying driving forces.*

The products or ideas developed in brainstorming can be divided into the STEEP categories described earlier and then examined in more depth. This may require substantial research. The NCSL task force asked staff to explore and develop lists and descriptions of driving forces in four categories: social, technical, economic and political. The task force determined that environmental forces were not relevant to the focal issue. These staff-generated lists were then discussed, debated and refined by the task force.

Here are some examples of driving forces developed by the NCSL task force for its futures study.

**Social**—Immigration is projected to be a predominant factor in U.S. population growth. It will likely account for about 29 million people or about one in nine Americans by 2020. Hispanics and Asians are projected to account for seven out of 10 immigrants from now through 2025.

**Technical**—Advances in computing power and artificial intelligence will drive other technological advances in the areas of biology, genetics and medicine that will pose complex and fundamental moral/ethical/religious questions for policymakers and those who support their work.

**Economic**—Changes in the U.S. economy will severely test the ability of current state tax systems to collect the revenue necessary to finance state government. Examples of this include the threat to state tax collections posed by sales through the Internet and the ability of state business taxes to adapt to rapidly expanding international trade.

**Political**—Electronic commerce, Internet communications and regional interests, e.g., the Pacific Rim, will challenge the viability of traditional political boundaries and the governmental authorities that operate within them.

## 6. IDENTIFY CORE VALUES

In his book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Steven Covey writes, “People can’t live with change if there’s not a changeless core inside them. The key to the ability to change is a changeless sense of who you are, what you are about, and what you value.” Covey’s words have great significance for those engaged in futures or strategic planning exercises. By identifying a clear sense of what must be changeless, we establish important parameters and guideposts for the consideration of choices and priorities for the future.

*Core values provide the foundation for decision making about the future.*

Core values describe the essential beliefs and principles of a person, group or institution. Core values are the “canaries in the coal mine” of the futuring process. As we venture into various scenarios of the future and the choices they present, we keep an eye on the core values. If a scenario or choice threatens the viability of a core value, we know that we have encountered a potentially undesirable environment.

*Core values are essential beliefs and principles*

In the NCSL task force futures exercise, the participants asked the following question about core values and state legislatures: “What are the core values of the legislative institution that deserve special attention and care when considering change? The task force arrived at these answers:

- Legislatures should be **ethical**.
- Legislatures should be committed to **representative democracy**.

- Legislatures should be **responsive and open** to the needs of people.
- Legislatures should be committed to **collegiality** among members.
- Legislatures should be committed to being an **independent, co-equal** branch of government.
- Legislatures should be committed to a **deliberative process** of making public policy.

Each value highlighted in bold served as an important signpost that guided task force deliberations and helped it to measure the feasibility and desirability of various options for the future.

Core values must be relevant to the focal issue of the futures exercise. Different focal issues will generate different lists of core values. Participants in the futures exercise should reach consensus about core values. The core values list should be concise and clearly stated.

# 7. AXES OF UNCERTAINTY AND SCENARIO DEVELOPMENT

Chapter 5 of this guide describes the key role that driving forces, and especially the critical uncertainties, play in building scenarios of the future. It is through these scenarios that various alternative futures can be contemplated, assessed and planned for.

*Critical uncertainties are the building blocks of scenarios.*

An effective futuring exercise is able to refine the driving forces at work in the environment into two or three critical axes of uncertainty that represent important dimensions that will likely have a major impact on the focal issue or decision being studied. These axes of uncertainty are the building blocks of scenarios.

*What is a critical axis of uncertainty?*

It is important to note that a full range of possible outcomes is represented by a critical axis. For example, in the NCSL task force exercise, the first axis of uncertainty represented the possible range of public use of direct democracy. One end of the axis indicated a future where there is high or increasing use of direct democracy. The other end of the axis portrayed low or decreasing use. The actual outcome of this uncertainty will have a profound influence on the future of the legislature. Thus, it will have a profound effect on answers to the focal question:

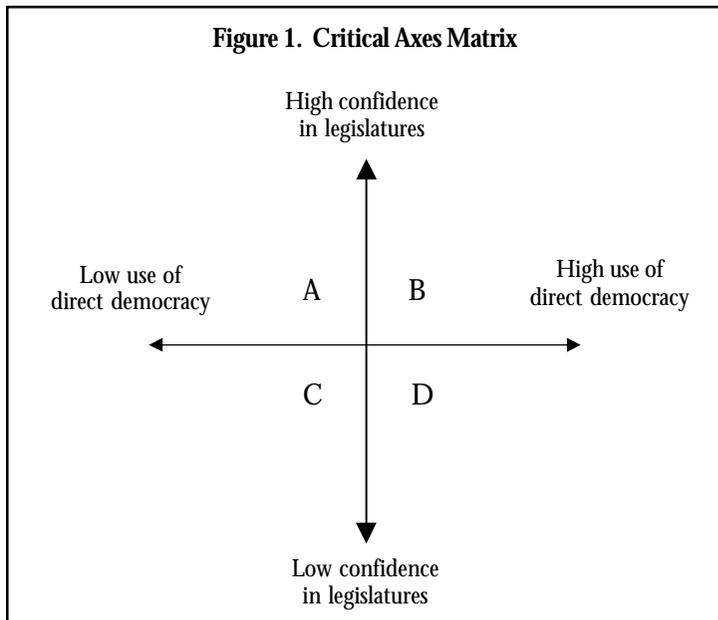
“What actions will be required to keep state legislatures relevant to the democratic process in the year 2025?”

*Combining two or more critical axes of uncertainty into a matrix reveals scenarios.*

Critical axes of uncertainty, when combined into a matrix (two axes crossing) form the beginnings of potential scenarios of the future. The following matrix from the NCSL task force exercise illustrates how this works.

Figure 1 shows the intersection of two axes of uncertainty: 1) increasing/decreasing use of direct democracy; and 2) increasing/decreasing confidence in the legislative institution. The intersection of these axes creates four distinct quadrants that represent four possible future scenarios. For example, quadrant B is a future characterized by high use of direct democracy and high confidence in legislatures. In contrast, quadrant C represents a future where there is low confidence in legislatures and low use of direct democracy.

*Each quadrant or octant of the matrix represents a different scenario.*

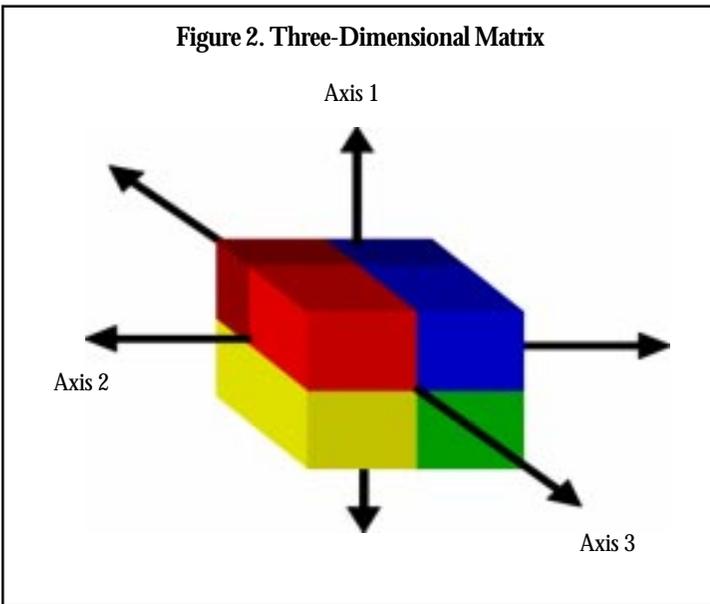


Through an understanding of history and the driving forces, and guided by the focal issue and a bit of imagination, a story can be told about each quadrant in the matrix.

Imagine, for example, what legislatures might be like in a future depicted by quadrant D of figure 1. In this scenario, people have little confidence in the legislative institution and the public routinely uses direct democracy as a way to get around the legislative process. What are the implications for public policymaking or for candidate recruitment, for example? How do the driving forces play out in this future? Chapter 8 contains more information about how a matrix quadrant is developed into a scenario.

Figure 2 illustrates how a third axis of uncertainty can be added to the matrix to create eight possible futures. Each octant represents a different scenario. The NCSL task force used three axes of uncertainty in its work. However, after each octant was examined, the task force determined that only four of them warranted further study.

*The addition of a third axis adds richness to the exercise.*



The addition of a third axis of uncertainty, when appropriate, enriches the futuring exercise by revealing important nuances in scenarios that might otherwise go undetected.

## 8. DEVELOP SCENARIOS INFLUENCED BY DRIVING FORCES

*Scenarios can suggest problems that may exist in the future.*

Once the critical uncertainties are identified and the quadrants are selected, it is time to write the scenarios. A scenario highlights the forces that may push the future in a given direction. It makes the forces visible and helps the readers to understand those forces and their potential consequences more fully. When carefully crafted, scenarios suggest problems that may exist in the future and can provide the research group with foresight it might otherwise lack.

*Scenario writing requires creativity and visualization.*

Scenario writing involves elements of several different types of writing. First, it is an exercise in creative writing. The writer needs to imagine what the future will hold, and convey that image to the readers. Creativity and visualization are required to provide details of circumstances that do not currently exist.

Scenario writing also is an exercise in story telling. The writer must describe characters and situations and make them come to life for the reader. At first glance, scenarios may seem like fairy tales, but they're not. All the research and analysis conducted prior to this stage provides the writer with enough facts and possibilities to make the scenarios as close to reality as possible given that no one can predict the future with certainty.

Lastly, scenario writing is an exercise in news writing. Every good journalist knows that if the reader's attention isn't immediately captured, it's over. The reader will not read the scenario, and the writer has wasted a lot of time. A good scenario is interesting and contains all the main elements of the story in an uncomplicated and straightforward style.

The task force developed four scenarios describing what legislatures might be like in 2025. They are highlighted below.

1. ***The harassed legislature***, a strong legislature faced with a high level of demands and public scrutiny;
2. ***The circumvented legislature***, a weak legislature faced with a public that is highly involved in direct democracy;
3. ***The ideal legislature***, a strong legislature that the public relies on and trusts;
4. ***The diminished legislature***, a weak legislature that lacks public confidence and is supplanted by other government entities.

As with any task, getting started is the hardest part. Once the ideas start to flow, the elements of a scenario come together rather quickly. Based on Lawrence Wilkinson's work, *How to Build Scenarios*, the task force suggests the following writing process.

First, the writer must develop a plot that centers around the focal issue. The driving forces, of course, suggest the plot. The writer's job is to illustrate these forces at work through the use of examples that are as realistic as possible. Creatively thinking about what could happen leads the writer to visualize scenes under the altered conditions and capture them on paper. In some instances, the driving forces may propel the story in different directions. When that happens, the writer may need to prepare more than one scenario to cover all the possibilities.

*First, develop a plot based on the focal issue.*

Next, the writer must create characters to carry out the plot. Generally speaking, the writer develops at least one character

*Create characters to carry out the plot.*

for every stakeholder. The scenarios prepared on the legislature, for example, include legislators, legislative staff, lobbyists, government officials, and constituents. Everyone who will be affected by the imagined changes is included in the scenario.

Throughout the scenario writing process, the writer should focus on the reader. Getting the reader to understand and relate to the future portrayed in the scenario is the ultimate goal. This is achieved in a number of ways. First of all, the writer should use examples that are vivid and concrete to capture the reader's attention. They must contain enough details to make them plausible. It is also vitally important for the writer to keep the scenario free of any personal opinions or biases. If the reader suspects that the piece is skewed in any way by the hopes or desires of the writer, the scenario is lost and won't serve its intended purpose.

The scenarios prepared by the NCSL task force, for example, provide a real feel for what the legislature could be like 25 years from now. They do so by describing the inner workings of the legislature as well as the external forces that it may face. As examples, the task force describes a typical day in the life of a legislator and the types of technology that a legislative staffer will likely use by then.

*Scenarios give the reader the whole realm of possibilities.*

Though all of the task force scenarios are built around the same three critical axes of uncertainty, each of them pulls the critical uncertainties in different directions. Thus, the researcher is made aware of the whole realm of possibilities that may exist at that future date.

Through illustrations and storytelling, scenarios convey the essence of the research that has been conducted in a way that is thought provoking and easy to understand. The use of scenarios encourages stakeholders to analyze and prepare for the future in a way that statistics and other raw data never could.

## 9. ASSESS THE FOCAL ISSUE AND VISION WITHIN CONTEXT OF EACH SCENARIO

Once the scenarios are written, the gathering and compiling of information is complete. The futures researcher now must focus on analyzing the data to see what can be learned from the work accomplished.

As was previously discussed, each scenario pulls the future in different directions. Therefore, it is important to study them all on an individual basis as well as in comparison to the others. This will provide the researcher with a better sense of all the possibilities that exist.

During this assessment phase, it is wise for the researchers who have conducted the work thus far to seek the opinions and advice of others who may not have been involved in the initial phases of the work. Those closely associated and familiar with the focal point are ideal candidates to review the scenarios and assess them. The task force, for instance, presented its scenarios to a group of legislators and legislative staff members at a meeting of the NCSL Executive Committee and the Legislative Staff Coordinating Committee.

*Review each scenario separately.*

A review and assessment of the scenarios may be conducted in several ways. The group of reviewers can work together and examine all of the scenarios or they can divide into groups that are each assigned one or two scenarios. The format is flexible and depends on individual circumstances. The task force sent copies of all the scenarios to the entire group of reviewers. The group reviewed them in advance of the meeting. At the meeting, each reviewer was assigned to a subgroup that closely examined one scenario and reported the results of its findings to the group as a whole.

*A facilitator can help in the review process.*

The review process also may involve a facilitator. This is an especially good idea when the group doing the reviewing is very large or perhaps new to the area of futures research. In those instances, a facilitator can provide continuity and maintain a constant thought process among members of the group. The facilitator also can help with compiling the findings of subgroups and coming to conclusions once all of the scenarios have been assessed.

A facilitator may be someone who is well versed in planning, research principles, and futures research in particular, or someone who is well versed in matters surrounding the focal issue of the scenarios. The NCSL task force selected a facilitator who is a strategic planning consultant and a former legislative staff member.

*Judge the scenario from many perspectives.*

In reviewing a scenario, the reviewers should judge it from many different perspectives. Some of the questions they might address are listed below.

- How plausible is it? What is the likelihood that this future will become reality?
- How desirable is it?
- What are the implications for change?
- What problems or challenges will it create?
- If the potential for problems or challenges exists, how might we prevent or overcome them?

- If the scenario is completely undesirable, what steps might we take to prevent it from ever becoming reality?

Throughout the review process, the reviewers must always keep the core values in the forefront of the discussion. As desirable as a scenario might seem on its face, it is not desirable if it conflicts with or challenges the core values set forth in the early stages of the research.

*A scenario is not desirable if it conflicts with the core values.*

After each scenario is evaluated individually, the reviewers turn their attention toward the scenarios collectively. If one or two of the scenarios seem most likely to become reality, they may want to focus on those in particular. If all of them seem quite plausible, they may want to focus on the one or two they find most desirable. Again, it all depends on the unique circumstances.

When all the scenarios have been thoroughly analyzed, it is only natural for those involved to begin thinking of possible actions they might take to promote desirable conditions for the future and fend off any undesirable ones. It is at this point in time that the researchers move on to the next phase of research.

## 10. DEVELOP ACTION PLANS BASED ON A LIKELY OR DESIRABLE FUTURE

By the time this stage is reached, the research group has put considerable time and effort into developing a long-term perspective and identifying its vision for the future. The scenarios evaluated in Chapter 9 have pinpointed key possibilities for the future, and the researchers have a feel for what may lie ahead.

### *Construct long-range plans*

Now the group must translate the knowledge gained through the entire process into concrete and practical actions by constructing long-range plans complete with necessary timetables and budget forecasts. This is critical to protect the work already complete, commit themselves to the next phase of the process, and to lay the groundwork for necessary actions.

The research group begins this phase by reviewing the scenario assessments completed earlier and by identifying the specific goals and challenges that must be met in order to make the desirable future a reality. To simplify the process and bring more people into this effort, it is wise to divide the goals and challenges into categories or groups.

### *Analyze action plans*

Once the categories are selected, the research group can begin to analyze and examine the goals individually and define nec-

essary actions related to each of them. In reviewing the categories, the research group may want to recruit “experts” in the various categories to assist them or they may want to simply divide the categories among themselves and work on them in smaller groups. The best approach once again depends on individual circumstances.

The task force study revealed a number of possible goals that deserved additional attention. One of the goals was to improve the efficiency of the legislative process to ensure that the legislative branch maintains its parity with the executive branch in state government policymaking. To achieve this goal, a number of issues were addressed. Among them were how to recruit and retain high quality staff, how to better educate the public on the importance of the legislature’s role in policymaking, and how to use technology to improve efficiency.

The research group should examine all proposed action plans with great care. They must evaluate the plans in terms of cost, effectiveness, viability and other factors that vary with the subject matter. It also is important that the plans be as detailed as possible and include budget data and a proposed schedule.

Once all the proposed action plans are reviewed by the full research group, they must narrow them down to only those they think deserve implementation. They need to document their findings, provide details on all the plans they have selected, and present them to those who will ultimately make the decisions regarding implementation.

*Select action plans for implementation.*

This is one of the most critical phases of the research. It takes the researchers from the point of uncovering what the future may hold to actually taking action to shape it. While it would be easy for the researchers to file the project away before this step and simply consider it to be an interesting intellectual exercise, it is imperative that they proceed to the next level. Looking into the future is not enough, they need to act on it as well.

# 11. IMPLEMENT ACTION PLANS

The research, the predictions, the evaluations and the planning are complete. The process so far has generated dialogue not only among the research group directly, but also among stakeholders and other interested parties. People are perhaps more interested and curious about the future than they once were. Enthusiasm has been generated, and now it is time to turn that enthusiasm into action. It is time to implement the action plans that have received final approval.

During this final phase, the role of the research group inevitably changes. Although they once were in command, they now step aside. In some instances, they may play a role in promoting and educating others about what they learned. In other instances, they may play a role in promoting the actual action plans. It is also very possible, however, that they will have no role at all in this phase.

*These tips may help.*

Implementing action plans is not easy. It is often hard to garner the support and commitment it requires to carry them out. Listed below are a few tips that might make the implementation phase more successful.

- Review the plan at regular intervals;
- Chart its progress;
- Stand ready to reevaluate or redirect the action plan as new trends and challenges emerge;

- Bring new people into the process whenever appropriate;
- Use outside observers or evaluators if possible.

Remember that the goal is not necessarily to create a perfect future, but to effect positive change for future gain. Even if the goal is not entirely met, all is not lost. Those who implement an action plan are likely to learn a lot along the way including the ability to recognize a need for change and to respond appropriately.



# GLOSSARY

**Core Value.** Core values describe the essential beliefs and principles of a person, group or institution that we hope to preserve in the future. Core values serve as guideposts about the desirability of various scenarios of the future.

**Critical Uncertainty.** Critical uncertainties are driving forces that have an uncertain future but that also have a potentially profound effect on the focal issue of the futures research. Critical uncertainties, when arranged as axes in a matrix, provide the foundation for identifying possible alternative scenarios of the future.

**Driving Force.** A trend or forecast that has a high likelihood of affecting or changing the course of future events and the focal issue. Driving forces are divided into two types:

- 1) Predetermined forces—forces that we can predict with relative confidence.
- 2) Critical uncertainties—[see definition above]

**Focal Issue.** The key question or vision of the future that the futures researchers hope to answer or learn more about. The focal issue serves as the guiding light of a futures project by establishing parameters about the scope of work and the relevance of all project activities.

**Scenario.** A story about the future based upon facts, predictions and possibilities uncovered in futures research. A good

scenario employs imagery, characters and plot to create an interesting, readable, and plausible vision of the future.

**SWOT Analysis.** An internal or external assessment of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats faced by a group when conducting a project such as futures research. The SWOT analysis provides a good starting point for measuring the scope of a project against available resources and environmental factors.

**Snow Card Exercise.** A brainstorming technique that requires individuals to write their thoughts about a specific question or issue on small white cards in advance of discussion about the question. The cards of all participants are placed together on a wall or panel (“snow”) and arranged according to common themes. The snow card technique allows many ideas to flow from a group in a short amount of time.

**STEEP Categories.** A system for categorizing driving forces into social forces, technical forces, economic forces, environmental forces and political forces.

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