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The art and strategy of scenario writing

Betty S. Flowers

Until her appointment this year as Director of the LBJ Library and Museum, Betty Sue Flowers was Kelleher Professor of English and member of the Distinguished Teachers Academy at the University of Texas at Austin. She is also a poet, editor, and business consultant (bflowers@uts.cc.utexas.edu). She has served as a moderator for executive seminars at the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies, consultant for NASA, member of the Envisioning Network for General Motors, Visiting Advisor to the Secretary of the Navy, and editor of Global Scenarios for Shell International in London and for the World Business Council in Geneva (on scenarios for global sustainable development and, most recently, on the future of biotechnology).

On my first day on the job as a member of the 1992 Royal Dutch Shell Scenario Team in the London office, there was a fire drill. After walking down the many flights of stairs and crossing the street to Jubilee Gardens, I found myself standing beside the head of Group Planning, as we waited for the all clear signal. Deciding to seize the moment, I introduced myself as the “new scenario editor” and asked him how I could make the scenarios that I had been hired to help shape and write the best Shell had ever produced.

He looked at me somewhat skeptically. I waited, expecting to hear some advice about the relation of global economics to pipeline politics and maybe a few words about water wars in the Middle East or a suggestion to place a stronger emphasis on trade policy. But all he said was “Keep it short”.

“What do you mean by ‘short’?” I asked.

“Under ten pages”, he said.

“OK”, I instantly agreed. And he laughed, as if I’d made a joke.

The art of keeping it short

I soon learned that anyone on a Shell Scenario Team would have laughed at a promise to keep a scenario book down to ten pages. Three years of research for the scenarios generates hundreds of pages of reports and graphs. Interesting current events that point to important trends are summarized in boxes that are sprinkled throughout the text. These add to the richness and persuasiveness of the scenario stories – and also to their bulk.

So the primary product of Shell’s scenario research was a set of big scenario books – Volume One, with the main storylines for economics, politics, and energy; and Volume Two, with additional scenarios for countries and other focused topics.

But mindful of the promise I’d made during that fire drill conversation beside the Thames, I also wrote a little book, a short overview of the larger scenarios that captured the major themes and images. Over scenario rounds from 1992 to 2001, the function of the “little” book evolved so that it served not only as a summary, but also

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as a “public scenario book” that could be shared with outsiders. The little book became a valuable result of the project.

On later reflection, I realized that a successful scenario process should produce two different products based on two distinct mental disciplines: thorough research leading to rich, fully articulated stories (the long books); and the distillation of these stories into essential concepts and images (the little book).

What also became clear over the course of writing those first scenarios was that the “distillation” process was not only a form of summarizing, but also a way to highlight key moving forces in the stories – what was left over after all the details and sometimes even the stories themselves were taken away. For example, in the course of distilling one of the 1992 scenarios, which described the resistance to globalization, I was left with the image of “barricades” – the title of the scenario itself. “Barricades” – the title and the image of resistance – was like a seed from which you could grow the entire story. These story “seeds” were so powerful in themselves that eventually I began to work with them directly, growing the scenarios from the key images rather than finding these images during a “summary” exercise. To perhaps oversimplify a bit: the scenarios began to incorporate the qualities of poems and dramas as well as the story elements found in novels and short stories.

However, there’s an important difference between using literary techniques in the process of developing and sharing scenarios and creating scenarios as entertaining literature. The “entertaining literature” school of scenario writing is useful if scenarios are simply to be read. But if scenarios are to be shared through presentations and used in strategy exercises, another model of scenario writing is more useful.

“All the world’s a stage”

Some scenario builders have suggested that a science fiction novel might make an ideal scenario if it dealt with the issues managers cared about. This approach makes a kind of common sense – scenario builders could think creatively about the evolving future and share this very different world in an exciting narrative. The problem is, in the novel model of scenario building, the manager is like the sultan listening to Scheherazade’s 1001 tales of the *Arabian Nights*. The manager can sit comfortably in an Aeron chair and let the good story roll by, excited for the moment by the tale of the future it contains and maybe even challenged by it. But it’s a different matter to take ownership of various alternative futures and experiment with them.

So in the course of wrestling with that original summary book, I came to the conclusion that the better model for a successful scenario is a sort of play, or more precisely, a stage set created by words. In this model, the future is imagined as if it were a stage-set description, where every element contributes to the effect of the whole. However, the stage-set waits for the key actors – the managers themselves – to animate it. By experiencing each scenario as a separate stage set, managers have the opportunity to participate in each alternate world.

Scenario teamwork

Ideally, senior managers would build their own scenarios from scratch, but this is a lengthy process. So the challenge for any scenario builder is how to incorporate managers into the scenario process while making the best use of their limited time.

There are many ways to do this incrementally: for example, managers contribute in initial interviews; in “learning journeys” early in the scenario process that encourage them to give feedback on emerging themes, issues, and branching points; and in their responses to multiple short presentations of scenario stories as they are being

Box 1 Scenario participation vs. entertainment

Once, while engaged in a preliminary rollout of global scenarios for the future of the environment sponsored by the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, I argued with a colleague about the “less is more” or “novel vs. stage set” issue. Our specific disagreement centered on one scenario, which raised the issue of what would happen to the environment if the world continued simply to do what it had always done. The function of the scenario, as I saw it, was to motivate managers to read the next two scenarios – which offered the consequences of two different approaches to solving environmental problems. My European colleague felt we should offer a vivid description of a world in which the consequences of no action were dire. I argued for a less dramatically dark scenario, in part because I felt that American executives at the time might react to a too-negative world as exaggerated, thus finding the scenario implausible. “Besides”, I said, “if we fill up all the available space with our own facts and figures, there won’t be any open space for the manager to step into with his own contribution”.

After this particular scenario was presented, one of the executives stood up and said, “This scenario doesn’t go far enough! The world is going to be much worse than this scenario if we don’t do anything more about the environment than we’re doing now!” Then he went on to say exactly how much worse the world would be.

“You see”, said my colleague, “I was right! We didn’t go far enough!”

“No”, I said, “This is exactly what we wanted to happen! That speaker stepped into the scenario and made it his. It’s not what the scenario says that’s the key to the learning – it’s what it’s designed to do. When that manager said the scenario didn’t go far enough, he was stepping onto the stage of the scenario and participating in its creation”. The most effective scenario work is not what happens in the scenario story; it’s what happens in the mind of the managers.

Of course, for this effect to work, the scenario writers must know something about the minds of the managers. If no one on the senior management team is worried about a do-nothing approach to the environment, the moment in which the scenario becomes “inhabited” may not happen.

developed. While this is going on, how can the scenario writers stimulate the development of scenarios in the minds of the managers? This question is not the same as, “How can the scenarios be made more memorable?”. Remembering a story is not the same as experimenting with it and imagining alternatives. To enlist managers in the creative process, scenario writers need to articulate a number of key themes and images around which the managers’ imagination can play.

For example, an environmental scenario project I worked on for another client used the central image of improvisational “jazz” music for one of the scenarios to represent a process in which businesses formed *ad hoc* coalitions, sometimes with NGOs or government entities, to solve particular environmental problems.

In the two years following the rollout of this scenario, a series of projects around the US were designed to “make Jazz happen”. But while the Jazz scenario had described many events and specific developments in particular countries around the globe, the subsequent projects were not that closely related to the events that the scenario had described – in fact, only a core group of people knew the scenario in any detail. For the people “making Jazz happen”, the resonance and associations of the Jazz metaphor within the context of environmental scenarios were enough to propel the projects that were attempting to reach into a Jazz kind of future, where *ad hoc* coalitions solved emerging problems.

Names, slogans and other “sticky” labels

“Jazz” is an example of a “sticky” label-like a poetic image, it stayed in the minds of the scenario participants, helping to bond related ideas together. I was once asked



“ To enlist managers in the creative process, scenario writers need to articulate a number of key themes and images around which the managers’ imagination can play. ”

whether my job as a poet writing scenarios in an oil company was to make up such images for the scenarios. “No”, I said, “my job is to recognize them when they emerge”. Sometimes they’re found buried in the middle of a long research report by one of the experts on the team. When I see one that looks promising, I give it a kind of field test, developing it in my edited version of one of the sub-stories. We have a winner when the other team-members – or the original author – start using it. The final test comes when team members try telling the stories without notes in the early stages of scenario development. When a central theme sticks to a particular phrase or image, the story itself begins to grow from that image.

The “stickiest” phrase that emerged during my four scenario rounds at Shell was “TINA” – an acronym for “There Is No Alternative”. TINA was so sticky that the concepts that it alluded to – globalization, liberalization, and the development of technology – seemed to stick, too, as trends seemingly certain to continue for the foreseeable future. This coinage traveled widely outside the company. Within five years, the term “TINA” was popping up in widely varied uses – a book of French literary criticism, a speech by a US Presidential candidate, and articles in business magazines.

The architecture of the whole

My continuing attempts to give scenario writing the intense, imagistic brevity of poetry has become a quest with an elusive goal – to make each aspect of the scenario a facet that reflects the whole. For example, one of the seed images for the future of biotechnology was Aesop’s fabled hare-and-tortoise race. Wherever possible, the hare and the tortoise were evoked in headings or through race analogies so that the over-arching theme of the scenario would not be lost even when the focus was on specific details of biotechnology development. The “whole”, of course, was the story itself, in which slower technologies beat out futuristic ones. But within the stories, I inserted subheadings with the “sticky” images and phrases to provide a kind of ongoing outline of the story.

In the most recent scenario development round for Shell (2001), we introduced a system of geographical perspectives designed to further enhance the learning that managers experience in each of the scenario “stage sets”. Called “Geographies of Connection”, this frame of reference allowed managers to explore each scenario from one of four positions: how people are connected globally; how nations are connected; how the globally connected edges of nations are connected to their own heartlands; and how we are connected to the earth through our environmental policies and practices. The scenarios formed the stage set; but the geographies formed the point of view through which the play could be experienced. If, for example, managers considered a political story in the Prism scenario from the point of view of our connection to the earth, they would be experiencing the story somewhat differently than if they viewed it while standing in the “heartland and edges” geography.

All you would need for a truly minimalist stage set, then, would be the central storyline for each scenario; a set of topics you would want to explore; and the four geographies



of connection. So, for example, standing in the geography of “Circles”, (how people interconnect) to think about energy in the Business Class scenario – a scenario with an emphasis on globally interconnected elites – would yield insights that the energy story, with its focus on oil and gas, does not spell out. Similarly, looking at the political story in Business Class through the geography of “Earth” would bring to mind other issues relevant to the scenario, but not spelled out there.

The use of these geographies as “points of view” on the “stage set” of the scenarios highlights an aspect of scenarios that is usually neglected. That is: stories are always told from a point of view. In scenarios, the point of view, while usually not expressed, is almost always that of the manager. Rarely is a scenario told from an “outside” point of view – even though playing such an outside “role” on the scenario stage set might be the most valuable learning experience possible for the actor/manager.

The London Eye

Since my first visit to Shell, a giant Ferris wheel called the “Eye” has been built in the neighborhood of the company’s office building. If the fire drill were to happen again and I encountered the head of planning, he and I would be standing next to a turning circle (the “Eye”) beside a linear river. I would turn to him, and hand him the equivalent of four “eyes” to see the scenarios through – four geographies of connection (in fact, drawn by our designer as four different circles). And then I would hand him the two linear pieces of the scenario stage set – the stories themselves, like a river in time, as suggested by their titles. “If you thought about energy”, I might ask, “and the future were a story called ‘Business Class’, what would this geography of connection lead to? And this?” If he wanted to immerse himself in research, he could wait to return to his office and read hundreds of pages in the long version or double-click through infinite links. But if he wanted to use his fire drill time – and managers always operate on Fire Drill Time – he could look at these bare pieces of “furniture” for the scenario stage set and build some challenging dramas.

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