

Step 1: Assumptions in the Horizons Foresight Method

Overview

What they are: Assumptions are statements about what we believe to be true. They are shaped by our experience, education, ideology, religion and culture. We may be aware of them or not. Often we have no proof to support them. However, they play a very significant role in shaping perception, learning, thought and decision-making processes. They are one of the building blocks in our mental models. Indeed, unexamined and mistaken assumptions are a major source of surprise and uncertainty. As a result, examining assumptions is a very efficient and strategic focus for foresight.

Where they fit in the Horizons Foresight Method: Before any foresight activities start, the Horizons Foresight Method identifies the current, commonly held assumptions about the issue or problem under study. These are the core assumptions that are shaping public policy and public dialogue on the issue. These assumptions are collected at the outset through interviews and research and then put aside, to be tested later in the process. At the very end of the process, when we have a better understanding of the range of plausible futures, the robustness of each assumption is tested to see if it is a good guide for policy and decision-making across the range of plausible futures. If necessary, current assumptions are re-written to be more robust. This testing of assumptions is one of the important functions of the Horizons Foresight Method.

Challenges in this step: In a group workshop, it is easy to get participants to identify lots of assumptions that are shaping their thinking about a public policy issue. But there are many layers of assumptions in a complex issue, and it can be hard for the group to identify which ones are most central to shaping the future of the issue. These core or strategically useful assumptions are the foundations on which current analysis, strategies and decisions rest.

There are at least four ways to surface strategic assumptions: 1) We make assumptions about the expected future. Examine the public dialogue and policy documents for the underlying assumptions. 2) We make assumptions to reduce uncertainty about the future behaviour of the system. Examine the common stories about how the system works and then note the underlying assumptions about continuity and change. 3) We make assumptions to reduce complexity. Look for areas where we don't understand how things work or where we may have simplified our story, particularly around which elements are part of the system and which are not. 4) Finally, we avoid some topics because they are too disruptive to address. Explore the assumptions buried in taboo topics (e.g. power, wealth, gender, etc.)—the things in life and professional mental models that people do not want to talk about.

Summary: Examining and testing assumptions can be a very efficient and strategic point of intervention to gain foresight. Assumptions are at the centre of mental models, analysis and decisions. Often, you can communicate the essence of the findings in a couple of sentences, so that users who don't have a lot of time can get it quickly. At the end of the Horizons Foresight Method, users can take the robust (credible) assumptions and the knowledge of emerging issues to build or strengthen their own mental model of the system to inform their decisions.

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