

# If I were a carpenter . . .



Richard O Smith  
meets scenario  
planner Rafael  
Ramirez, Oxford  
University's only  
Fellow of Strategy

**M**idway through the interview Rafael Ramirez makes a shocking gesture. He illustrates what can happen if scenarios are not adequately planned.

Like the baddie in *The 39 Steps* he holds his hand aloft to reveal missing fingers. "I was a bad carpenter in the frozen Canadian north," he deadpans.

Woodwork did not really work out. So it was time to plan what to do next. Starting with how to plan properly – because the best plans themselves begin with good planning technique.

And in Rafael's case the method became the conclusion. Because planning for the

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future is what he is good at. Very good at. Much better than carpentry.

Rafael Ramirez is a scenario planner. Yes, that is a proper job. In fact, not only is it a job, it is a role essential for future-proofing global organisations.

Culturally we all feel a conforming compulsion to be seen 'working' by displaying visible industriousness. When was the last time you sat down with eyes shut in the workplace and answered your manager's inevitable question this action prompted with, "I am thinking and planning".

It turns out that thinking and planning in the workplace is a good thing. Who knew?

Certainly very few managers I have ever worked for, preferring to promulgate the looking-busy-equates-to-working orthodoxy. As Albert Einstein once remarked: "People love chopping wood. In this activity one immediately sees results."

A scenario planner is someone who has the ability to see both the wood and the trees simultaneously, then focus on the changes to the chopping environment those trees are most likely to encounter in the future.

By way of an introduction to the subject, Rafael has written: "Scenario planning saw its origins with the possibility of nuclear war. It borrowed the term 'scenarios' from the arts, but considered the serious implications of 'what if' in one of the most terrifying possibilities of human history."

Now occupying a muscular position in the mainstream, scenario planning is only around 50 years old. However, it is estimated that 75 per cent of all the produced literature on the subject has originated since 2001 – specifically post 9/11.

As Rafael has pointed out: "Since 9/11 we have seen a steep increase in the production of scholarly work on scenario planning. Currently some 2,400 peer-reviewed papers are published on scenario planning in English alone every year; and Amazon lists more than 1,500 books whose titles include 'scenario planning'."

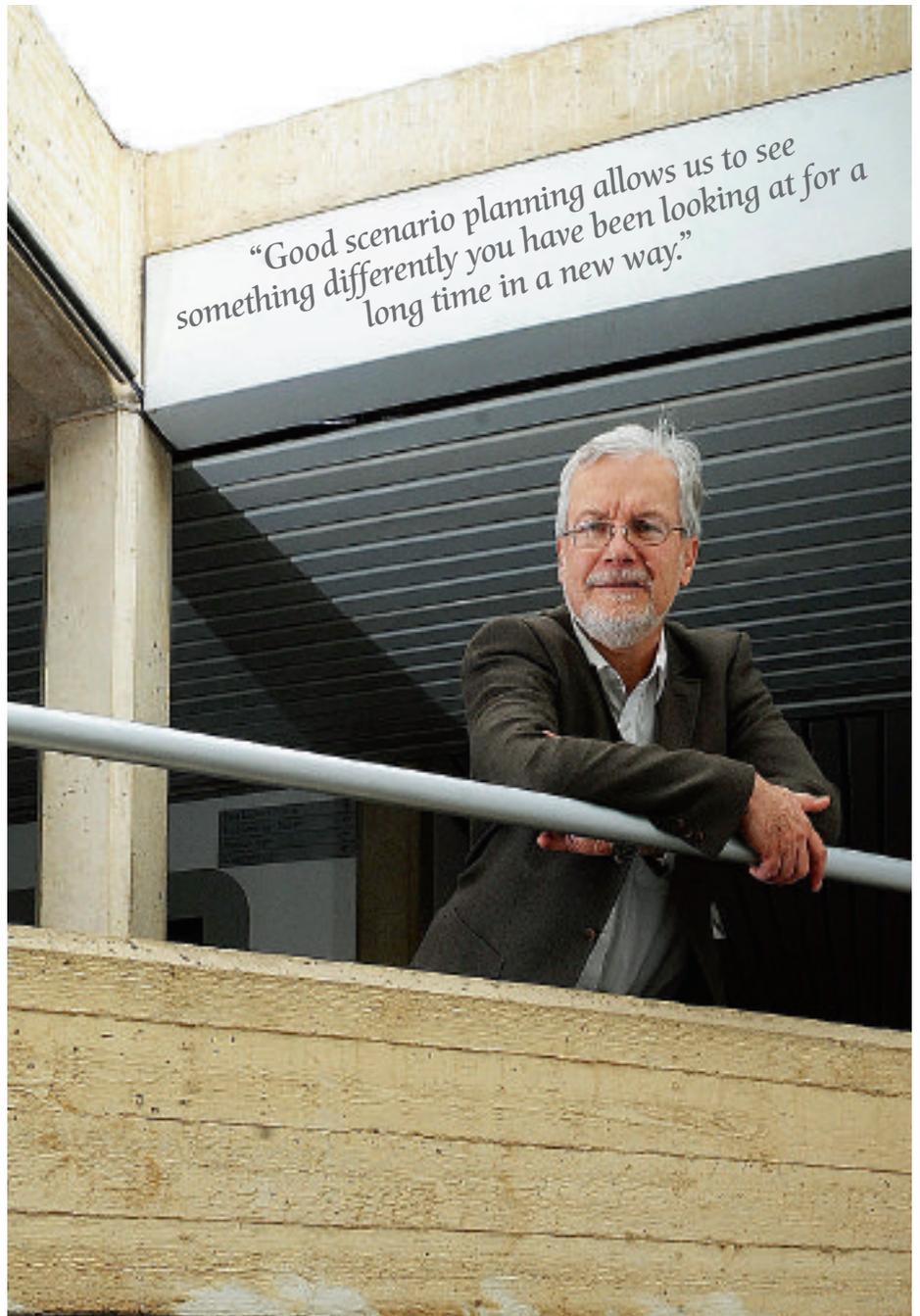
Rafael Ramirez is Oxford University's only Fellow of Strategy. He is used to the solitude that being the first, and thus only one, in a field brings: "I was probably the only one who did a masters on the subject of aesthetics," he recalls, "it made me unemployable for a long time!"

However his employment hiatus was ended when Shell courted his expertise and appointed him Visiting Professor of Scenarios and Corporate Strategy. He recalls their approach included the memorable line: "I understand you have been writing about clarity?" Nonetheless, Rafael soon learned clarity is an aesthetic construct. "Shell treated me [immediately] as a team member, the same as Shell lifers."

Shell's approach to adopt scenario planning gradually became fashionable, and is now replicated throughout organisations – from governments to conglomerates.

Rafael co-authored what is considered to be the standard text on scenario planning: *Business Planning for Turbulent Times – New Methods for Applying Scenarios*. In the book's introduction Business Secretary Vince Cable, a former Shell employee, writes about a world buffeted by "many intense forces, pressures and cross-currents".

Scenario planning is seen as the storm



windows for protecting organisations against such a buffeting from an increasingly tempestuous future.

As far back as 1965 Shell began experimenting with an innovative way of looking at the future christened 'scenario planning', enabling organisations to reboot how they view, plan and relate to the future.

According to Angela Wilkinson and Roland Kuper's book *The Essence of Scenarios* documenting scenario planning's conception at Shell, this new tool allowed "corporations to break their dependency on short-term forecasting and manage disagreement as an asset, overcoming group think and exposing the organisation's world view".

In other words, scenario planning is about collaborative enquiry alongside exposing and questioning deep-seated assumptions. Or as Pierre Wack – whose archive is preserved among the 5,000 items forming The Oxford Futures Library (the scenario planning resource

at Egrove Park in Kennington) – once phrased it: "Scenario planning is the gentle art of re-perceiving."

In his office at the Said Business School, Rafael explains: "Good scenario planning allows us to see something differently you have been looking at for a long time in a new way, helping leaders to identify critical change levers."

One visual metaphor deployed in teaching is to encourage students to literally remove their glasses and hold them to the side.

"How different is the view from elsewhere? What is the view going to be like from multiple vantage points in ten years? Twenty years? Thirty years?" A lot of scenario planning is "creating alternative points of view," he concluded. It turns out that safe assumptions are often not safe at all.

"As opposed to futurists looking for trends,

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*“It takes several years to train and qualify as a certified gastroenterologist. But are we training them for the future or yesterday’s medicine? Are we fighting yesterday’s war?”*

**Dr Rafael Ramirez  
at the Said Business  
School, Egrove Park,  
Kennington**

*Photograph: Jon Lewis*

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we are looking from the future, enabling a point of view to be formed.”

Scenario planners tend to favour plausibility, whereas futurists side with probability – or preferable – futures. I am keen to ask: “How do you gauge plausibility in scenarios?”

“Plausibility is co-constructed and co-established,” he replied. “We aim for ‘least’ plausible, yet ‘plausible-enough-to-be-useful’. This is because ‘too’ plausible a reframing equals not a very challenging frame to the established one.

“And ‘too implausible’ will be rejected as unusable. We aim to co-produce re-framings that are plausible enough to challenge and to be used.”

A recent working visit to Singapore helped formulate a descriptive weight-bearing metaphor. “In Singapore bamboo scaffolding is common. Scenario plans are like bamboo not metal scaffolding. It allows bend. And once the conversation is up and running we can take the scaffolding down.”

Jointly-based at the Said Business School and Green Templeton College, corporations and governments all venture to Oxford University to recruit his expertise. It is certainly an impressive consultancy register.

Recent clients Rafael has helped equip for their difficult climb into the future include trade unions, banks, NGOs and professional bodies.

In a long list of organisations he has worked with, the following names sparkle – Eurotunnel, Royal Mail, BMW, NYC Department of Juvenile Justice, Nissan, Prudential, O2, Nexen (the largest operator of North Sea oil platforms), Royal College of GPs, Standard City Chartered Bank, HP (as in Hewlett Packard, not the sauce) and the government of Panama. All have come knocking for some bamboo scaffolding erection jobs.

Yet this work only constitutes one of the three circles on the Venn diagram he draws on his office whiteboard. The other two are

headed ‘teaching’ and ‘learning’. Ideally a project encompasses the shaded area overlapping all three.

“There is a lot of bad scenario planning around that doesn’t understand how output relates to helpful input,” he cautioned. “We do contingency forecasting.”

He cites an interesting real life occurrence. “It takes several years to train and qualify as a certified gastroenterologist. But are we training them for the future or yesterday’s medicine? Are we fighting yesterday’s war?”

His questions became poignantly relevant in Holland recently. In one area of medicine 76 specialists graduated after years of training for only three available jobs – the mismatched figures flashing like a warning light for the absence of adequate scenario planning.

The Dutch had failed to predict the progression of keyhole surgery, combined with the advancement of other treatments allowing

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nurses, not costly doctors, to administer them to patients.

Scenario planning appears to be about introducing a counter thought, then adding another counter thought and seeing how they interact. Assumptions, it seems, clot traditional thinking.

Rafael continued: “We ask, ‘are you aware of assumptions you have been putting into your models. Can you create alternative scenarios?’”

This rings true – the global financial earthquake that struck in 2008 was partly based on the erroneous assumption US property prices would go up unhindered every year. Nobody interjected a “but what if they do not?” scenario. And we are still shedding vital public services as a consequence.

“Have alternative models that disagree with each other,” he said. It illustrates a key point of scenario planning that assumption of future outcomes must be attentive to multiple scenarios.

Known as a founding father of “theories on the aesthetics of business, work and organisation,” Rafael arrived in Oxford in 2003 and was tasked with starting a programme in scenario planning.

Between 2008 to 2010 he was Chairman of the World Economic Forum’s Global Agenda Council on Strategic Foresight. Probably necessitating a larger-than-normal sized business card, he is also a Senior Research Fellow in Futures at the Oxford Martin School, Director of the Oxford Scenarios Programme and Associate Fellow at the Smith School for Entrepreneurship and the Environment.

Defining home is difficult for tri-lingual Rafael.

Born in Mexico, he has lived in five countries including 15 years in France where he was a Professor of Management (the French government were early adopters of scenario planning), a decade in Canada, plus a spell in Sweden and he completed a PhD in Pennsylvania.

You need to get on with people if you are a top scenario planner. Especially if you are expectant of persuading them to implement your conclusions too. So how does a leading scenario planner gain the essential trust of his/her clients?

“Empathy without capture. Understand a user’s world view. How do they frame their understanding of their context, whilst maintaining a critical distance from that viewpoint, for example” he replied.

“Also co-develop with the user how they will actually use the scenarios and the reframing this allows in their work. A good scenario planner has the scenario user test and if needed [will] re-set this trust repeatedly, openly and explicitly.”

Good scenario planning challenges different aspects of how business is experienced, from the way conference rooms are set up to hospital architecture.

Recently a hospital ward was re-designed after gaining the insightful realisation that placing nurses in a central workstation – rather than marginalised in corners – maximised efficiency whilst crucially ensuring patients would be more visible.

Hence what role does architectural design have in scenario planning?



“Some scenario planners believe they have to build a prototype to ‘see’ what they are imagining and then describe it; others think that they need to write up [and/or] describe what they imagine first; then build a prototype. This dilemma we explored at length in the 2014 Oxford Futures Forum,” he said.

Originated in 2005, the Oxford Futures Forum convenes every three years when Oxford becomes a hive of the world’s leading scenario planners and future practitioners – assembled to tackle a selected subject.

“I believe that building prototypes and models to share with others what one imagines and sees as plausible – to help them assess it – can be tremendously helpful.

“For example, as has been said many times in Oxford already, if a full prototype of the Castle Mill development had been demanded by the planning authorities, and shared for viewing and critique with all stakeholders prior to planning consent having been granted, the residences would have been built differently – and the current situation would have been averted.”

What does Rafael like and dislike about Oxford?

“I live in Oxford by choice, and choice itself – like living in Oxford – is a privilege. I like

the city’s variety and I like how what has been left natural (Port Meadow, Christ Church Meadow) and the built (mostly, but not always) help each other. I am concerned that this balance is now under attack. I do not like how the ‘strategic conversation’ on the future of the city is conducted. Clearly we need to do better in this respect.”

Scenario planning has been responsible for minting the wonderful phrase “canaries in the mind”.

Just as canaries were installed in coal mines as alarms for forthcoming endangerment, scenario planners provide an early warning mechanism for potential jeopardies mining mankind’s future.

Finally there’s just time to ask Rafael what he feels is his proudest achievement?

“I am hoping,” he said, “that my proudest achievement is still in the future!”

When he attains that future scenario I am sure it will be immaculately planned. 

■ View an example of scenario planning here: <https://www.ueg.eu/research/gi2040/>

■ The Oxford Futures Library is based at the Egrove Park campus of the Said Business School and open by appointment to researchers.