

# co-creating **STRATEGY**

**SCENARIO-PROOF YOUR PLANNING**

PLANNING FOR UNCERTAINTY: THE WHITEPAPER SERIES VOL.2

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# WELCOME TO CLASS 6 RAPIDS!

When I founded WhiteWater Consulting in 2001, I chose the name to reflect the era of perpetual change in which we were paddling. Things felt fast and challenging then.

Today, over two decades later, that change is accelerating and intensifying at a pace we've never seen before. It's not just rapid—it's multidimensional, too.

Regardless of your politics, the Trump presidency will have wide-ranging impacts on businesses in the U.S. and beyond. Add to that economic and geopolitical instability, the environmental crisis, and warp-speed digital transformation—it can feel like tough paddling out there!

As an American living in Canada who works in the U.S. almost weekly, I find the sense of uncertainty pervasive. I feel it from my clients on both sides of the border and in myself; what lies around the bend? While we can't know the future, we can do our best to prepare for it. That takes agility. But traditional strategic plans, with their years-long cycles, are too slow to respond to this complex, breakneck change.

We created this whitepaper to give leaders like you the confidence to prepare for this unknowable future through scenario planning. Unlike traditional forecasting, which tends to assume a single future that's not very different from the present, we'll demonstrate the value of exploring multiple potential scenarios. Along with drawing on our extensive experience leading clients through this process, we've curated the best practices and ideas from the leadership literature to bring you this scenario planning primer.

Ready, set, let's dig in!



Sean Ryan  
Founder & CEO  
WhiteWater International Consulting, Inc.

# OVERVIEW OF MACRO FORCES

## CHANGE HAPPENS: THE BIG THREE

While we can't know the future, we can prepare for it.

There are three major categories of destabilizing elements in the larger context that could affect your business and operations. By reflecting on their potential impacts today, you can better plan for a prosperous future. Remember, for every risk, there's the possibility of a new opportunity.

## 01 YOUR MARKETS

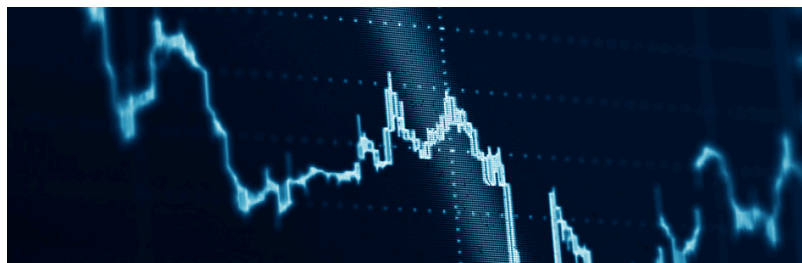
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In the U.S. and beyond, companies are bracing for the impacts of more "America First" economic policy. Outside the U.S., the spillover effect could be significant, affecting great swaths of other economies, including interest rates, inflation, consumer costs, currency valuation, and trade.

That could be golden if you're a U.S.-based manufacturer with a primarily domestic market. But it could also usher in fiscal policies that could disrupt the current global economic order, and challenge existing trade agreements. What if your supply chain relies on imports? Or if your key customers are in Canada, Europe, or beyond?

Below are some scenarios to consider:

- More protectionist economic policy
- Business-friendly tax and regulatory changes
- Tariffs on goods imported into the U.S
- Retaliatory tariffs on U.S. exports
- Challenges to existing trade agreements
- Interest rate changes by the Federal Reserve



## 02 YOUR PEOPLE

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The U.S. border was again a significant election issue. It seems highly likely that more restrictive immigration policies are coming.

These may create ripples—or rapids—in your talent pool, including worker shortages, increased vacancies, and wage impacts as the demand for skilled and unskilled labor rises.

Beyond your immediate team, other groups of people might also be impacted and, in turn, affect your organization, including suppliers, customers, competitors, partners, and other stakeholders.

Consider the potential impacts on your business of:

- Tighter border controls
- Changes to transborder work regulations
- Shifts in the labor pool (both skilled and unskilled workers)
- Deportation of undocumented workers in key industries
  - Agriculture, food processing, service, etc.



# OVERVIEW OF MACRO FORCES

## CHANGE HAPPENS: THE BIG THREE CON'T.

### 03 YOUR VALUES

Your business doesn't exist in a vacuum; it is in conversation with the issues of the day, and things are rather tumultuous on that front. While the "culture wars" present most issues as stark divides between left and right, missing all subtly along the continuum, there's no denying the deep divides between those on different sides of many issues will continue to shape society in ways we can't fully anticipate.

Your organizational values may be challenged by these shifts.

Of course, some values are evergreen (even if the prevailing culture might seem to have temporarily turned away from them). I'm referring to bedrock ideals such as honesty, respect, caring and integrity.

Other values are more timely, especially those related to contentious social issues that might be disrupted by policy changes and shifts in public discourse. Reflect on how these could affect your organization's stance on issues such as:

- Equity, diversity and inclusion
- The environment
- Human rights



# VALUES



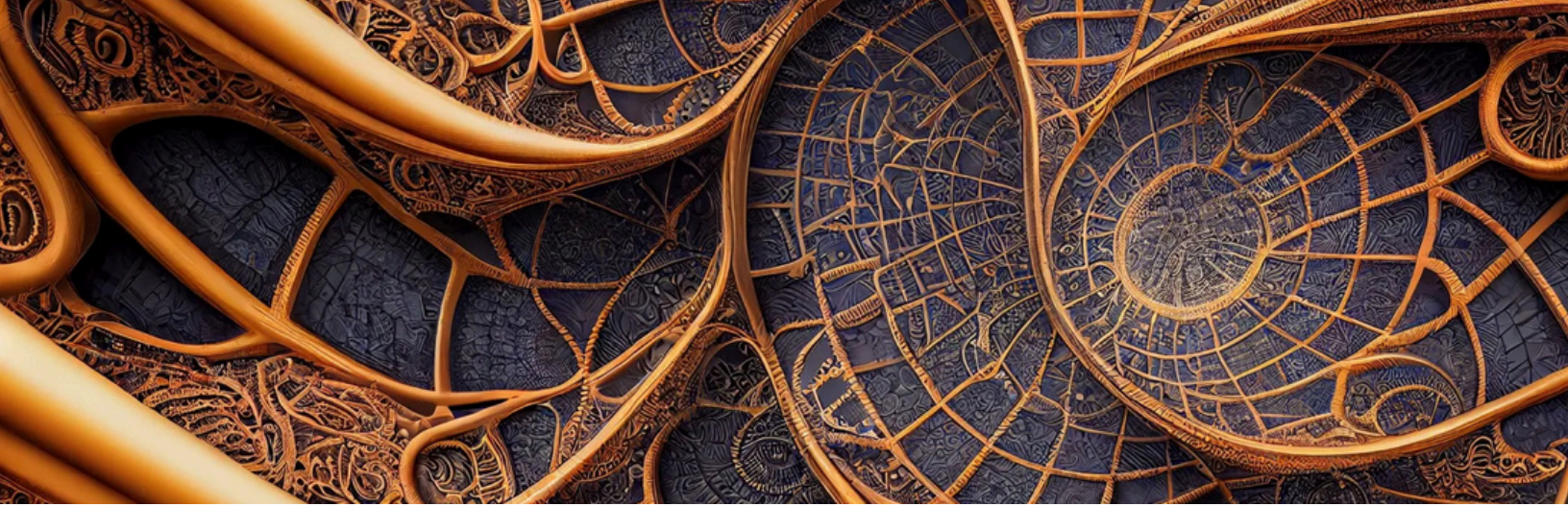
# AGILITY IN THE FACE OF COMPLEXITY

The factors confronting leaders and businesses today are complex, interrelated, and constantly evolving. All signs indicate that this condition of perpetual change will only continue to intensify.

Your strategy is based on a set of assumptions about what will *likely* occur. But what if that planned-for future never arrives? What if the conditions change? Scenario planning is an antidote to helplessness, a source of credible action plans to implement when change happens.

As Fernando F. Suarez and Juan S. Montes wrote in “Building Organizational Resilience,” a fascinating Harvard Business Review piece, “Organizations that regularly deal with fast-evolving situations—think SWAT teams and military commandos—know that it pays to practice and prepare for the unexpected while you have the luxury of time and resources instead of trying to learn how to adapt in the middle of a storm.”

Scenario planning makes your strategy as dynamic as the context in which you do business. It allows you to interact pre-emptively with external factors, from local, national and international politics to domestic and foreign economic forces and social movements. Most importantly, it helps you prepare for multiple eventualities—including those that are not ideal or that seem less likely. If there’s anything we can expect these days, it’s the unexpected.



# SCENARIO PLANNING: A PRIMER

Scenario planning was pioneered during the Second World War and came to prominence in the corporate world in the 1960s-'70s, when Royal Dutch/Shell used it to deal with the tumult of the 1973 oil crisis. The company wanted a more sophisticated and multilayered approach to future readiness than traditional forecasting. That's because forecasts "are usually constructed on the assumption that tomorrow's world will be much like today's," Peter Cornelius, Alexander Van de Putte, and Mattia Romani wrote "Three Decades of Scenario Planning in Shell" in the *California Management Review*.

Conversely, scenarios explore a range of plausible outcomes, not a single probable one. Think of scenario planning as a simulation in which multiple possible futures are explored (and not just those you hope for!).

"Scenarios are not projections, predictions, or preferences," the authors continue, but "coherent and credible alternative stories about the future."

These stories help organizations challenge their assumptions, develop their strategies, and test their plans. They help you prepare for the unexpected—before it happens. In the decades since, a number of organizations and schools have further developed scenario planning. The Oxford approach, for instance, explores the interplay between your immediate business environment and the broader context during "TUNA conditions": times of turbulence, unpredictable uncertainty, novelty, and ambiguity.

"Scenario planning is about exploring how the second layer might transform the first layer."

# SCENARIO PLANNING ESSENTIALS

## THE THREE ESSENTIALS OF SCENARIO PLANNING

Scenario planning can help your organization plan in three key ways: exploring future options, naming the triggers that will activate a course of action, and defining the factors to evaluate a plan's success.

Let's look at each one.

### 1. EXPLORE YOUR OPTIONS

The first step is to assemble a diverse team to develop multiple scenarios (What if the U.S. imposes tariffs on Canada and Mexico? What if thousands of undocumented workers are deported? What if trade agreements are renegotiated?). For each, assess the risks, identify the opportunities, and develop contingency plans.

It's really important to get a wide variety of perspectives. Remember how the problem with forecasting was that it assumed one future state that looked a lot like the present? Just as scenario planning invites a range of possibilities, your scenario planning process team also needs to go wide, encompassing a diversity of input from a range of stakeholders.

### 2. NAME THE TRIGGER

Now that you've begun to explore some potential scenarios and framed up plans in response, you need to determine when you'll know when to act on them.

What are the real-world indications it's time to exercise a particular option? For instance, it might be the passing of a particular piece of legislation, a threshold in the labour market, or a change in your primary markets.

Naming the trigger in advance gives your organization clarity about when it's time to act.

### 3. DEFINE SUCCESS

Just as you've articulated the triggers that would indicate a particular scenario is underway and have activated the plan associated with it, you also want to define the signs that your plan is working.

What indicators—both qualitative and quantitative—would demonstrate a successful response to the scenario? Be sure to attach timelines to the indicators.



# IMPROVISATION

## YES, AND... THE VALUE OF IMPROVISATION

Scenario planning requires an intentionally flexible, open and creative stance to uncertainty. That same approach is required when it comes to getting the work done.

In their aforementioned *HBR* piece about how leaders can respond to highly changeable environments, Suarez and Montes explore the value of improvisation, which they define as spontaneous, creative efforts to address an opportunity or a problem. Leaders who create conditions for more improvised responses are more successful overall. In times of extreme uncertainty, that fluency with shifting to approaches that aren't "business as usual" becomes essential.

"In fact, we believe that the ease with which teams refashion how specific tasks get done—whatever the level of turbulence—is the defining capability of a resilient organization," they write.

Well, buckle up because we are in for what looks like a bumpy—or at least unpredictable—ride. But, as the authors remind us, "organizations aren't helpless." The more comfortable you become with uncertainty and changeability, the more resilient and responsible your organization will be as you navigate this whitewater.

## OPEN LINES OF COMMUNICATION

Communication is essential for any plan's success, and the imperative to keep people informed and engaged only increases alongside uncertainty and the likelihood of change.

In my work with clients, I tell them that they almost cannot communicate enough. Too often, though, they'll host a single town hall or presentation or send an email and consider the message sent. Nope!

However often (and how much) they think they need to share, triple it! That means ongoing and open communication across the organization. Sometimes, I see a tendency to keep information in a tight inner circle. But when it comes to responding to change, it will be an all-hands effort. The sooner and deeper your communication, the more engaged your team will be when it's time to act.

As scenario planning demonstrates, there's a power to being proactive, open and flexible. It naturally follows that communications around the planning should share these traits.



# GET IN TOUCH

To discuss these ideas further or explore:

- Scenario planning support
- Just Lead! program
- Strategy partnership

feel free to reach out anytime, or click [here](#).

## ABOUT WHITEWATER INTERNATIONAL CONSULTING, INC.

WhiteWater Consulting helps our clients create great organizations where their people can perform their best daily. We are creative, flexible, and persistent in helping our clients establish and execute their strategies. Led by executive coach, speaker, trainer, and consultant Sean Ryan, WhiteWater International Consulting specializes in leadership development, change management, talent management, succession planning, and strategy and scenario planning.

Need help with your scenario planning? Let's chat:

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