Envisioning a Future State: Using Strategic Foresight to Imagine Tennis in 2025

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(including questions)
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Sport is an integral part of our social fabric, and as such, the administration of sport, through National Sporting Organizations (NSO) needs to be representative of and accountable to the public. NSOs are increasingly required to account for operational efficiency, participation increases, and financial outcomes. Many NSOs develop strategic plans for 4-5 years planning cycles, mirroring the four-year Olympic cycle and common business practices. However, the timeframe may be inadequate to understand larger forces acting outside the boundaries of their operations yet have considerable impact on an organization’s operations. Conversely, long-term planning horizons (10, 15, 20 years) are difficult to conceptualize and are incongruent with the internal planning mechanisms, however, may offer better opportunities to achieve a “vision” stated in NSOs mandates.

The presentation will illustrate the use of a strategic foresight methodology to examine emerging conditions and reframe a strategic planning process within a Canadian NSO. Strategic foresight is an approach to planning which gathers unrelated, referential, and varied data, identifying emergent conditions leading to possible futures, and implicating the results on an organization’s current operations. Strategic foresight is both a philosophy and a methodology which ultimately purports to result in more flexible, robust, and resilient strategic outcomes for organizations (Cuhls, 2003, p. 108). Such outcomes test present strategic objective to identify limitations, and alterations to limit adverse effects, and explore opportunities (sLab, 2012). To illustrate the approach, Curry & Hodgson’s (2008, p. 2) Three Horizons is used to demonstrate how past, present, and future conditions can be modelled as interconnected horizons, interacting and influencing one another: legacy conditions (first horizon), a preferred future state (third horizon), and a turbulent current state (second horizon), where legacy conditions still exert authority and processes designed to achieve “the future state” overlap. A case study involving Tennis Canada demonstrates an application of the Three Horizons model, examining the past, present conditions, and a preferred future vision for tennis in Canada. The case study examines the current business operations employed by Tennis Canada, the second horizon, identifying programs, processes, and behaviours within the organization that may lead to realization of their mission and vision.

Identification of the business operations is critical to understanding how broader-scale themes and “driving forces of change” may affect operational outcomes (Schwartz, 1996, p. 101). The case study serves to ground the understanding of the broader context horizon scan (Sutherland & Woodroof, 2009, p. 525) as the tensions and dynamics within the organization indicate where possible uncertainty lies. A horizon scan is used to determine “weak signals” indicating change, which when grouped together establish trends (Schwartz, 1996, p. 60). Trends and the underlying “drivers of change” are the main descriptors whereby strategic directions can be reshaped and reconstructed, understanding the impacts and implications of how these forces act on current operations (Schwartz, 1996, p. 101). However, simply identifying trends and drivers is insufficient to understanding the complexity of possible future events. The trends and drivers must be projected forward into possible futures states, whereby, the impacts and implications of these conditions can be examined in context of current business practices (Ralston & Wilson, 2006, p. 171). Understanding the implications from the process inform future-facing policy and planning processes. To illustrate how this may be used within an organizational context, common business planning tools (practiced by Tennis Canada) are used within the process. However, the context is not of present day, but conditions modelled for 10-15 years from present day. To establish the context, a short narrative is used to situate how the trends and drivers may implicate the conditions 10-15 years from present day. The implications serve as a base to model additional analysis for the organization using existing in-house practices.

The presentation will demonstrate the use of strategic foresight in long-term planning, whereby, existing strategic plans can be evaluated, and impacts and implications used to reshape strategic objectives (Cuhls, 2003, p. 103). As a methodology, strategic foresight has been championed Voros (2003) as an approach, which employs environmental
scanning, semi-structured interviews, creative narration, and participatory design. This methodology seeks to engage participants, facilitate emergence, and solicit reaction and interaction, in order to understand how proposed future conditions affect present day organizational operations. Foresight supplements prevailing planning by broadening scope and breadth of the inquiry, examining emerging events, and shaping a more comprehensive systems approach influencing organizational behaviour (Cuhls, 2003, p. 96).

In sum, strategic foresight provides a methodological framework to investigate uncertainty and changing conditions. Organizations are exposed broader socio-cultural, economic, and political themes, in turn, expanding considerations for operational procedures. By broadening the view, emergent conditions can be applied to existing strategy to question assumptions and trouble policy. The design generates models, which examine potential impacts of future uncertainty, whereby, implications to an organization can produce meaning understanding of the shortcomings within their current strategic planning. The approach provokes reactions, probes understanding, and scrutinizes assumptions in order to identify strategic “blind-spots”. The process provides a mechanism to examine possible futures and determine the reactions of current operations. In turn, the results of examining strategic objectives can help guide policy and decision-making to ensure that negative results limit an organization’s ability to achieve its mission and vision. Ultimately, strategic foresight provides a framework to ask “what if”, to understand the affects emerging conditions may have on current business practices, and plan for a more positive outcome in the future.

References


