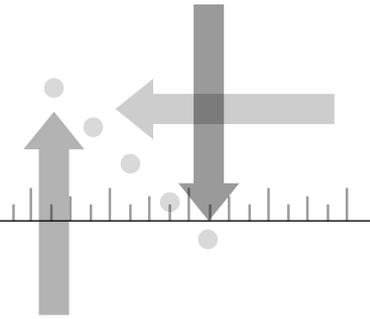

SCENARIOS



Purpose

The purpose of scenarios is to provide contextual explorations of the potential strengths and weaknesses of different combinations of performance-improvement interventions. Scenarios are most useful in situations where the number of possible directions is large or where there is a large degree of uncertainty.

Needs Assessment Applications

The best decisions are typically made when you can compare and contrast the potential benefits and the potential risks of each decision. The same is true in needs assessment, especially when it is time to recommend what to do next according to your needs assessment findings.

Use scenarios during this stage of your needs assessment to provide examples of different combinations of performance-improvement activities. For instance, scenario A could be a mentoring program paired with some training and a job aid, whereas scenario B could be a management performance feedback tool paired with training, new work policies, and a new rewards structure. By comparing both the benefits and the risks of alternative scenarios, you have a foundation for recommendations about the appropriate balance of risk and reward for your program or organization.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Advantages

- Scenarios allow decisions to be made by examining multiple alternatives rather than single solutions.
- Instead of simply reviewing options as discrete alternatives, scenarios can provide contexts for making decisions. Scenarios are especially valuable when you are dealing with a complex situation in the context of the needs assessment.
- Decision makers often value scenarios for their ability to provide a visual illustration of different alternatives within the organization's context.
- Multiple scenarios can also be used to contrast positive and pessimistic views, thus providing a balanced perspective.

Disadvantages

- Developing realistic scenarios can be time-consuming, and there is no guarantee of what results will actually be yielded as the situation in the scenario is implemented.
- Scenarios can (but should not) limit decision makers to examine only the combinations of activities or solutions included in the presented scenarios.

Process Overview

1. Complete the identification of needs (gaps in results) and the associated analysis of causal factors.
2. Identify sets of potential activities or solutions that will assist in accomplishing desired results while also addressing the potential causes of problems with the current performance.
3. For each set of potential activities, create a scenario based on the results your program or organization could realistically expect to accomplish and the risks associated with the implementation of each set (including economic, time, and opportunity costs). Each scenario should use the same concrete time frame (for example, 1 year, 18 months, 3 years) and should apply similar constraints that could affect implementation.

4. In each scenario, describe the factors that are internal and external to the organization and that are likely to increase or decrease the successful achievement of desired results. Here are some ideas to consider when developing the substance of a scenario:
 - a. Build uncertainties and unexpected events into each scenario.
 - b. Use information on trends and on the character of the organization to write each scenario.
 - c. Write each scenario so that it seems plausible. Choose names used in the scenario carefully; they can communicate a great deal to the reader.
 - d. It is generally a good idea to make each scenario about one page long.
 - e. Give each scenario a short and meaningful title.
5. Develop two or three scenarios for each of the sets of potential activities (or solutions) that meet the requirements dictated by the performance pyramid tool (see page 236) by Wedman (2010). Scenarios can be written from several perspectives (for example, yours, the agency management's, a community member's). Therefore, it is important that you describe each scenario from a similar perspective (thus ensuring that you are comparing "apples to apples").
6. After a solid draft of each scenario has been developed, validate the scenarios with experts and others who are familiar with the situation. Make any changes recommended by the scenario reviewers before sharing the scenarios with decision makers.
7. Schedule time with the groups or individuals who will be making decisions about which activities to implement.
8. Provide at least two or three scenarios to the groups or individuals selected for participation. Often, it is helpful to provide varying perspectives in different scenarios, including both positive and pessimistic views. If your scenarios are longer than a page or two, provide the scenarios to the decision makers before the meeting.
9. Discuss each scenario with the participants, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses exhibited in the context described in each. (Scenarios are best estimates of how the interventions would be implemented and how the results would be accomplished; thus, decision makers must

take into account that later implementation may or may not mirror the scenario's description).

10. Ask group members to rank each scenario and to provide alternative combinations of the activities that could be used for a second round of scenarios (if desired).
11. After you have finished administering the scenarios, you may be asked to write a report discussing the results. If so, it is generally a good idea to include summaries of the scenarios, as well as an overview of how scenarios were shared with participants. Keep your report short, highlighting key data without overburdening the readers with too much detail. Include observations and conclusions, and provide some suggestions for next steps.

Tips for Success

- Create multiple scenarios, with each scenario having a unique balance of risk and benefits that are based on multiple perspectives within the organization.
- Don't paint too rosy a picture within each scenario. The scenarios should be realistic and should show no preference for one set of activities or solutions over another.
- Inform decision makers that they don't have to select a scenario but that other combinations can also be developed, depending on the balance of rewards and risks that the organization is looking for in the program or project.

References and Resources

- Watkins, Ryan. 2007. *Performance by Design: The Systematic Selection, Design, and Development of Performance Technologies That Produce Useful Results*. Amherst, MA: HRD Press, and Silver Spring, MD: International Society for Performance Improvement.
- Wedman, John F. 2010. "Performance Pyramid Model." In *Handbook of Improving Performance in the Workplace*. Vol. 2: *Selecting and Implementing Performance Interventions*, edited by Ryan Watkins and Doug Leigh, 51–80. San Francisco: Wiley/Pfeiffer, and Silver Spring, MD: International Society for Performance Improvement.

Witkin, Belle Ruth, and James W. Altschuld. 1995. *Planning and Conducting Needs Assessments: A Practical Guide*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Websites

Examples of scenarios (from Arizona State University) are available at <http://cals.arizona.edu/futures/sce/scemain.html>.

Scenarios: An explorer's guide is available at http://www-static.shell.com/static/aboutshell/downloads/our_strategy/shell_global_scenarios/scenario_explorersguide.pdf. (This document from the Shell Corporation is written for people who want to build scenarios and for those who want to help develop scenario-thinking skills.)

Scenarios Toolkit developed for The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training is available at http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/6009_en.pdf.