

Scenario Planning

Planning for the Unexpected

What is Scenario Planning

Scenario planning is a management tool for planning for future events by understanding the nature and impact of uncertain and unexpected on the organisation.

It is a group process that encourages the exchange of ideas and potential scenarios to be identified and subsequently planned for.

How does it contribute to Public Relations

Public Relations focuses on communicating the key messages of an organisation in a positive and productive way. Unexpected events or potential disasters can lead to negative press stories and affect public opinion of your organisation and destroy in a short time any positive relationships you may have built up over the longer term.

By undertaking the process of scenario planning, you can identify these disasters waiting to happen and plan how to deal with them – both in terms of managing them and in terms of how you will deal with the potentially negative press that will accompany the event happening.

Once identified, there may be opportunities to address these concerns through the day-to-day communications activity, or there may be the opportunity to forward plan a response to keep in place should such an unlikely but significant event occur, to avoid time wasting and minimise damage to the profile and reputation of the organisation.

This means that press releases can be prepared to cover scenarios such as wet weather plans for outside events, notification of changes to programme, cancellation of events and other issues that may arise in the planning process. It is also a good idea to have an 'emergency' list of contacts – such as key radio and even TV stations as well as local journalists. A timely response can sometimes be critical.

Undertaking a Scenario Planning Exercise

Scenario planning works best with a group of people, as do most 'brainstorming' type of activities. Consider any and all of the possible situations that could arise as part of your project or that can affect your organisation. These don't have to be negative things although they usually are.

Next, assess the likelihood of them happening and the anticipated impact on the project and the organisation.

The next step is to decide where each scenario fits within each section of the matrix (shown below) , together with classifying whether each scenario would have a **major and negative impact**, a **potentially negative impact** , a **neutral impact**, or a **potentially positive impact**. It's a good idea to identify these in different colours.

Once all of the scenario's have been identified the group can then consider the ways in which the organisation could influence or reduce the likelihood or impact if such scenarios occurred. A good way to classify these is if the scenario needed communications and public relations activity to influence the outcome, an ability to respond if the situation arose or whether the organisation could prepare/predict and therefore make effective plans to address the scenario.

The result of the exercise is to give the organisation a clear indication of what might happen, the impact of it and how to then plan effectively if it should occur.

10 Steps for Scenario Planning

1. Don't be afraid to say something - if you can imagine something it just might happen!
2. Include the best and worst case scenarios – it doesn't always have to be a negative situation that needs planning for
3. Break down scenarios into those that you have some control over and those you do not
4. Consider the projected probability of a scenario. Is it likely to happen, unlikely to happen or does it fall in between? Will it partially happen?
5. Try to rank the impact of each scenario if it happens. Will it have a great impact, minimal impact or something in between?
6. Do not try to get too specific but do try to make your projections as realistic as possible. We are looking at the future and with the future there is inevitable uncertainty
7. Identify those scenarios that may be an opportunity or a threat. For example, another organisation develops the same work strand – opportunity could be collaboration, threat could be loss of funding to them
8. Try to focus on the scenarios that are out of the ordinary. Scenarios that are 'predictable' should be a part of your business process.
9. Pay more attention to those scenarios that have a higher probability of occurring.
10. Emphasize those scenarios that can be planned for with little or no money. Anticipation often can reduce a negative impact and take greater advantage of an opportunity.

Scenario Planning Matrix

High Impact/Low Likelihood	High Impact/High Likelihood
Low Impact/Low Likelihood	Low Impact/High Likelihood