



SCENARIOS

PURPOSE

Use scenarios 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 and/or when there is a large degree of uncertainty.

NEEDS ASSESSMENT APPLICATIONS

The best decisions are typically made when there are options to compare and contrast both potential benefits and risks of each decision. The same is true in needs assessment, especially when it is time to make recommendations on what to do next, based on your needs assessment findings. You can use scenarios during this stage of your needs assessment to provide examples of how different combinations of performance interventions (for instance, Scenario “A” could be a mentoring program paired with some training and a job aids, while Scenario “B” is a management performance feedback tool that is paired with training, new work processes, and a new rewards structure). By comparing both the benefits and risks of alternative scenarios you can then base your recommendations on the appropriate balance of risk and reward for your program or organization.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

ADVANTAGES

- Scenarios allow decisions to be made through the examination of multiple alternatives rather than single solutions.
- Instead of reviewing options as discrete alternatives, scenarios can provide contexts for making decisions. This is especially valuable when 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 context of the organization.

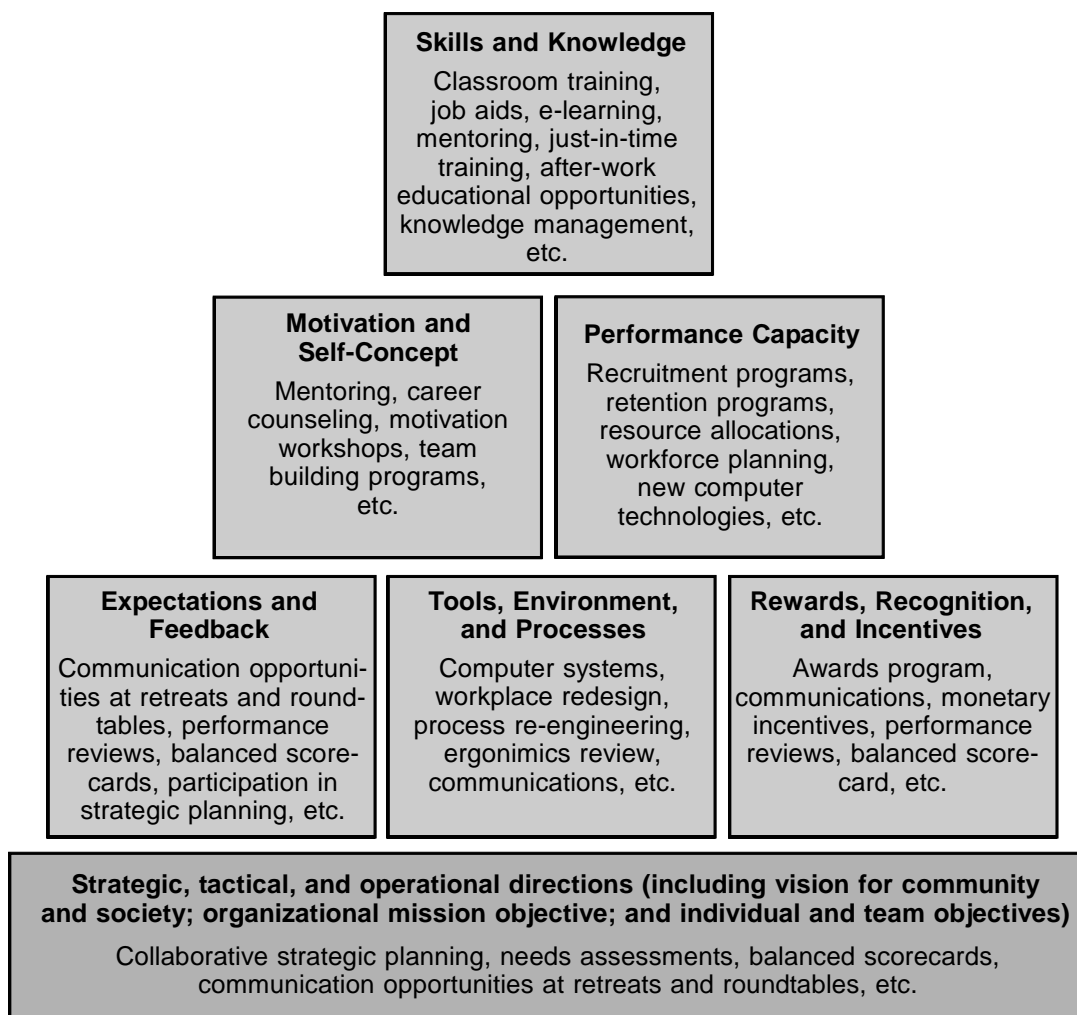
DISADVANTAGES

- Developing realistic scenarios can be time consuming and there is no guarantee of what results will actually be yielded if the situation in the scenario is actually implemented.
- Scenarios can (but should not) limit decision makers to examining only the combinations of performance interventions included in the presented scenarios.

GENERAL PROCEDURES

1. Complete your needs assessment and causal analysis.
2. Using the performance pyramid (see Figure 1 below) as a guide, identify sets of potential performance interventions that will assist in accomplishing desired results while also addressing the potential causes of problems with current performance.

Figure 1: Performance Pyramid with Alternative Performance Improvement Interventions (from Watkins, 2007)



3. For each set of potential performance interventions, create a scenario based around the results your program or organization could realistically expect to accomplish and the risk that are associated with the implementation of each set (including economic, time, and opportunity costs). Each scenario should use the same concrete time frame (e.g., 1 year, 18 months, 3 years) and apply similar constraints that could impact implementation.
4. In each scenario, describe the factors internal and external to the organization 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:
 - Build uncertainties and wild cards (unexpected events) into each scenario.
 - Use information on trends and on the character of the organization to write each scenario.
 - Write each scenario so that it seems plausible. Choose names used in the scenario carefully; they can communicate a great deal to the reader.
 - It is generally a good idea to make each scenario about one page in length.
 - Give each scenario a short and meaningful title.
5. Develop two or three scenarios for each of the sets of potential performance interventions that meets the requirements dictated by the performance pyramid. Scenarios can be written from several perspectives (e.g., yours, senior management's, WBI's as an organization) therefore it is important that you describe each scenario from a similar perspective (this ensures that you are comparing "apples to apples").
6. Once 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 performance interventions to implement.
8. Provide at least two to three scenarios to the groups or individuals selected for participation. If your scenarios are longer than a page or two, you should provide them to the decision makers prior to the meeting.
9. Discuss each scenario with the participants, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses exhibited in the context described in each scenario that you have created. (Scenarios are best estimates of how the interventions would be implemented and the results that 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 performance interventions that could be used for a second round of scenarios (if desired).
11. Once done with administering the scenarios, you may be asked to write up a report discussing results. If so, it is generally a good idea to include summaries of the scenarios in the report, as well as an overview of how scenarios were shared with participants. Keep your report short, highlighting key data without

overburdening the report with too much detail. Include observations and conclusions in the report, and provide some suggestions for “next steps”.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

- Create multiple scenarios, with each scenario having a unique balance of risk and benefits based on multiple perspectives within the organization.
- Don't paint too "rosy" of a picture within each scenario. The scenarios should be realistic and show no preferences for one set of performance interventions over another.
- Inform decision makers that they don't have to select a scenario, but that other combinations can be 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, R. (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.

Witkin, B.R., & Altschuld, J.W. (1995). *Planning and Conducting Needs Assessments: A Practical Guide*. Sage Publications, Inc.

WEB SITES

Vision 2010 Scenarios:

<http://www.si.umich.edu/V2010/scenproc.html>

This is a web site for generating scenarios for the future of higher education; however the steps for scenario-building that they identify are generic and helpful.

Examples of Scenarios (from Arizona State University):

<http://cals.arizona.edu/futures/sce/scemain.html>

Scenarios: An explorer's guide:

http://www.shell.com/static/aboutshell-en/downloads/our_strategy/shell_global_scenarios/scenario_explorersguide.pdf

This document from Shell corporation is written for people who want to build scenarios, and also to help develop scenario thinking skills.