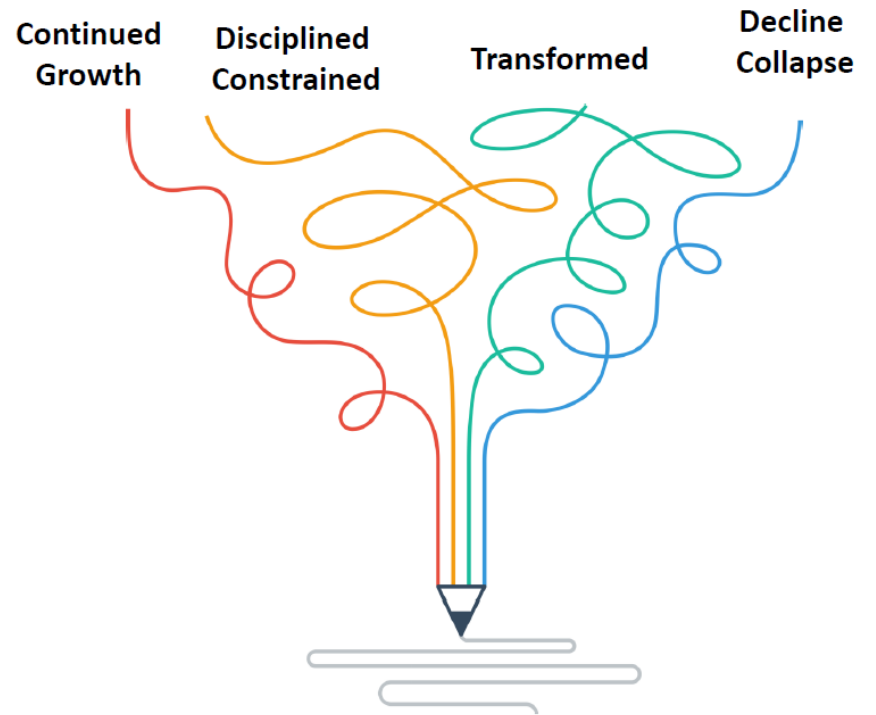


# Four Futures



## Activity: Stories of Our *Four Futures*

It is important for organizations to be able to imagine and communicate a range of plausible futures – including their own transformation or demise.

This document provides an overview of Four Futures thinking and tips on how to structure this process as a team activity.

As a product, the Four Futures output may be structured as traditional multi-paragraph stories about the future. Some teams may find it easier to use bullet points to convey storyline elements. Others may wish to use visualizations to convey story messages.

There is flexibility in running this activity.

### Single Session

Your team may wish to dedicate a two hour session to draft out all four futures in one setting. The advantage of a single session is the ability to generate outputs from a focused conversation.

### Multi-week Activity

Your team may also find more value in separating scenario drafting sessions over a period of a few weeks. This provides more time to reflect on the stark differences across the four futures.

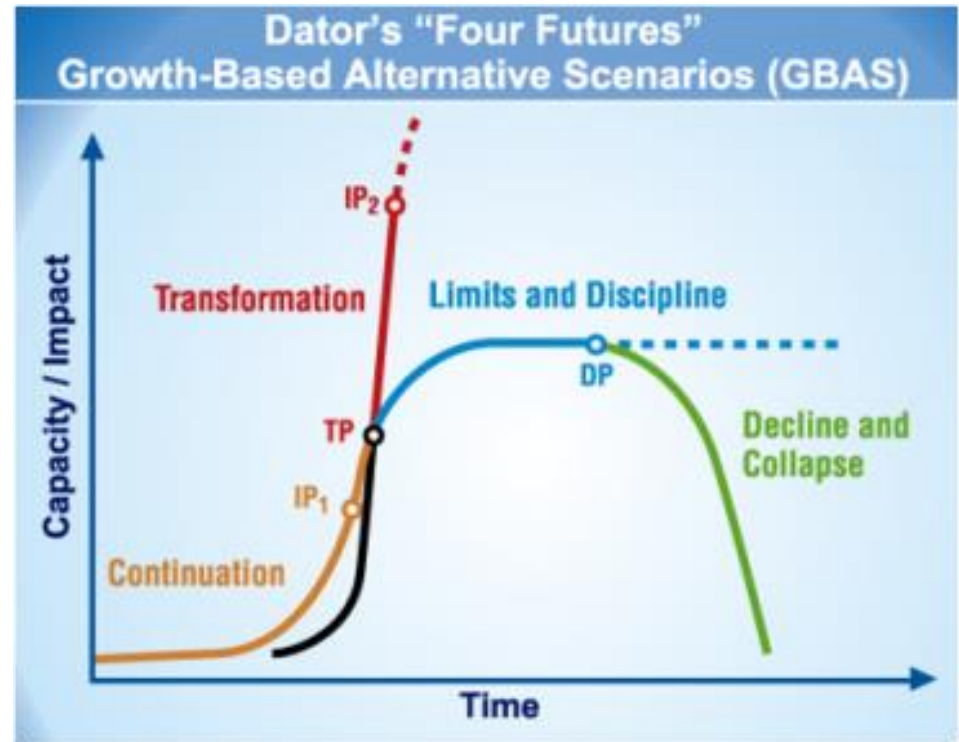
# Four Futures

Four Futures refers to a set of scenario archetypes:

- Continued Growth (Continuation)
- Disciplined/Constrained (Limits)
- Transformed (Transformation)
- Decline Collapse

The original model was developed and popularized by Professor Jim Dator at the University of Hawaii-Monoa Futures Studies program.

While the framework has been used for years in the foresight community it was most recently codified in the Journal of Futures Studies November 2009.



# Examples of Four Futures Thinking

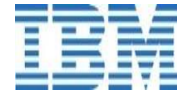


**Continued  
Growth**



**Disciplined  
Constrained**

Coal is not going away anytime soon but for Peabody their most likely future is constrained by stronger regulations, shrinking market access, and low cost natural gas and renewables.



**Transformed**

IBM has transformed itself from hardware to software to an 'as-a-service' business.

U.S. Intelligence Agencies have transformed themselves post-Cold War and post-9/11.



**Decline  
Collapse**

In 2008 CEOs scoffed: "What do Apple and Google know about the phone business?" "Our mobile operating systems dominate the marketplace."

## Four Futures Thinking: Continued Growth (Continuation)

Continuation is story based on signals that reflect *known knowns* and extrapolation of generally positive forces. This scenario may be viewed as the 'baseline' (extrapolation) or 'official future' which reflect the shared (often unspoken) assumptions of an organization.



When you create the Continuation story it should include

- Familiar stakeholders and partnerships
- Services & value offerings, and customer needs
- How you overcame new twists & turns along the way

The story should include challenges of new social norms and market dynamics but inevitably reveal how your organization leverages its core capabilities and 'rides the wave' of change.

## Four Futures Thinking: Disciplined/Constrained

Disciplined/Constrained is a story of the future where your organization continues to operate in a traditional manner despite evidence that the world around you has shifted. Key organizational challenges are maintaining relevance and returning to growth.



When you create the Disciplined/Constrained story be sure to reveal:

- Signals that suggest your current services and value offerings are less relevant or aligned to market and client needs.
  - Signals that challenge organizational culture or processes.
- The story's tone is not fatalistic but morale and expectations for growth are muted. You will survive but not thrive.

The story might surface how the organization's inability or refusal to change has hit a 'limits to growth' phase. The story's tone is not fatalistic but morale and expectations for growth are muted. You will survive but not thrive.

# Four Futures Thinking: Transformed



Transformed is a scenario archetype where the world and organization have gone through an era-step change. Think caterpillar to butterfly – or Industrial to Information Economy.

The story should reveal how the organization became something different. This may be the emergence of a new department or team. Or it might be a wholesale reinvention of the entire organization culture or value proposition.

The story tone is not utopian. There should be new problems and challenges that appear as expected – or as unintended consequences. Leave some issues unresolved.

The key story dynamic should show how the organization is empowered and feels in control of its future in this new world.

## Four Futures Thinking: Decline/Collapse

Decline/Collapse is a scenario archetype where the world has changed and your company has not.

The Collapse Story connects signals that suggest:

- Your imminent demise (e.g. Shut down firm; Merger)
- An End of Growth (A Burning Platform)
- Stagnation is challenging your culture

When you create the Decline/Collapse story be sure to describe both external conditions (outside-in changes) and internal actions (inside-out changes).

You might also emphasize inactions or decisions not made. The story may describe innovative efforts that failed and did not succeed as you attempted to transform the organization.

 **BlackBerry**



**NOKIA**



# Tips for Writing Storylines

## Experiment with Story Structures

- Multi-paragraph stories
- Bullet points of storyline elements
- Visualizations that communicate the message

## STEEP Forces of Change

Each scenario should include elements of the STEEP categories of change:

- Society (Demographics / Culture)
- Technology
- Economy
- Environment
- Politics (Legal)

## Three Mechanisms of Change

Your scenarios should include:

### 1) Trends

Slow moving changes over time;  
Language should be 'more' or 'less'

### 2) Events

Sources of discontinuity including:

#### Scheduled Events

e.g. Leadership Changes; Elections; New Service

#### Plausible Events

e.g. Policy Reform; Regulatory Shifts

#### Wildcard Events

Low Probability, High Impact Events

e.g. Global Pandemic; Scientific Discovery

### 3) Choices

Reflect our investments in people, partnerships and places.

# Assessing Four Futures – Key Questions

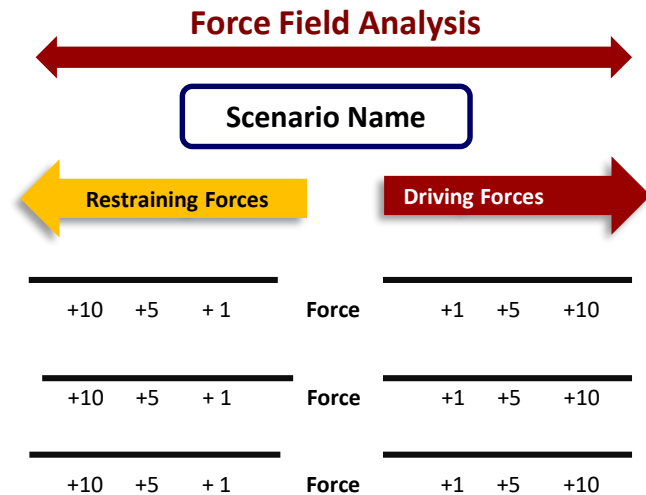
When the Four Futures are written, you should engage colleagues in answering strategic questions:

- What signals or trends have you seen that might support the future described in each scenario?
- What are the internal implications for our partners and teams?  
What might our clients do differently to thrive in this future?
- Where might the story go from here? Write a few extensions from this future.
- What indicators or milestones might we monitor that represent a tipping point of this future?

# Assessing Four Futures – Force Field Analysis

Tools such as *Force Field Analysis* ask you to rate “push-pull” forces that might be holding the organization back within a particular scenario.

‘Forces’ are extracted from the story. They might be: Rise of Automation, Shifting Client Expectations, New Service Models, New Policies, et al.



## Steps

### 1. Review the Scenario / Issue

Have your team review the scenario – discussing the new set of assumptions you are being asked to embrace.

### 2. Describe the Forces

Have your team write out the forces of change. Place one force on each line.

### 3. Rate it / Weight it!

Next, have each person provide a quantitative value to each force that reflects the strength of the force. Forces of change that have strong stakeholder influence, policy support or favorable factors receive the highest weight.

Option 1 – Weight each with a number (e.g. 1-10; 1 being weakest; 10 being strongest)

### 4. Re-arrange

On a new template average out the Rate/Weight factors then put the forces of change that have the most influence at top; weakest at the bottom. When your Force-field analysis chart is complete you will have a sense from your team how to identify challenges and opportunities.

### 5. Address Challenges & Opportunities

The next step is to discuss strategic ways of confronting negative forces (obstacles to change) holding you back; and ways to reinforce positive momentum pushing you towards the scenario.

# Force Field (Push vs Pull) Analysis

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Scenario Name

Restraining Forces (Pulling You Away)

Driving Forces (Pushing Toward Scenario)

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- 10	- 5	- 1	Force	+1	+5	+10
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- 10	- 5	- 1	Force	+1	+5	+10
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- 10	- 5	- 1	Force	+1	+5	+10
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