

To: Everett Kaplan  
From: Charles Cole, III  
Re: Strategic Plan for Aspira

---

## Strategic Assessment

Aspira as an organization has faced many changes lately. From expanding regions of service to closing down key locations, transitions have begun to take its toll on both staff morality and performance. Aspira is currently operating at a satisfactory level now, but is it sustainable? Is Aspira well equipped for the ever-changing market of social services? What direction should the organization go in if there are scientific breakthroughs in autism? Through scenario thinking, these and other questions will be answered. Scenario thinking would equip the organization with the appropriate tools to thrive despite the future because there will be a plan for each scenario.

This assessment will accomplish four tasks:

- to extensively define scenario thinking
- to discuss how scenario thinking and planning applies to Aspira
- to find and discuss the gaps associated with scenario thinking, as well as filling those gaps
- to trace scenario thinking back to its original school of thought

The Global Business Network (GBN) defines scenario thinking as:

*“... a combination of formal and informal learning that requires the powers of judgment and intuition to analyze shifts in the environment and produce new perspectives, insights and catalysts for actions. Ultimately, the point of scenario thinking is not to write stories of the future. Rather it is to arrive at a deeper understanding of the world in which your organization operates, and to use that understanding to inform your strategy and improve your ability to make better decisions today and in the future.*

*-Diana Scarce, Katherine Fulton, GBN*

As stated above, scenario thinking allows organizations to look at the 360-degree view of the environment not only of the organization, but surrounding it. Scenario thinking is being used more and more by organizations. It allows organizations to manage the unforeseen while cultivating a new form of thinking. It is a way that allows organizations to manage issues that may arise that they are uncertain about (GBN, 2).

There is a process to which scenario thinking operates and that process is guided by 3 principles: (1) Long View, (2) Outside-In Thinking, and (3) Multiple Perspectives.

The long view principle dictates that an organization look past the demands of the short term. GBN points out that most non-profits are driven by their short-term goals, be it getting food to a village or serving the needs of homeless children. There tends to be a

sense of urgency amongst non-profit organizations (GBN 10). The long view principle challenges those organizations to change their thinking. An example of short-term thinking can be found in Aspira. Aspira plans only for fixing the current situation but not for any future situations that may be a result of the quick fix. For example, if there is a hiring shortage, then the standards for hiring tend to drop and the organization may suffer from inadequate staff.

Outside-in thinking in organizations requires management to step outside of their familiarity with the organization's operations. It requires that the organization to think about external factors that may eventually affect the organization (GBN, 12). An example of outside-in thinking in the Aspira case can be if Aspira kept a keen eye on autism insurance. There has been talk in the media lately about parents getting insurance for autistic diagnosis in their children. This would have a tremendous effect on the way in which programs like Aspira get funded and may lead to a change in practice. Through this avenue of scenario thinking, the organization could be prepared.

According to GBN, multiple perspectives is not managing multiple stakeholders, it is much different (14). Multiple perspectives is defined as “[the introduction] of diverse voices that will shed new light on your strategic challenges” (GBN, 14). Multiple perspectives allows for the fresh ideas to exchange between the organization and other entities that bring something different to the planning table. The fact that the some of the other voices in the room are not of your organization's culture allows everyone to hear a point of view that they themselves may not have been aware of. The modes of thinking can be very different from organization to organization.

One of Aspira's issues is that the majority of decisions come from higher management that may not even work in the district to which their decisions are practiced. Not only would it benefit them to have a district representative attend major meetings, but to have parties that may not even be associated with the agency present. That would allow for the meeting to yield a more diverse range of ideas.

GBN outlines that scenario thinking can be applied to four categories: (1) setting strategic direction, (2) catalyzing bold action, (3) accelerating collaborative learning, and (4) alignment and visioning. These categories are broad and sometimes overlap (GBN, 15). Below is a brief definition of each category.

- Scenario thinking allows an organization to set its strategic direction by getting management to look at the long-term as it relates to the short-term.
- Catalyzing bold action- Scenario thinking allows you to “challenge the status quo” while allowing the organization to take charge of its destiny by working collaboratively and getting on track.
- Collaborative Learning- Scenario thinking can help organizations engage members in learning from one another by bringing commonalities and differences to the forefront for productive discussion and planning (GBN, 16).
- Alignment and Visioning- To bring together diverse stakeholders and establish a workable vision for the future.

In order for scenario thinking to be successful for the organization, the organization must first be open to challenging assumptions and to hearing different

perspectives. The organization must then be willing to make the changes that proved feasible with a sense of commitment and urgency. The leader of the group must understand the process and facilitate it appropriately. Finally, the organization must be willing to commit the necessary money and time that may be required for the change to take place (GBN, 19).

In the next section, we will discuss the process as it relates to Aspira. The five-step process is outlined as orient, explore, synthesize, act, monitor.

---

## ASPIRA & the SCENARIO THINKING PROCESS

As discussed in the Prospectus, Aspira is facing a turning point in the organization. The organization wants to grow by following a model that does not apply to this case. The staff layout is different as are the resources available. The main ideas flow from one main source that seems to be out of touch with the district and resources are being worn too thin. The organization has a new progressive thinking manager on board that is open to rational change. Below is the five-step process for scenario thinking for Aspira:

### PHASE ONE: ORIENT

This goal is designed to put the general issues on the table. This sets the foundation for the next four stages of the process. By identifying what the issues are the group can then focus on challenging them head on. It is important to set up a firm time line. In Aspira's case, it would be to look 5 years into the future. Key stakeholders and other participants are to be identified at this time so they may be interviewed. The

interview seeks to find out what they want the organization to look like 5 years from now. Aside from setting the main focus of planning, the interviews will be broad so that the creativity of others involved can flow freely (GBN, 24-27).

## PHASE TWO: EXPLORE

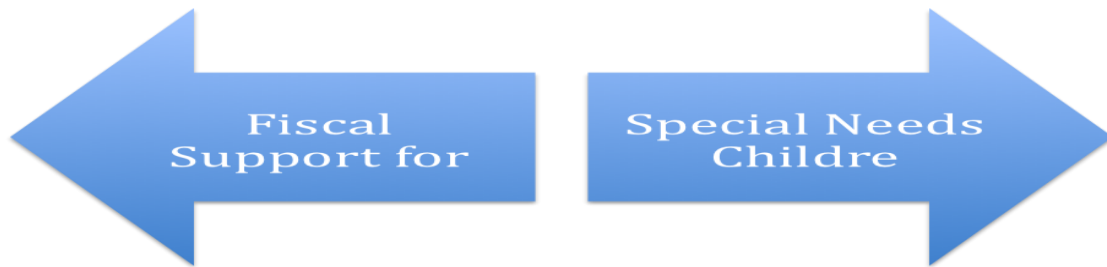
This phase calls for the organization to explore the driving forces that directly affect the defined issue(s) (GBN, 27). This process will allow Aspira to go past the initial everyday issues that the organization may face and think on a bigger scale. This allows the team to discuss those unexpected impacts that may significantly affect the organization in the future. For Aspira, some of those things may be the government's role in dealing with autism and funding for special needs. This is where it is especially important for an outsider to partake because they will be able to give perspective to some very uncertain circumstances. Aspira may benefit from inviting a parent of a special needs child to the team as well as a government employee.

## PHASE THREE: SYNTHESIZE

This stage forces the team to prioritize the expansive list of driving forces. The Aspira team would now prioritize the driving forces by the degree of importance to the defined focus issue and the degree of uncertainty surrounding the issue (GBN, 27). In Aspira's case, it may be the amount of fiscal support special needs programs will receive from autistic insurance. Another example may be social perception of autism and new hosts of competition for Aspira. These are situations that are very important to Aspira's

ultimate mission of servicing the special needs community and both examples carry a high degree of uncertainty.

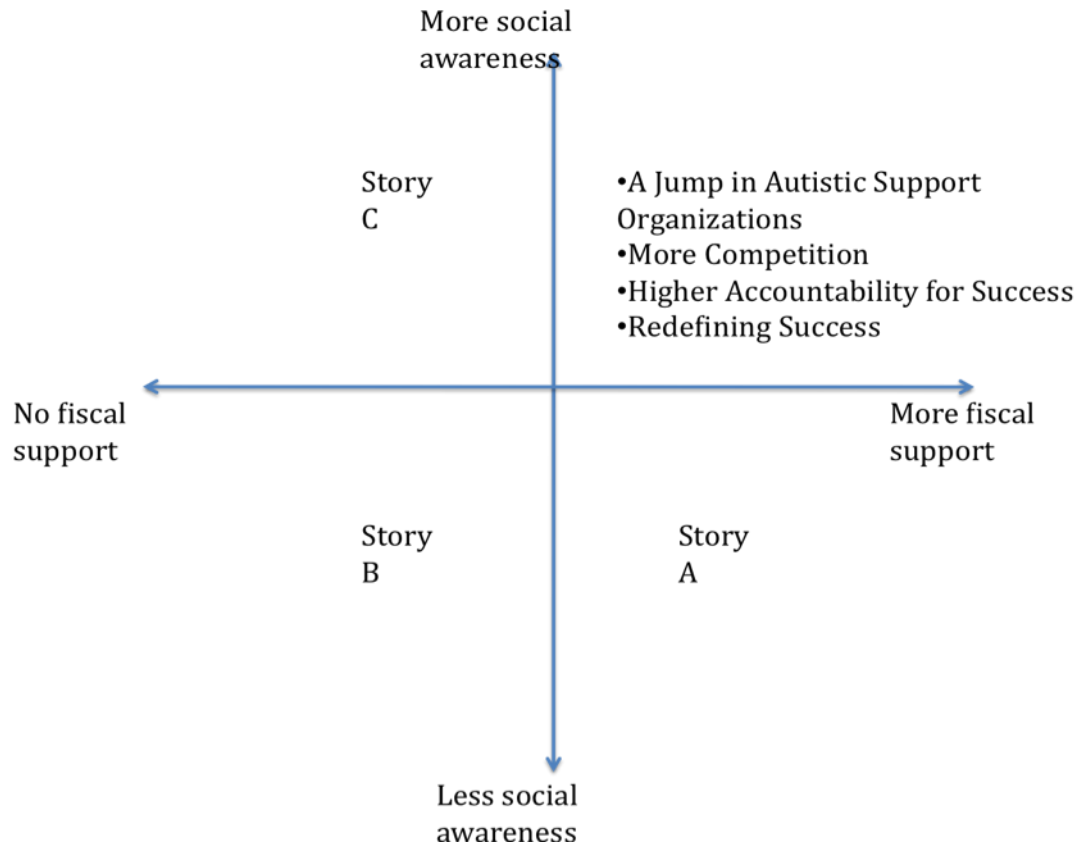
The next task would be to place the two driving forces on an axis:



Then combine both axes to make a matrix:



Now the Aspira team would derive stories to fit into the matrix of each scenario (GBN, 27-30). Below is an example of what the matrix may look like early in the process.



#### PHASE FOUR: ACT

This is the phase that Henry Mintzberg would describe as emergent. This is where the Aspira team would then place themselves in each quadrant story. Ideas would emerge as ways to be successful in that future. Aspira would need to assess how different each story is and plan for success in all of them or, to determine which future(s) would totally kill the organizations. One of the emergent stories may be that funding and social support soar for autistic children and families and new competition arrives in

waves. The Aspira team would then need to derive a plan that would allow them to not only survive the new market but also thrive.

#### PHASE FIVE: MONITOR

In this phase, the Aspira team would then need to create a system that would allow them to monitor if their projected futures are coming true. Indicators would be any autistic legislation passing, or new autism specialty groups beginning to form. Each new piece of information the team receives needs to be noted and the plan needs to be updated for the change. For example, if legislation passes that requires families to receive autism insurance; the team needs to find out if the fee for providing services to families change in any way. Are other organizations forming and what services do they provide that Aspira does not?

---

#### POTENTIAL GAPS AND GAP FILLERS

GBN points out that there are certain circumstances that may not work with scenario thinking. In Aspira's case, one problem may be that leadership wants to maintain the status quo. There needs to be a leader that can facilitate the plan to upper management and it seems that the new manager is more than capable. Larry Spears would describe her as a Servant-Leader. Spears classifies a servant leader as owning ten character traits: (1) being a listener, (2) being empathetic, (3) being a healer, (4) owning keen awareness, (5) possessing the power of persuasion, (6) the ability to conceptualize, (7) foresight, (8) good steward over resources, (9) a commitment to growth, and finally

(10) the ability to build community (Spears). The leader that introduces strategic thinking must carry all of the traits

The new manager owns all of those qualities and those traits would allow her to pitch the idea to upper management. She is proven in the field and has facilitated her own level of growth in her title before. She would be able to facilitate the emergent environment that is required to make strategic thinking a success at Aspira. Henry Mintzberg explained the importance of emergent ideas in his 1985 paper titled *Of Strategy, Deliberate and Emergent*, Mintzberg argues that deliberate means “of intention” and emergent means “convergent behaviors, absence of intentions”. However, in this case it could be argued that both factors can occur at the same time. Scenario thinking must be both deliberate and emergent and there must be a leader that can articulate that how that dichotomy can and must work. In order for strategic thinking to be successful the team has to be deliberate in their attempts to form great emergent ideas. There must be an ownership and passion over the team in order to be successful and the Servant-Leader can deliver that. According to Mintzberg, if Aspira can execute strategic thinking, it will then evolve into a Learning Environment (Mintzberg & Lampel, 23).

## Bibliography

- Mintzberg, Henry (1987). The Strategy Concept I: Five Ps for Strategy, *California Management Review*, 30(1):11-21. (BSP)
- Mintzberg, Henry and Lampel, Joseph (1999). Reflecting on the Strategy Process, *Sloan Management Review*, 40(3):21-29. (BSP)
- Mintzberg, Henry and Waters, James A. (1985). Of Strategies, Deliberate and Emergent, *Strategic Management Journal*, 6(3):257-272. (JSTOR)
- Scarce, Diana and Fulton, Katherine (2004). What if? The Art of Scenario Thinking for Nonprofits, Global Business Network, pages 1-60. (GBN.com)  
<http://www.gbn.com/ArticleDisplayServlet.srv?aid=32655>
-