

FLAWLESS PLANNING

— The Art and Science of Planning Anything —

2nd Edition

JACK RICCHIUTO

— Author of —

*Ready & Able: An unpretentious guide to being
prepared for whatever comes our way*

Flawless Planning

The art & science of planning anything

Jack Ricchiuto



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Flawless Planning

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Invitation

After decades of guiding people in simple and complex planning, what's obvious is that the quality of our planning model shapes the quality of our planning results.

Until people learn new planning models, they might hope old models give them new results—which is functionally impossible.

It might seem reasonable to expect that people plan well because their planning situations are relatively predictable. Actually, people who plan well get good results even when their future seems relatively unpredictable. It depends on their model.

The groundbreaking, open source Flawless Planning model evolved over the past 30 years from unique synergies of Neuroscience, Scenario Planning, Neurolinguistic Programming, and Action Learning.

This book outlines an easy-to-learn model that applies to any context, scope, and scale of planning. It makes us smarter, faster, and better in our planning.

In this 2nd edition, I simplify the model so it is easier to learn and apply. I also include several application articles published since the 1st edition.

As with any skill, reading and watching videos about it for years doesn't replace the value of a few hours of learning by doing, practice, and mastery in a variety of use contexts. Our minds learn new abilities through doing - not reading and watching.

On every level, we need good planning more than ever. When I see people struggle in their lives—at work, or in local, national, or global contexts—the first thing I get interested in is their planning model. It's the same when I see people flourishing in these contexts.

Every time I read about something delightful or dreadful happening I immediately wonder how planning made these possible.

When people work from a good model, planning works. When they don't work from a good model, planning doesn't work. Good planning models inspire our best aspirations, engage our best talents, and leave the world better than we found it.

Presenting a good model for planning anything is what I had in mind when I had my muses join me for this book. It is an understatement to say I am delighted to share it.

Jack Ricchiuto
March 2024

Going Flawless

The primacy of the future

To be human is to imagine the future.

Our sense of the future shapes the character of our present. When you want to understand someone's present experience ask them about their future. Their imagined future is an exquisite aperture through which we can enter their present.

The future we have is the future we imagine. Moments of having a delightful future are moments of imagining a delightful future. Moments of having a dreadful future are moments of imagining a dreadful future.

Imagining the future is an ability our minds develop during toddlerhood as they develop the ability to remember. Our nascent minds learn how to compose an imagined future simply in the magic of rearranging memories. The future we imagine is the future we compose.

Our potential for imagining is unlimited because our mind is neuroplastic, meaning there are no permanent structures in our mind. We can rewire it at any time.

Every time we learn something new, this learning rewires our mind with new capabilities. We are always imagining the future because our mind is hardwired to run millions of simulations each second to compose our sense of the future and experience in the present.

If we say a plan is what we imagine seeing, hearing, assuming, wondering, feeling, and doing in any future situation, we always have a plan. We are always imagining seeing, hearing, assuming, wondering, feeling, and doing something a future situation. A plan is how we learn what does and doesn't work in future situations.



A detailed timeline of activities is a plan. Winging it is a plan. Hoping and worrying is a plan. Waiting for something to happen is a plan. We always have a plan. Knowing we always have a plan gives us a sense of choice in any situation.

For any future situation, we can plan for the best, worst, or any of the infinite possibilities in between. We can remember countless times in our lives when we imagined favorable and unfavorable situations. We could imagine ones that seemed quite likely and others that seemed quite unlikely.

This means we can plan for favorable and unfavorable situations. It doesn't matter whether we think what we imagine is "realistic" or not. The future is largely unpredictable even though we could assume otherwise. We can't even accurately predict our next dozen thoughts or texts.

How we plan is quite significant because how we imagine the future immediately shapes what we think, feel, and do in the present. It has an immediate impact on our physiological, psychological, emotional, and social experience.

The future is not something that happens to us the way the weather happens to us. It is what we compose in each moment of our lives. No one else can compose the future we have at any moment any more than we can compose the future anyone else has at any moment.

Imagining has this extraordinary power. Knowing this removes the mystery of why people feel and do what they do in their lives and world. Imagination is why we see anyone doing the most delightful and dreadful things. It is why we see people living the most flourishing and floundering lives.

This has been true for each of the more than 100 billion people who have lived on this planet so far. It will likely continue. It's not too late to let our children and grandchildren in on the secret.

Flawless planning

Whatever kind of planning we do, it can be flawless or flawed.

The prime planning flaw is working from assumptions. Assumptions are guesses, speculations, and opinions. They have the appearance of certainties but they are actually uncertainties. As confident as we can feel in our planning assumptions, they are things we really don't yet know.

The risk potential for things going wrong in planning increases when we work from assumptions. If we want to see for ourselves, all we have to do is try cutting blindfolded a bunch of fresh vegetables.

In flawless planning, we work from questions instead of assumptions. We cut with curiosity—eyes open. The risks of things going wrong dramatically diminish—probably to around zero.

Planning is flawless because we work from zero assumptions. We only work with questions. That's why it works every time whether we're planning something favorable or unfavorable, simple or complex, on our own or with others.

A flawless plan is simply a dynamic timeline of what questions we will answer, when, and how.

Imagine planning your life flawlessly. Imagine flawlessly planning any part of it, any project, endeavor, or adventure. Imagine flawlessly planning any typical time, crisis, or transition.

We can flawlessly do startup, strategic, operational, marketing, budget, program, or change planning. We can flawlessly do planning with any kind and scale of challenges, problems, or opportunities.

What's important here is that when we see things in our life or world working well or not working well, it is a direct reflection on whether our planning is more flawed or flawless. Things don't go well with flawed and go well with flawless. It's not rocket science or brain surgery—except when it is.

Doug is just finding his feet in the chaos of inheriting his father's business which he managed to avoid for years. Nancy just found out her husband has been told he has at best six months to live. Dan finally finds the path toward his passion.

A struggling neighborhood finally wants to solve its own problems instead of waiting for public leaders to

do so. After several successful careers, Meg has decided to join her husband in retirement. The leadership team of a faith community wrestles with the puzzle of an uncertain future.

At her volunteer job, Amy finds out she has a weekend to place 5 refugee families. Tim and Anna just found out their daughter wants to be their son. Melissa just took over a leadership team in a startup that's at a tense crossroads.

Grace's daughter has been in and out of rehab treatment centers and has become more withdrawn with time. Tom is on his daily run, pondering the new \$500 million development project he is leading. Shawna's side hustle has become her life's work.

If we talked with any of these people about their situation, some might say they definitely have a plan, some might say they sort of have a plan, and others might say they really don't have a plan.

Given the choice between flawed or flawless planning, each would readily agree they would prefer flawless planning.

It's all about our planning model

Each of us has our own portfolio of planning stories.

We have stories of being in situations where we had no idea what planning could mean because there was so much uncertainty. We have had times of plans going awry, falling short, or somehow, unintentionally making things worse.

We can recall situations when our plans worked out. Whether they went exactly as we predicted or wanted, we improvised and experimented our way into pleasing or even delightful results and experiences. We might have times when we built and adjusted a flexible timeline of activities that produced favorable results.

Whether planning is easier or harder depends on one factor: our planning model. This is true when we're planning on our own, with others, and when supporting others in their planning.

Our model is how we go about planning. Flawed planning is one model. Flawless planning is a distinctly different model and because it's different, it is a

different planning experience that gives us different planning results.

With a good planning model, we can plan days and years, dinner parties and progress on wicked problems, reimagining new products and services, business start-ups and rapid growth spurts, births and deaths, healings and adventures, life transitions and turnarounds, solutions to old problems and new problems, surviving crises and realizing our dreams.

When we want planning to be easier and better, we just need a model that is designed to make this possible. This is because everything works the way it's designed to work, including how we plan any situation that matters to us.

The art and science of flawless planning

In some of the more dramatic and humble moments in science, wonderful discoveries unfold and enfold from the dynamic interplay between imagination and experimentation. This is true in basic and applied research in any domain and context. Interestingly, art

shares the same magical intersections of imagination and experimentation.

When we sit in conversations with accomplished artists and scientists, we learn that art and science share the same essence: solving problems through new questions. The essential difference between scientists and artists and people who believe they don't have a scientific or artistic bone in their bodies is their questions.

A single scientific breakthrough or celebrated work of art in any domain is the result of dozens or thousands of solved problems. Solutions are possible as we imagine and try new things—iteration by iteration—learning our way into the discovery of new solutions, one question at a time.

The art and science of flawless planning is planning based on the unlimited power of imagination and experimentation.

Being an art and science, flawless planning can be learned and mastered. We can practice it in easy and

hard scenarios, on our own and with others, in the best of times and the worst of times.

It can transform how we plan in our organizations and communities. We are not destined to do flawed planning in any context or at any scale any more than we are destined to continue having our parents do our thinking for us beyond a certain age.

It's one thing to dream of a life and world we want to see for ourselves, those we care about, and future generations. It's another thing to flawlessly plan our way into that future. We now know how it can be possible—for anyone, anywhere, anytime.

Flawless and flawed planning

The difference between flawless and flawed planning is emphasis.

In flawless planning, we base what we feel and do on wondering. Wondering is the curiosity of questions. Questions are simple, wonder-full acknowledgments of

life's constant of uncertainty. In flawed planning, we base what we feel and do on our assumptions.

The point of flawless planning is feeling and doing our best in any situation. We are our best when we have a variety of possibilities. Possibilities are ideas, questions, and opportunities. When we are our best, the possibilities are many. When we are other than our best, the possibilities are few.

While working from assuming in flawed planning limits our possibilities, working from wondering in flawless planning expands our possibilities, making it easier to be our best in any scenario.

Planning is flawless when it operates from zero assumptions. Assumptions are a constant because our early-developing minds learn how to imagine.

Engaging our imaginations in visualization is core to flawless planning. It's just that we don't treat them as walls of assumptions, but rather as windows of wonderings expressed in the curiosity of new questions.

We have two kinds of assumptions in planning: content assumptions and context assumptions. Content assumptions are predictions about the nature of our situation. Context assumptions are predictions about our planning process.

Content assumptions are predictions and expectations about the situation we're planning. They include assuming something is or isn't available, something can or cannot be done, something will move quickly or slowly, and some consequences will or won't happen.

It's assuming certain estimates are accurate or inaccurate, available data is reliable or unreliable, solutions are viable or unviable, problem diagnoses are valid or invalid, and understanding of a situation is complete or incomplete. Context assumptions are endless in possibilities.

The end we have in mind is the best or only possible destination. The solutions we have to the problems we're solving for are the best or only possible solutions. The activities and events we have planned are the ones that will move us forward. The things we

expect to change and not change will change and will not change.

The questions that occur to us first or next are the right questions at the right time. What we do know is more important than what we don't know. What we don't have is more important than what we do have. Who we know is more important than who we don't know. Signs of plan failure are evidence of a bad plan, someone's incompetence, or unfortunate circumstances.

We can predict the consequences of our planned activities and events. The more detailed our plan, the more valid and reliable it is. Our first ideas and questions are probably our best. More and better data leads to more and better ideas.

People with more experience or formal intelligence are more likely to come up with the right ideas or questions. People do their best thinking when they feel free to speak up. Because history is destiny, if you want to know someone's future, understand their past.

Anything that appears impossible is very likely to be impossible. Complex problems are larger-scale simple

problems that lack sufficient scale of resources. The more challenging a solution, the longer it will take.

Leaders and majority voices know things that followers and minority voices do not. If something worked in the past or somewhere else, it will probably work here now. A failure to prove a hypothesis is a failed experiment. Unsuccessful people fail more than successful people. Improvisation is a sign of plan failure.

Failing to follow a plan means we have a lack of planning or discipline. The point of planning is to replace uncertainty with certainty. Doubts, criticisms, or resistance in reaction to a plan indicate there is something wrong with the plan.

It's not that these assumptions are intrinsically bad or wrong, it's just that they limit our options more than wondering does.

In flawless planning, we can assume whatever we want. If we run short of assumptions, there's a good chance we know people who would gladly lend us some of theirs. These are the people who seem to have no shortage of opinions—about anything and everything.

Assumptions can be wonderful catalysts for the questions of wondering. The more the better. Turning assuming into wondering unfolds a vast space of options for us to be our best. New options come from new questions rather than from old assumptions.

We are always one new question closer to a more wonderful life.

The flawed planning norm

For many of us, flawed planning feels normal. We encounter a situation and do whatever makes sense to do, given whatever we happen to be assuming at the time.

A planning flaw is acting on what we're assuming rather than what we're wondering. This flaw has nothing to do with cooking up a plan we fail to follow or failing to follow a plan we've cooked up. The planning flaw is being assumption-based in our planning.

In flawed planning, we might want to be our best in a situation but working from assumptions makes this less

possible because doing so limits our new options of ideas, questions, and opportunities.

When we don't accomplish what we want from a flawed plan, it isn't evidence that there is something wrong with us, the situation, or others. It is not evidence that falling short was "meant to be."

There are no accidents in planning, whether flawed or flawless. Being our best or other than our best is entirely about how we go about planning. When we change the model, we change the results.

Struggling in planning has nothing to do with the story that there is something wrong with us. There is nothing wrong with us. We have all the inner resources we need to do flawless planning whenever we want. If we're doing flawed planning, it's likely because we haven't yet learned how to do flawless planning.

Once we learn how to do flawless planning, we are no longer limited to flawed planning as our norm. Our lives are never the same again.

A complementary model

Flawless planning can be used to plan anything of any character and scale. Any parts of the model can also be used to complement any other planning model.

We don't have to decide if we want to use a specific planning model or the flawless planning model outlined here. The model here features elements that can be incorporated into any planning model.

We can select scenarios and plan them using any approach we want. We can start or focus planning with scenario composing. We can generate and answer new, actionable questions at any point along the way of any planning process. If "plan implementation" requires its own plan, we can work from questions from beginning to end.

Whatever model we use for solving problems, tackling challenges, or making decisions, we can make the process flawless.

We now have planning models for every occasion. There are models for how to plan our life, our finances,

health and well-being, careers, projects, adventures, businesses, scenarios, strategies, and change efforts.

Most of these models feature some kind of future states and pathways to achieve these. They might also involve some kinds of research, assessments, inventories, diagnostics, and analyses.

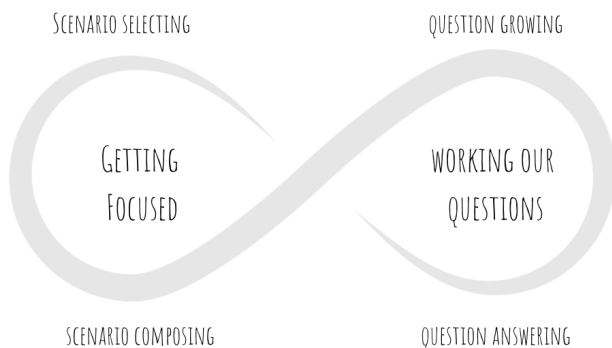
However they are structured, they can be flawed or flawless in part or entirely. We can make any question-based from beginning to end. All it takes is turning any assumptions and ambiguities into new, actionable questions.

Because uncertainties are a given in any kind of planning—without exception—we can make any planning model flawless.

The Tao of Flawless Planning

How it works

FLAWLESS PLANNING



Tao is the way of things. The Tao of flawless planning centers on two dimensions: getting focused and working our questions.

Getting focused involves scenario selecting and composing. In scenario selecting, we decide which scenarios we will plan. In scenario composing, we define what it would mean to be our best in any scenarios we choose to plan.

Working our questions involves growing and answering our planning questions. In growing our questions, we translate planning uncertainties into questions. In answering our questions, we engage in actions that result in discovering what's possible.

The two dimensions involve four questions:

In getting focused:

- Scenario selecting: *What scenarios will we plan?*
- Scenario composing: *What could be our best in each?*

In working our questions:

- Question growing: *What questions do we have?*
- Question answering: *What questions will we answer, how, and when?*

Our plan is a timeline outlining what questions we will answer, how, and when. The process is easily and quickly learned because we already have all the prerequisite skills. All the model does is organize them in new ways. When we want to be our best in any planning scenario, it works every time.

Flawless planning makes sense when:

- We're intrigued with the notion that uncertainty could be a prime planning asset rather than a source of risk
- We would like a planning model that you can apply to any planning context—from simple to complex
- We want to quickly get and keep people aligned on the same page—whether two, dozens, or hundreds
- We want an easy-to-learn, low-risk, high-reward planning model

It's fascinating that just shifting our planning model from flawed to flawless could make such a profound difference.

As the graphic implies, getting focused and working our questions form an iterative spiral, where the way we get focused shapes the way we work our questions, and the way we work our questions shapes the way we get focused.

A prime advantage in flawless planning is that we already have the requisite abilities. These are the abilities of imagining, wondering, remembering,

organizing, discovering, and sense-making. Learning the model means learning how to engage these at the right time in the process

The process is structured by iterations of translations. We translate uncertainties into questions, questions into actions, and actions into results.

It's a question-based model that can be used to shape or complement any planning experience. It can turn any kind of flawed planning model into a flawless planning process.

Scenario Selecting

The principle

In flawless planning, we plan scenarios. Scenarios are different versions of planning situations. We can imagine situations going different ways. Each different way is a different scenario.

In an anticipated conversation, we can imagine a favorable scenario that goes as we would like it to, a scenario we would look forward to.

We can also imagine an unfavorable scenario that goes other than as we would like it to, a scenario we would not look forward to. We could even imagine different variations of our favorable or unfavorable scenarios. Each is its own distinct scenario.

A scenario is not a prediction. It's not a version of a situation we're assuming will happen. It's a possibility we want to plan because we think it's better to have a plan for it than to not have a plan.

The way we imagine a challenge or opportunity going is one scenario. The way we imagine any part of our life going is one scenario. Each goal we set or plan we make is one scenario.

The value of composing different scenarios for any given situation is that doing so reveals more new possibilities, making being our best more accessible.

If we enjoy annual gardening, one scenario could be doing the same garden as last year. Another scenario could be doing a different garden. Having a personal garden is one scenario; sharing a garden is another scenario.

As soon as we know we can imagine different scenarios, we are instantly no longer limited to the single scenario we refer to as “our plan.” We can plan different scenarios.

When we’re in a conversation where someone presents their “plan” for some situation, we can remain clear that it’s just one scenario. We waste no time and create zero tension trying to argue or debate about the predictive feasibility of the plan.

This is what we do in flawed planning—getting stuck and compromising trust in the futility of dueling predictive assumptions. The only thing this accomplishes is reducing our potential for being smarter together. It literally lowers our collective IQ because it limits our field of options.

A plan for the coming day or week is one scenario. A plan for a project we're in the thick of is one scenario. A plan for handling a rough life patch ahead is one scenario. A plan for enjoying our life just a wee bit or way more is one scenario.

Composing multiple scenarios is possible when we think of scenarios living on a matrix of four quadrants made from two intersecting scenario continuums. One continuum goes from likely to unlikely. The other goes from favorable to unfavorable.

Likely and unlikely are feasibility best guesses. Favorable scenarios are those we want to happen. Unfavorable scenarios are those we don't want to happen.

The four quadrants then are favorable-likely scenarios, favorable-unlikely scenarios, unfavorable-likely scenarios, and unfavorable-unlikely scenarios. We can take any situation and compose scenarios in any or all of these quadrants.

Once we consider what scenarios we could plan, we decide on which we will plan. We can decide to plan

one first, deciding if and which next to plan as or after we see how the first plan goes.

We can decide to concurrently plan two or more scenarios. And we can decide to sequence the timing of multiple scenarios to plan.

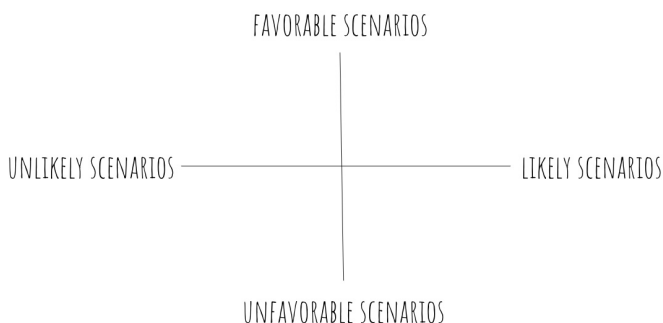
Because uncertainty is a planning constant, we are always free to change our minds. Our planning results will tell us what to select and when.

As we move along planning one scenario, another actual or potential scenario could unpredictably emerge. We could decide to start planning this as well, pivot from the scenario we're planning to this emergent scenario, or postpone planning it for some determined or undetermined time in the future.

We don't have to plan every scenario we can imagine. We could decide not to plan or postpone planning scenarios we consider fairly unlikely. We could postpone planning an unlikely scenario in favor of instead doing research to get clearer on its potential probability.

In any case, which scenarios we do and don't plan is always entirely up to us—and we can change our mind at any time.

The practice



We begin by building a scenario landscape map. This is a map of possible future scenarios we expect could happen in our lives, work, or world.

Scenarios can have the character of opportunities and challenges. Challenges are things we want less of. They can be dilemmas, conflicts, challenges, puzzles, or crises. Opportunities are things we want more of. They can be new possibilities, aspirations, or dreams.

In the situation we're planning for, we identify any potential future scenarios and locate each within one of the four quadrants. We can rely on best guesses. We can also take time to do research to develop potentially better best guesses.

Because change and continuities are the nature of reality, we refresh our map on a regular basis. While some scenarios will stay in their quadrants, others will shift within and between quadrants.

We can start by seeing if any scenarios are obvious choices for planning. We don't have to overthink whether we should plan them. It just makes sense to select them.

It might also be obvious which one's we're not going to—at least for now—invest time and resources in planning. We only have so much planning capacity. If and when our capacity changes, we could consider planning other scenarios.

For others that seem less clear options, we could use a simple rubric to select. The rubric is a set of three questions we would apply to each considered option.

1. What could be the benefits of planning this scenario?
2. What could happen if we didn't plan this scenario?
3. How willing are we to invest time and resources in planning this scenario?

When considering possible consequences of planning and not planning a scenario, we can think about near-term and long-term possible implications.

The stories

A struggling neighborhood finally wants to solve its own problems instead of waiting for public leaders to do so.

Their problems always felt personal because the grass seemed greener in the neighboring neighborhoods. Other envied neighborhoods seemed to have the good fortune of good local leaders, businesses, and social safety nets. Even the police would spend more time in the "better" neighborhoods.

In every neighborhood and town, there are always hidden gems, people who have a relentless entrepreneurial spirit. It was no different here, where in a community meeting, Eileen and a few of her co-conspirator community leaders asked people if they were tired of waiting for someone to "save" the community.

In response to a sufficient groundswell of agreements, Eileen and her friends walked those interested through the scenario landscape map. Even though it was initially easier for people to name likely unfavorable and unlikely favorable scenarios, they were able to build a fairly balanced map of possible scenarios to plan.

With the question *Who wants to work on putting a plan together for any of these?* a handful of people signed up for some of the more promising unfavorable and favorable scenarios. They did this despite others objecting with calls for studies, consultants, and a community vote. These humble, grassroots beginnings would launch a whole new era for this soon to become a more flourishing community.

After several successful careers, Meg has decided to join her husband in retirement.

Meg's husband Andy has been happily retired for a while, enjoying what he calls his favorite "G's": grandchildren, gardening, and golf. He's been gently tugging at Meg's heartstrings to join him. It was a minor victory for him to get her to take vacations.

Even though she was a consummate planner at work, little of this followed her home. Her lifelong free spirit that she kept under wraps at work could breathe freely at home.

Andy was clear on the first step in getting her into a planning mode. On a quiet Saturday afternoon, he drew out the four quadrants and asked Meg if she would like to join him in playing with composing some scenarios for them, going out as far as she wanted. She agreed to go along, surprising him with the suggestion to go out 10 years.

"There is only one rule," Andy said, "Anyone can locate the same scenario along different points on the likelihood continuum because we can only guess if

something could be more or less likely." One by one, they took turns naming favorable and unfavorable possible scenarios along the likelihood continuum.

It didn't take long for them to build a busy map of options together. Then Andy surprised Meg with the question: *Do you want to create a plan for any of these?* He and Meg easily named a few they both wanted to do planning for. From that day forward, their planning conversations took on an easier tone and tempo.

The leadership team of a faith community wrestles with the puzzle of an uncertain future.

This is not the first or last faith community to lose its beloved senior leader. With a dwindling membership and mounting expenses, the compounded grief became almost too much to bear.

That was, until two members of the leadership team, Maggie and Geoffrey, decided to host a gathering and invited people to name the future scenarios they wanted to plan for. They quickly named unfavorable likely scenarios. After some of the resident optimists

spoke up, some favorable likely and unlikely scenarios emerged.

As soon as Maggie and Geoffrey reminded the group that no one has to prove or defend the likelihood of any imagined scenarios because this is not about prediction, the group was able to come up with more possible scenarios.

This was eye-opening because many people were convinced that the community was irreparably divided in how they imagined the future—mostly between the hard-core optimists and the hard-core pessimists.

In the end, they were able to agree on the scenarios they most wanted to have a plan for. It was quite a relief to see the community come together. Best of all, as they shifted from being at effect to being at cause, people grew less anxious about being saved by a hero leader.

Scenario Composing

The principle

When we understand that the future we have is the future we imagine, we become the composer of our future. It is not something that happens to us. It is something that happens by us. More than our stories of the past and present circumstances, how we compose our future shapes our ability to be our best in any scenario.

We can compose any scenario any way we want. We can imagine different versions and variations and create plans for whatever makes sense.

In flawless planning, we're planning to be our best in any scenario—favorable, unfavorable, likely, or unlikely. This means feeling and doing our best—feeling and doing what we would want to in any given scenario.

Visualizing our best gives us access to our unlimited inner resources which gives us unlimited planning possibilities.

Being our best is the opposite of being stuck or overwhelmed. It reduces and prevents being stuck or overwhelmed.

Being stuck, overwhelmed, or our best in any scenario is not the result of the character of the scenario. It is the result of whether we're visualizing being our best or other than our best.

What's important to get here is that only we can limit ourselves and our possibilities by imagining being miserable, struggling, or failing in any favorable or unfavorable planning scenario.

The character of our future self is entirely up to how we visualize ourselves in future scenarios. The way we engage in a future scenario is shaped by how we visualize engaging in it. Visualizing has this power.

This is not about magical thinking—assuming things will go the way we imagine they will. Things will go exactly how they go based on the conditions at the time.

All we're doing in flawless planning is visualizing our best in any variety of scenarios.

Our minds are neuroplastic, meaning they have no permanent structures or patterns. We can compose new scenarios we never imagined, experienced, or

heard of before. We can imagine feeling and doing new things in scenarios we've never felt or done before in past scenarios.

If we seem to have a bright future, it's precisely because we're imagining bright scenarios. When it seems like we have a bleak future, it's precisely because we're imagining bleak scenarios.

If we catch ourselves imagining bleak scenarios and shift to spending more time imagining bright scenarios, our sense of the future will become increasingly brighter. This is not accidental, coincidental, or magic. It is how our minds work.

Everything we imagine has an immediate impact on how we experience our world, what we feel, and what we do.

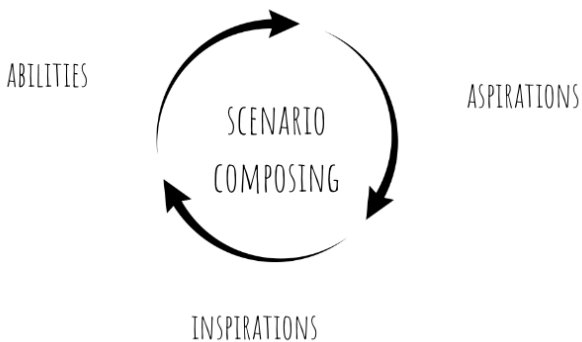
If one scenario feels like the only likely or unlikely scenario, that's because we're imagining only this scenario instead of imagining different alternatives, variations, or versions.

When someone declares they "know exactly" what's going to happen in any future scenario, it's simply evidence they are imagining only one version of one scenario. It doesn't matter that they could go on and on "justifying" their certainty with all kinds of stories, anecdotes, data, and opinions from assumed or actual experts.

The future they have is the future they imagine. They will live an entirely different life from someone else who imagines an entirely different future.

We have no future other than the future we imagine. It's been this way since our toddlerhood and will continue through the rest of our lives.

The practice



Scenario composing involves accessing our unlimited inner resources of aspirations, inspirations, and abilities. It primes our mind to be our best in any situation and scenario.

By accessing these, we compose each favorable and unfavorable scenario we want to plan. We don't have to learn how to access these. We already know how.

Aspirations are what matters to us and why in a specific scenario. When we plan our week or a project, our aspirations are what matters to us in this week or this project. We create a deeper appreciation for what matters to us by also describing why these things matter to us.

Inspirations are what we visualize that we would like to feel and do, given what happens in the scenario. We visualize feeling what we want to feel and doing what we want to do with as many details as we can. We can visualize using our mind's eye, in words, or both.

It's a good idea to visualize the scenario both from the first person-from inside ourselves-and the third person-from outside ourselves.

Abilities are the skills we already have that would make possible what we visualize feeling and doing in a scenario. We decide which skills we have and, as vividly as possible, recall times in our lives when we engaged these skills. The more times we recall, and the more details we use to visualize these times, the better.

In designing a scenario for an upcoming project, we decide what matters during, at the end, and after the project. We visualize exactly what we want to feel and do throughout the project. We do these for each phase of the project.

We decide what abilities we already have to support our aspirations and visualizations. We visualize times in our life when we engaged these specific abilities, and how doing so felt. We notice how and where in our bodies we feel these feelings recalling these times.

We use this process for each scenario we want to plan, for both favorable and unfavorable scenarios. We never need to limit ourselves to spontaneous scenarios. We can compose the future we want to make possible.

The stories

At her volunteer job, Amy finds out she has a weekend to place 5 refugee families.

Fortunately, Amy has been doing this for the past year and has a few people on call to help. They're a quirky yet reliable crew who have also done some projects over the past year or two. She was able to gather them to put a plan together.

Once they described two likely favorable scenarios and one unfavorable scenario, they got busy visualizing the details of each. They described what mattered to them for the weekend and beyond into the next few weeks.

This was useful if they ended up having things they couldn't fit into whatever scenario they went with. They described what they would love to feel and do in each scenario. Different people described different things they wanted to feel and do which became helpful when they went to identify and build their planning questions.

Finally, they described the abilities they had at the table and realized they could invite other people for other abilities.

The whole conversation moved forward smoothly because they didn't have to force an agreement on "one perfect, fool-proof scenario." There would have been no such thing given their unknowns, and all the things that could change in the course of the weekend.

Tim and Anna just found out their daughter wants to be their son.

Early on they knew this about their daughter Sam. Her expressions and preferences all leaned in the direction of what one would traditionally expect from a boy in that stage of development. They simply thought she had Tom-boy inclinations, but over time even Sam's friends were clear what her actual gender identity was.

After a rocky start, they finally settled on three scenarios they wanted to plan. They started with one, talking about what mattered to them. They had more in common than they expected. The tension of the

unknown can cast a pall of wariness that fades away at the speed of built trust.

Then they shared their visualizations of what they would most love to feel and do and then named the abilities they already have that could support these visualizations. It took more than a few iterations to get to composed scenarios they all felt confident in being their respective bests.

It didn't take them long to compose the other two scenarios. What they were ultimately surprised about was that just doing this flawless planning built an atmosphere of mutual trust that took them all the way through the transition. Sam is today closer to her parents than many of his straight friends.

Melissa just took over a leadership team in a startup that's at a tense crossroads.

This small leadership team in a small, bustling startup has worked together enough for tensions to surface. It's a team chosen by the founder because of their discipline expertise, which, as often happens, means "strong personalities."

Melissa decided that before engaging the group in imagining their selected scenarios to plan for, she would go through the model for herself first. She found herself checking in with people as she put together what mattered to her most in these scenarios.

She made sure to visualize what she most wanted to feel and do in multiple versions of favorable and unfavorable scenarios. She was surprised by how vivid they were and the positive emotions and feelings they provoked.

She easily identified her necessary abilities and had no problem recalling times when she engaged these well and with good results.

When it came time to do this with the group, she was prepared to give them examples, which they definitely needed since they were so good at and accustomed to arguing over who was right and who needed to accept being wrong. Melissa ended up being pleased with their flawless planning.

Question-growing

The principle

Flawless planning is question-based planning. Being question-based is precisely what makes the model flawless. In question-based planning, we work from zero assumptions. We turn assumptions into new, actionable questions. Assumptions are prime assets in the growing of questions.

Assumptions have the power to reveal old possibilities. New, actionable questions have the power to reveal new possibilities.

We talk about growing questions because, like ideas, questions are living things—the way seeds and ecosystems are living things. As with living things, we can grow or stifle new, actionable questions.

Growing questions works from the principle that more questions lead to better questions. Discussing, debating, or dismissing questions prevents the growth of questions into better questions.

By design, flawed planning prevents access to new possibilities by preventing the growth of questions. The basis of discussing, debating, and dismissing is being assumption-based in our planning process.

If we are our best in any future scenario, it's because we learn to do our best in it. Learning to do our best in each new scenario is new learning. There is no "permanent best" that applies to all future scenarios.

We can draw from past bests to compose future bests, but each new scenario requires its own best.

If we say assuming is the opposite of wonder, hoping is the opposite of action, and limiting ourselves to what we know is the opposite of discovery, then these are the opposite of learning. They are how we limit our learning, even though our learning capacity is unlimited.

Imagining and being our best is a continuous dialogue between wondering and doing. Wondering is generating questions.

We translate our uncertainties and ambiguities into new, actionable questions. The more uncertainties and ambiguities we have in any scenario, the more questions we will have and easier it becomes to learn our way into being our best. Being our best is all about being question-based.

The practice

One easy way to begin question growing is naming the abundant uncertainties of what's assumed and unclear in our scenarios. We then translate everything into at least one question.

We use the common question frames of who, what, when, where, how, why, which, what if, could we, should we, and what will we. We name any questions as they emerge without filtering. We trust that quantity will naturally lead to quality.

Better questions do not come about by trying to analyze them, discuss them, or debate them. These get in the way of better questions because they drag on velocity and quantity of questions. They don't lead to better questions, much less the right questions.

Translate what's assumed into questions

Assumptions are guesses, speculations, hunches, hypotheses, intuitions, hopes, concerns, and opinions. If we're not quite sure if something is an assumption, it's a good practice to put it on our assumptions list.

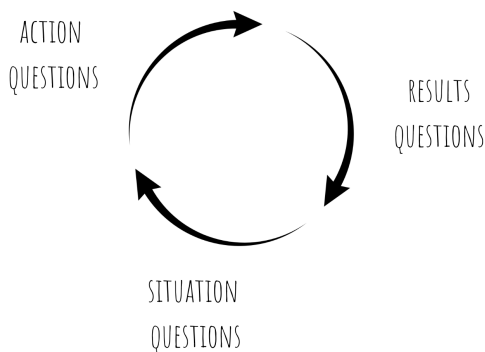
Many assumptions are hidden assumptions. They are predictions and expectations that we aren't even aware are assumptions. Turning our predictions and expectations into questions makes hidden assumptions obvious and assets rather than the sources of planning flaws.

Translate what's unclear into questions

Ambiguities are anything unclear—anything we don't yet know for sure. These include anything that is yet undefined, unconfirmed, untested, and undecided.

In our garden plan, the weather might be an unpredictable. A question could be *Are there kinds of plants that are more weather-hardy for our growing region?* We don't know enough to have assumptions. We just don't know. These are ambiguities.

There are three modes of questions to build in flawless planning: results questions, situation questions, and action questions.



There are two kinds of results questions: potential and actual. Potential results questions are about what we want to see happen; actual results questions are about what we will actually see happen.

If we're planning a vegetable and flower garden, our potential results questions could be questions like *What vegetables could best serve our cooking and eating patterns? Do we want flowers more for decorating the garden, picking for gifts and*

decorations, or both? We can time the answers to these at the beginning of the season.

Our actual results questions could include questions like *How many total pounds of useable tomatoes will we get from harvesting?* and *What will we learn from this year's garden?* We can time the answers to these at the end of the season.

Situation questions are about the scenario itself. They expand our understanding of what's going on in the scenario we're planning. These could be questions like *What condition is the soil in? What are the expected weather and sun conditions like here?*

Action questions are about what we could, should, and will do to grow the garden. These could be questions like *What could and should we research? What will we need to do in each phase through the season?*

Here are more simple ways to grow our field of questions.

Translate parent questions into child questions

Parent questions are general or vague. Child questions are clear. They address the details of who, what, when, where, why, and how—otherwise known as the 5WHs.

Child questions are the sub-questions of parent questions that when answered, help answer our parent questions. When it's not clear how to answer a parent question, it's useful to translate it into its more clear child questions.

Do we need more resources? is an example of a general, vague parent question. Child questions that add more clarity could include *From whom do we need more resources? When do we need more resources? Where do we need more resources? Why do we need more resources? How do we need to get more resources?*

Answering these more detailed questions might help us answer the parent question *Do we need more resources?*

Translate your open-ended questions into closed-ended questions, and closed-ended questions into open-ended questions

Open-ended questions have multiple possible right answers. Closed-ended questions have single right answers. *Where will we go to buy our seeds and starter plants?* is a closed-ended question. An open-ended translation could be *Where could we go locally and online to buy seeds and starter plants?*

What new recipes are available online for what we're growing and harvesting? is an open-ended question. A closed-ended translation could be *What recipes do we already have for what we're growing and harvesting*

Translate each open-ended into at least one closed-ended version, and each closed-ended into at least one open-ended version.

Translate long-term questions into near-term questions and near-term questions into long-term questions

What kind of gardens would we love to have over the next few years? is a longer-range question. We could translate this into a shorter-range question Based on this, *What would we want to learn in this year's garden that could make our future dreamed gardens more possible?*

Translate assumption-based actions into questions

When we're already doing things that are based on assumptions, we can identify what kinds of questions these questions answer. This is question extracting.

If we're planting things where we usually plant them in our garden, we could extract questions like: *Does it make a difference if we plant these plants near these others? or Does it matter what kind of soil or sun these plants get over the course of the season?*

We then move forward deciding how and when to answer these extracted questions.

Remember that more questions lead to better questions and more and better options for ideas, questions, and opportunities in your planning.

However many questions we begin planning with, more will emerge as we plan through to completion. How many questions we need for any plan depends on how simple or complex the scenario. The more complex a scenario, the more questions we will need.

Stories

Doug is just finding his feet in the chaos of inheriting his father's business which he managed to avoid for years.

It's not that his father's business is doing poorly, in fact, it's holding its own. It's just that Doug liked his work as a software developer and never pictured himself at the helm of a company he's only admired from a distance. Now, engulfed in a sense of obligation to his long-time role model, he reluctantly takes over.

Because of his style, "taking over" for Doug means a high-velocity learning curve. He secretly wishes to get the company in shape to hand off or sell, appreciating the trust his father has in him to fulfill this legacy he spent his lifetime building and growing.

With a couple of scenarios selected to plan, Dan starts generating his questions. Naming what's assumed and unclear was easy because his uncertainties far outnumbered his certainties.

He was able to translate these into open and closed ended, short and long term, parent and child questions. He did notice they got better the more he created.

He also noticed which were new, which were old, which were actionable, and which were not. He was surprised by how much comfortable he felt with the whole scenario knowing it was simply a matter of answering new, actionable questions instead of trying to pretend to have faith in his assumptions.

Nancy just found out her husband has been told he has at best six months to live.

Probably the worst of it was figuring out how to tell their children. This would be an entirely new learning curve for her and their father who continues to be quite active in their young, ambitious lives.

She can't help but imagine the stages of grief they will go through before and after his passing. She already dreads feeling along all along the way, even though they have always been close friends and confidants.

In times of unprecedented uncertainty, Nancy fluctuates between being at cause and being at effect.

She began feeling better when we started naming her questions. This gave her a tangible sense of focus and shifted her from feeling helpless to determined to answer her new, actionable questions.

She had questions about support possibilities, her best use of time as a companion and caregiver to her husband. She has questions about what might be on their shared bucket list and even what her life could be like when he's gone.

She was shocked to discover that meeting these questions head on made them less intimidating and depressing. She discovered the grace and magic of questions.

Dan finally finds the path in the direction of his passion.

Dan is the youngest in a family of over-achievers. He's done his fair share of earning degrees and winning medals. Yet, turning 30 has become a dark crossroads.

He feels doomed to maybe never knowing what his life is supposed to be about.

He has spent time looking into more advanced degrees, wondering if his lack of direction is a lack of talent.

He imagines himself trying to stay in school as long as he can get away with it. This is mainly being at effect, hoping someday viable work miraculously appears from the universe. He assumes this miracle is possible and doesn't assume that what he thinks is his passion today will continue to be his passion.

Having been deviled by assumptions and ambiguities—which never helped him gain direction clarity—he was surprised how easily he could turn them into questions. The more he created, the more new and actionable ones appeared. His first several were old and non-actionable.

He ended up with more actionable than non-actionable questions that gave him an immediate and palpable sense of optimism for the first time. The idea that planning is learning began to become clear to

him. And because he was always a great learner, the process resonated with one of his greatest strengths.

Question answering

The principle

In flawless planning, we answer our questions with actions, not assumptions. This is important because we get to new results by working on the right questions at the right time.

Right questions are new and actionable. New means new to us. Actionable means affordable. Affordable means we have the resources to do what we can do to answer them. We can have all kind of “great” questions that we cannot currently afford to answer. If and when we do have the requisite resources, we can then answer them.

Not every question we generate is a right question to answer. We could come up with all kinds of old and non-actionable questions.

This is fine because each of these has the potential to spark better, possibly newer, more actionable questions. This is to say that “wrong” (old, non-actionable) questions can lead to right questions. It’s all about the more than leads to the better.

We don’t try coming up with right questions first. If some emerge early on, that’s perfectly OK. They will emerge if we keep growing the quantities of questions because more leads to different that leads to better.

As in life, timing is everything. We answer the right questions at the right time.

Timing means scheduling when we will answer each of our questions. Scheduling is estimating, meaning we can adjust the timing on any question whenever it makes sense.

In flawless planning, we answer our questions through actions. This means through doing rather than thinking or talking.

We answer questions through doing—not obsessing, discussing, or debating.

There are endless examples of actions we can take to answer our questions in order. Three most basic include finding out, experimenting, and deciding.

Finding out could mean searching or researching something, asking someone something, interviewing or observing someone, or exploring something. Experimenting could include trying something out, testing a sketch or model of something, or running something through simulations.

Deciding can mean choosing between two or more options using whatever knowledge and experience we have available. Decision making is an action that will yield answers to questions.

Each doing will reveal new possible answers and new possible questions. We make possible the future we want to be possible, one question, one action, and one answer at a time.

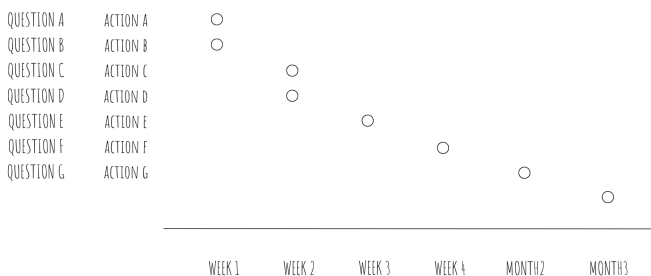
The practice

Timing begins with sequencing.

We can look at whether we need the answers to certain questions before answering others. These are logical dependencies.

Another consideration is urgency and resources. We might answer questions that seem more opportunity urgent and that we have the resources to answer before we answer questions with less urgency and that we don't yet have the resources for.

We also make sure we're answering right questions before wrong questions.



Then we put our questions on a timeline of when we will answer them. This means assigning specific dates to some questions, and for others, indicating the weeks, months, or quarters we expect to answer them.

As we move forward, and timing becomes more clear, we can assign specific dates to questions that were assigned to specific weeks; we can assign specific weeks to questions that were assigned to specific months; and we can assign specific months to questions that were assigned to specific quarter.

We decide how we're going to answer our questions through actions. Answering our questions is learning. Answering our questions through action is action learning—learning by doing. We essentially learning our way into being our best in any scenario we plan.

Considering each, we decide whether we will answer questions through finding something out, experimenting with something, or deciding something. We engage in these actions and discover what's possible. This is how we get to new, meaningful results.

Some of our answers will move us forward in realizing what we want to create. Some will spark new questions as well as new assumptions and new ambiguities we can turn into new questions.

Some will spark new insights into other ways to answer these questions and new learning from the answers to our questions. Some will spark new scenarios to plan. Some will inspire us to reshape our definition of what it means to be our best in any scenario.

When someone asks us what our plan is, we give them the outline of what questions we will answer, when we will answer them, and how we will answer them. It is simply superb, responsive planning.

The stories

Grace's daughter has been in and out of rehab treatment centers and has become more withdrawn with time.

After several honest attempts at getting her daughter Katie to make plans, Grace decided to invest time in creating plans for herself.

She selected one favorable and one unfavorable scenario to plan, and easily composed what she considered her best for each scenario. Her whole

mood shifted as soon as she transitioned from visualizing only the worst to visualizing her best.

From that, she generated a healthy variety of old and new, non-actionable, and actionable questions for her plan.

It didn't take much effort to decide how she would go about organizing and answering her new, actionable questions. It turned out to be a combination of finding things out and experimenting with things. These led to then making decisions that turned out to be both satisfying and productive.

Not ironically, as she changed, her daughter began to show signs of change as well. As Katie noticed her mother being less anxious, she felt more safe opening up to her. Life works like that sometimes.

Tom is on his daily run, pondering the new \$500 million development project he is leading.

Not new to big projects, the arc of Tom's career trajectory pointed straight at this kind of opportunity. As much as he liked everything about the deal, this was

still the kind of project no one of any caliber is entirely prepared for.

At the table with his team, they built their plan on four scenarios. Like many bright, experienced groups, they had no shortage of passionate opinions, hunches, and hypotheses about how to go about this project. They were able to translate all of these into questions.

They initially got to about a dozen questions and using the model expanded this dozen to dozens. Their plan easily came together as they decided which questions to answer when, when they would answer them, and how they would answer them with actions.

Their plan turned out better than their plans usually do, with the group more on the same page than they ever were. They were pleasantly surprised by the velocity they experienced acting rather than talking their way into answers to their questions. Loving the fact that flawless planning is risk-free, they never did flawed planning again.

Shawna's side hustle has become her life's work.

It wasn't overnight, but Shawna was surprised to reach the point where she could quit her full-time job to dedicate herself to what was her dream project. She worked long and hard to get to that point, supported by making her planning as flawless as possible.

Once she had her visualized scenarios composed, she got busy generating, timing, and answering her questions. The most amazing part for her was seeing the hot mess of questions quickly fall into place as she sequenced the order in which she would answer them.

Many of her questions were answered with small, quick experiments, especially those testing for market needs and tolerances. Some she answered with online searches, often using AI which was always speedy and amazingly helpful. She also discovered her partners could be excellent resources for new ideas.

Before she knew it, she celebrated her first year, exceeding her expectations from the prior year, and feeling optimistic about her future knowing she could rely on the power of flawless planning. She even took it to mentoring other young women entrepreneurs who were amazed by its simple magic.

Flawless Planning Mastery

Keep everything visible

Building questions, actions, and timelines is best done visibly rather than in our heads. Visible means any media of paper or screens. Our moment-to-moment awareness is not designed to manage more than a few bits of information at a time in our conscious mind.

Composing scenarios means building on what's visible.

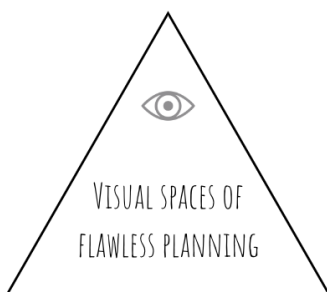
We make this possible using visual media that can accommodate unlimited amounts of planning information. We can't afford to let anything go unrecorded, especially when it comes to staying organized.

It can mean whiteboards, walls, documents, or apps. If we don't have a specific preference, it's worth experimenting to see what works best. When we're planning together, we use what all of us can manage and what gives us the most flexible access.

The principle here, that any experienced writer knows, is that thinking means losing things and writing means having things.

On our visual media, we build and update three things: scenario landscape mapping; descriptions of aspirations, inspirations, and abilities; and questions, actions, timelines, and answers.

SCENARIO LANDSCAPE MAPPING



ASPIRATIONS, INSPIRATIONS,
AND ABILITIES

QUESTIONS, ACTIONS,
TIMELINES, AND ANSWERS.

Organization is nothing more or less than visibility. It is not about intention or intelligence. It's all about creating visibility in planning from beginning to end.

People in the arts and sciences know from years of experience that we do our best thinking, remembering, organizing, and communicating in constructed spaces

outside our heads. Our best thinking, planning, and learning happen in our hands, not our heads.

Scenarios are perspectives, not predictions

An imagined, composed scenario is a perspective. A perspective is a unique location revealing a specific field of options—ideas, questions, and opportunities.

When we compose new scenarios and versions of scenarios, we shift perspectives. When we shift perspectives, we gain access to more options that make it easier to feel and do our best whatever happens in any scenario.

In hiking a mountain or forest, every change in physical position or location creates a different perspective and each different perspective reveals a different dynamic field of options to experience.

Because of how our minds are wired, favorable scenarios reveal larger fields of options than unfavorable scenarios. Favorable scenarios expand our options; unfavorable scenarios limit them. It would be

convenient if unfavorable scenarios had the power favorable scenarios do, but they just don't.

If this was how our minds worked, all it would take to have optimum options is to make ourselves as miserable as possible. Making ourselves miserable only creates unaffordable metabolic debt and constrains our field of available options because we simply lack the energy it takes to see rich fields of scenario options.

As usual, we don't have to believe any of this. Flawless planning has nothing to do with believing anything or changing our beliefs in anything. It has everything to do with seeing for ourselves, being our own scientists, and testing for the truth of our immediate experience.

We can go around for a week only imagining the worst scenarios possible. We can imagine ourselves feeling exactly how we don't want to feel and doing exactly what we don't want to do. We can notice how many options these scenarios reveal—especially new options. We could discover how our mind works.

It doesn't matter how passionately we argue that composing unfavorable scenarios is useful or necessary for getting through them with the fewest unaffordable disappointments or costs. This is what dedication to worry is about. It's the flawed belief that imagining the worst is the best way to prepare ourselves for an imagined unfavorable scenario.

In flawless planning, we give ourselves the gift of creating the kinds of perspectives that have the power to animate a literally wonder-full life.

Getting used to imagining our best

If we're used to imagining being other than our best in especially unfavorable scenarios, we can get used to imagining being our best instead. It doesn't take time. It takes practice.

It's perfectly fine that our mind spontaneously serves up unfavorable scenarios we would rather not happen to us. Our minds are genetically wired to do what they learn to do until they learn to do something else.

Using the principles and practices of flawless planning, we can visualize being our best in any unfavorable scenario. No matter what version of unfavorable we imagine, we can imagine ourselves feeling in this scenario what we would most want to feel and doing in this scenario what we would most want to be doing.

We can visualize as many details as we can. It's OK if the details are more vague, general, or fuzzy. It's OK if what we visualize doesn't pass our test for being "likely." We want to approximate the best feelings, emotions, and actions we would love to experience.

It doesn't matter how "weird" any of this is. It will feel strange if we're not accustomed to visualizing feeling and doing our best in unfavorable scenarios. We might be accustomed to visualizing feeling and doing other than our best in these kinds of unfavorable scenarios.

The more we visualize our best in unfavorable scenarios, the less weird it will be. The more natural it will become and the more flawless our planning will be.

The transition from flawed to flawless planning

If flawed planning has been our default, making the transition to flawless planning can be surprisingly quick and painless.

We begin where we are. Anywhere we find ourselves in life is a perfect place to start flawless planning.

We can decide if we think we could have or need a plan for any scenario. We can take any scenario we want to plan and notice the assumptions of any of our expectations, opinions, speculations, hopes, and worries.

When we're planning alone, we don't get concerned about any of these. When we're planning with others, we don't argue about any of these. We don't get stuck in assumptions because all we're going to do with them is turn them into new questions to shape our planning.

These expectations, opinions, speculations, hopes, or worries about a given situation make up the character of our plan. They are our plan.

Working from this situation, we can name and describe any scenarios we want to plan. We can describe our aspirations, inspirations, and abilities for each. Then we build, time, and answer our questions. That's it.

When new assumptions come up in the process, we simply turn them into new questions for the process. If we get stuck, lost, or overwhelmed, as we do in flawed planning, we can refresh our aspirations, inspirations, and abilities to get back on track.

We can trust ourselves to navigate whatever happens in any scenario. If new scenarios come up, we plan those as well.

The more we practice, the easier and better it gets. Count on it.

No way to do it wrong

As paradoxical as it sounds, there is no way to do flawless planning wrong. It's all about experiential learning. Experiential learning is trying new things.

What matters is not that things work out according to "plan"—if by plan we mean assumptions. It's about working and learning from our questions.

Not doing things "perfectly" at the beginning of anything new is what experiential learning is all about. Like any new learning, the process becomes better and easier with practice. If we think we could manage being imperfect, we're a perfect candidate for new learning, including learning flawless planning.

In learning the model, if we catch ourselves doing things based on assumptions, we just notice it and go back to generating, timing, and answering our next questions.

When we used to do flawed planning, we might have thought about change as failing to plan well or failing to follow our plan.

In flawless planning, change happens however we plan any scenario. Change happens for a variety of legitimate and valid reasons. If we want to make this obvious, all we need to do is name all the things that could change during the course of any plan we compose.

It has become evident to many of us that there are a few things in the universe that we don't have perfect control over. Even with all the human and machine intelligence in the world, the future is never perfectly predictable.

For all kinds of reasons beyond our control or predictions, likely scenarios could become unlikely, and unlikely scenarios could be likely. It doesn't take a global pandemic to figure this out.

Anything we do in planning that's new has the possibility of changing our lives or our world in unpredictable ways. Change happens even when we're trying to not plan or think we're not planning.

In flawless planning, change is an opportunity to name new questions. Not following a plan is an opportunity

to name new questions. Having someone doubt or criticize our plan is an opportunity to name new questions.

Trying something and having it not work as we hoped or expected is an opportunity to name new questions. Finding out there are better questions than the ones we have been working from is an opportunity to name new questions.

There is an obvious pattern here based on the principle that in flawless planning, whatever we do is part of the learning process.

Is it safe to try?

Small experiments are optimal ways to answer some or many of our planning questions. We try something new, see what we learn from it, and do next what makes sense based on what we learned. *How can we...?* and *What would it look like if...?* questions are classically optimal for experiments.

Experimenting shifts us from being at effect in a situation to being at cause. To appreciate the power of experiments, all we need to do is consider the fact that everything we have ever done in our lives has been an experiment of some kind.

It is through experimenting that we develop each of the abilities that support being our best.

Experimenting is not something we need to learn how to do or start doing. It is all we have ever been doing and all we will ever do.

Being a child is a series of experiments. Being a parent is a series of experiments. Being new to or expert in a field or discipline is a series of experiments. Making anything in our world better is a series of experiments.

Each relationship we ever had or will ever have is a series of experiments. Growing into the person we most want to be is a series of experiments. Becoming smarter and better together is a series of experiments.

There are at least four ways to minimize or prevent risks in experimenting.

We can reduce the scope or scale of the experiment. Smaller experiments have potentially smaller and faster failures.

We can reduce the costs of the experiments by using resources we already have.

We can reduce the timeline of the experiment. Shorter timelines mean fewer risks of things going wrong, and resources invested inefficiently or ineffectively.

We can reduce the definition of success. We can define success as progress rather than perfection.

The simple question *Is it safe to try this?* could lift potentially valid experiments over the bar of resistance or reluctance.

The prediction illusion

For the past several centuries, people categorized as "experts" in their disciplines and fields were wrong about what they predicted as possible and impossible.

The list is dizzying. No one will want a telephone. Travel beyond the earth's atmosphere will never happen. The only intervention health professionals could give infants with pneumonia will be a blanket.

At best, it will take weeks or months for personal communications to travel the globe. No average person will ever need a personal computer. There is no reason to grant women the same rights as men. The Beatles would be an abysmal music industry failure, soon to be forgotten.

These are just the tip of the expert prediction failures in the last century. Future generations will enjoy hearty laughs at the ridiculous predictions we will make in this generation.

Having feasibility evidence for any future scenario we consider or compose is entirely unnecessary because scenarios are perspectives, not predictions. As much as prediction accuracy is paramount to success in flawed planning, it is irrelevant in flawless planning.

It's perfectly fine to visualize a future that we absolutely have no idea how to make happen. In the words of the

most celebrated inventors, the impossible is just that which takes longer.

It's totally acceptable, even desirable, to visualize what others—even "expert" others—frown on as absurd, irresponsible, or indefensible.

Arguing and debating feasibilities or postponing learning for hypothesis-proving data-gathering are useless and costly ways to prevent or minimize the power of flawless planning.

Imagined scenarios don't need debate, proof, or agreement. They simply need to be composed as new questions revealing new options.

Emergent planning

As we detail any future scenario, only some of the many possible questions could be initially obvious. It doesn't matter how many questions we have to start with. The ones we start with are always the right ones to start with. We don't have to wait for more or better questions to begin answering the first or next ones.

For complex scenarios where we will ultimately answer hundreds or thousands of questions or in simple scenarios where we answer a handful or dozens of questions, we cannot initially predict all the questions we will build and answer in the process.

Planning in which we expect to discover more questions as we go is emergent planning.

Each iteration of questions answered reveals the next iteration of questions to be answered. It is the opposite of presumptive planning based on the absurd expectation that we should be able to know all the questions and actions for an entire planning process at the very beginning of the process.

Rock climbing provides an apt analogy.

We look up at the climb, noticing variations and patterns in the rockscape. We might have a clear direction or destination in mind. Even as our destination is a question, we begin with curiosity about the climbing opportunities in our chosen direction.

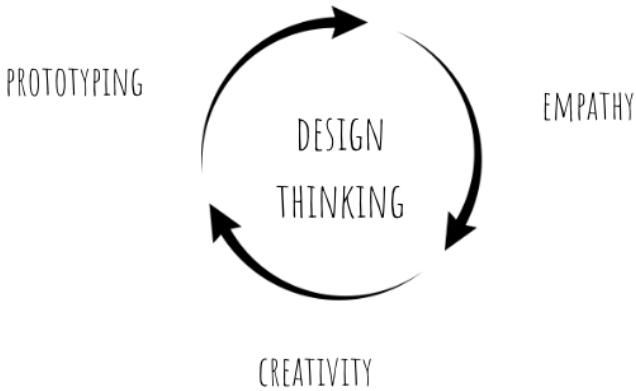
At any point along the way, we can see immediate hand and foot placement options available. Only until we make our next move can we see the adjacent next available options. Change in position means change in perspective. Change in perspective means change in view, climb, and energy management options available to us.

The more quickly we answer the questions we have in flawless planning, the more quickly we learn which are next, and next after that.

Design thinking

When a scenario involves designing solutions to any problems we're solving for, design thinking is a good way to go about the process. It's been used for designing many of the countless things we use, depend on, and value in our lives and world. There is no limit to the use opportunities possible.

In its simplest form design thinking involves iterations of three elements: empathy, creativity, and prototyping.



Iterations are cycles of these elements, building from the learning we gain from previous iterations.

It starts with empathy. To design anything is to design for potential and actual users of what we design. These are the people who could or will use the solutions that come from the design process. Empathy is learning how users experience the problems we're solving for. It's vital that we start empathy with problems rather than solutions.

In this sense, when we say we have "ideas" at the start of a design process, and these ideas are solutions rather than problems, we treat them as assumptions

and turn them into questions for the process. This is flawless design thinking.

Empathy learning can involve interviewing and observing users experiencing their problem. Our assumptions and wonderings can be useful ways of forming the questions that shape our interviews and observations.

In both, getting our questions right is key. We do question-storming in the same way we generate questions in the flawless planning model. More questions lead to better questions.

We might have different user personas. We might study users with different characteristics like age, gender, experience, skill levels, and circumstances.

Different personas could yield different learning along the way. In the empathy phase, we might begin with one idea of who our user personas are and then discover there are potential others. We might also decide to focus our efforts on specific personas.

Some of this can be assumption testing, which is to say, turning into questions assumptions about the users and the way they experience their problems. In empathy, we are not assumption testing about any solutions.

In creativity, we generate as many solutions and versions and variations of solutions as we can. More ideas will lead to better ideas. There are several simple ways to further develop and mature ideas.

We can consider what we like about any idea that comes up, and why. We can add, change, or delete any elements within an idea. We can think about what an opposite idea might be like. When it comes to the principle that quantity leads to quality—more leads to better—there are literally no such things as "bad" ideas.

Every idea has the potential to spark other ideas. Even intentionally trying our best to come up with "bad ideas" will generate ideas that could lead to other, possibly better ideas.

Eventually, we will develop testable ideas for prototyping.

In prototyping, we test what we consider our most developed ideas. These are not necessarily our most complicated ideas. Our most developed could be our simplest, most elegant ones.

Testing means showing users examples of ideas in two or three-dimensional forms. When possible, we could have them actually test our ideas with a minimum viable product that we build with whatever resources we happen to have available. Either way, the key is the quality of our questions in discovering exactly how users experience our ideas.

The dual purpose of prototyping is to gain a deeper understanding of the problems we're solving for and gain a deeper understanding of what works for users and why and what doesn't work for users and why. Our learning can continue even beyond the design thinking model, into implementing whatever the model produces.

Design thinking is a classic form of flawless planning. It's useful any time we're designing and building any kind of solution to any kind of problem—at any scale and in any context.

Things work the way they're designed to work. Whatever is not working in our lives or world is working exactly as it's designed to work. When we want things to work better, it's a new design opportunity for flawless planning.

Planning Together

Planning with others

It's one thing to plan on our own and another to plan with others. In flawless planning with others, it's the same four principles and practices.

Most people over 10 years old have the cognitive equipment to learn flawless planning principles and practices by working with others who have learned them. We already have 10-year-olds who have been trained in question formation and are far more fluent in the skill than their older siblings, parents, or grandparents.

The more adept people get at using the principles and practices on their own, the easier it is for them to use them in planning with others. When people come together in planning for the first time, it helps them to begin with a shared understanding and agreement on the principles and practices.

Whether there are two, twenty, or two hundred of us, the two most significant factors is how well we engage the principles and practices along the way and how much trust is in the room. As much as talent is

important in any shared planning model, trust is core to our shared success. People engage their talents to the extent there is mutual trust.

In shared planning, the power of the model is equal to the strength of shared trust. The formula for trust is simple:

$$\text{TRUST} = \text{RELATABILITY} \times \text{RELIABILITY}$$

Relatability means we have things in common with others. These could be shared qualities, values, stories, likes, dislikes, and beliefs. The more we know we have in common, the more possible trust becomes. We trust people we like; we like people like ourselves.

Reliability means we can count on each other to do what we say we will do. This is making and keeping any scope of promises. The seemingly small ones can have as much bearing on trust as the seemingly big ones.

Mutual trust requires relatability and reliability. If someone has one or the other but not both, our trust in them is less than optimal. Trust is something we feel

about others. We feel trust in people who are adequately relatable and reliable. We can't decide to trust someone with whom we don't feel trust.

When someone trusts us, it's because we have made it possible for them to see what we have in common and to see we make and keep promises to them.

Planning together goes well with trust and goes poorly without trust. Trust builds when shared planning goes well.

Building shared trust doesn't take time, it takes conversations and results. Conversation makes relatability possible; results make reliability possible.

Just as the costs of non-trust and mistrust are many, the benefits of trust are many. When we have shared trust, we are more willing and able to be creative, transparent, and entrusting.

Entrusting is giving people our ideas, support, or help even before they have gained adequate levels of trust with us. When they value what we entrust them with, entrusting turns to trusting.

When we have shared trust, we infer good intentions on their part even when others might disappoint us and they infer good intentions on our part when we disappoint them.

When we have shared trust, we act with more courage, confidence, and creativity. We listen with more curiosity than judgment. We share power instead of assuming or denying it. We share more of what we have. We invest more in the relationships and the investment pays off. We become smarter and better together.

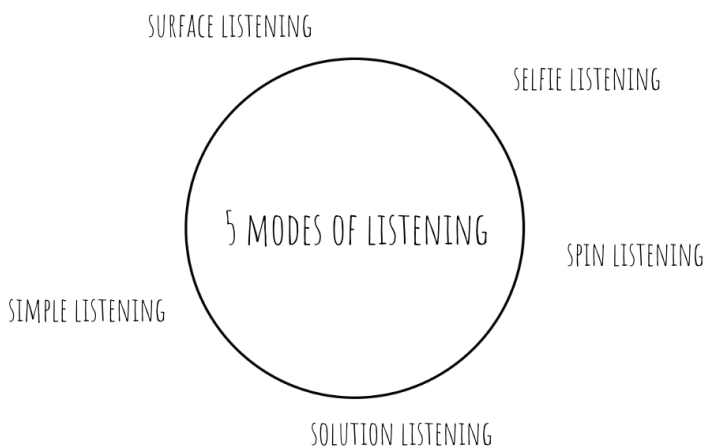
Simple listening

The quality of trust and planning together has everything to do with how we listen. How we listen to each other shapes how much we trust each other and how well planning goes.

Because of the design of its architecture, flawless planning, by design, makes it easier for us to listen well to each other in the planning process. Wondering creates the prime conditions for the best listening possible. When everyone feels heard, everyone does

their best imagining, wondering, and engaging in the process.

There are five basic modes of listening.



Surface listening

We listen to the surface of what people say, just long enough to quickly and superficially react with an assessment. An assessment is a judgment of something as good or bad. "Wow, that's awesome!" and "Wow, that's awful!" are assessments. We don't invest time in

expressing curiosity or interest beyond the surface of what we hear.

Selfie listening

We listen for what we can use to make everything about ourselves. Like surface listening, we do not respond to what people say with interest or curiosity beyond what they say. "Right! I had the same thing happen" is selfie listening. It's hijacking someone's opinions or stories to talk about our own related opinions or stories. Interrupting people mid-sentence, mid-question, or mid-thought is another form of selfie listening.

Spin listening

Here, we listen for ambiguities we can interpret, which is putting words in people's mouths they actually never explicitly said. We're putting our own spin on things others are saying. "It sounds like you don't care" and "It sounds like you're angry" are examples of spin listening. We project what we would or do feel or think onto others in our words rather than being curious or interested in the words they would put to their

experience. It makes it more awkward for them to express themselves in their own words.

Solution listening

We listen for opportunities to tell people what they should think, feel, or do—or at least consider thinking, feeling, or doing. It comes from thinking we know better, which we might or might not have evidence for. It's giving people unsolicited advice, admonitions, or warnings. It's trying to be helpful instead of curious. It comes across as our not trusting that others will do their own thinking well.

Simple listening

We listen for what people aren't saying or asking and express interest in knowing more about what they have in mind. We ask questions, which is what doesn't happen in the other four modes of listening. Showing interest can be to others a sign we care about what they think and feel. People feel heard, trust us, and act accordingly.

How we listen in planning together is everything because how we listen immediately shapes the trust that shapes our ability to do shared flawless planning.

Supporting others

Just as we all have moments of struggling in planning, others in our lives and world have these moments. For obvious and not obvious reasons, the situation they're trying to plan is somehow new for them. Something is different.

Their assumptions aren't helping them plan.

Specifically, the uncertainties of their situation are new, making convenient and confident assumptions tricky, challenging, or impossible.

If they're open to our support, we can offer them some questions to shift them into more of a flawless planning model. When we do, we will see an immediate shift in how they seem to feel and in their ability to plan more easily, effectively, and efficiently.

What's your plan? What kinds of favorable and unfavorable scenarios do you want to have plans for?

These get them unstuck and on their way.

Then, in one scenario at a time, we ask *What matters to you here and why? What would you love to feel and do? What abilities do you already have to make these possible? When did you successfully engage these in the past?*

It's likely that all these questions are new to people—especially if they're mostly or entirely accustomed to flawed planning. We give them time to think. The process might happen over the course of more than one or two conversations.

All we have to remember is that their mind is wired differently than ours. They will need to form their own answers to any of our questions.

Then we can ask them about their scenario expectations and assumptions, and turn them into questions. Here, we can offer suggestions if they have a hard time coming up with expectations, assumptions, or questions.

Then, it's the questions *What could you do to answer these questions?* and *When could you work on answering them?* They might benefit from our ideas here as well.

Another thing we know for sure is that their mind continues to unconsciously work new information into their existing wiring.

This happens when they're not consciously working on their plans, when they're lost in doing things, when they're engaged in any creative or relaxing activities, and when they're sleeping. This is how our minds are genetically structured to work.

When we talk with people whose planning we're supporting, it's a good idea to focus more on the future than the past.

This is asking what their day or week is looking like. It's asking about upcoming favorable or unfavorable situations they're anticipating. Listening with curiosity makes it more possible for them to be more intentional in their planning.

Asking about even their near-term future tells us how they're thinking about their future, which gives us direct insights into their present experience.

Some people focus more on the past, talking more about what has happened—past favorable and unfavorable scenarios in their lives or their world. It can imply they expect the future to be some version of the past repeating.

Their preference for talking about the past even when we ask about their future could be based on them feeling more at effect than cause in their life. Showing interest in their future has the possibility of shifting them from being at effect to being at cause in their lives and world.

Talking about their past favorable and unfavorable scenarios is a way of connecting and caring. It gives us things to relate to and care about.

These nurture the relationship. They can feed a future we share with them. This is also a wonderful opportunity to acknowledge their gifts and celebrate

the achievements, survivals, and learnings from past plans.

It's useful to remember that anyone can learn anything at any point in their lives. This includes the quite younger of us and the quite older of us. The only way to know someone's learning potential is to invite them to learn something new. If we have doubts about anyone's learning capabilities, we only need to be prepared to be pleasantly surprised.

Flawless planning in groups

Flawless planning in groups can be magical because of how it engages the best in people, to be their best together, for the best possible results.

Groups are unpredictably unpredictable. Without exception, each person brings a unique constellation of perspectives, emotions, and talents. Some are personal and some are shared.

It's possible for people in groups to not even know what's personal and shared until they have

conversations about their perspectives, emotions, and talents.

Depending on their planning model, they can be smarter and better together, or not so much. How they do together isn't about the favorable and unfavorable scenarios they imagine personally and together. It's about the planning model they use together.

A common way groups flounder is mistakenly assuming if they're not getting anywhere, it's because of a lack of resources, influence, power, talents, or good leaders.

Groups transition from floundering to flourishing when they learn a new model of planning. They don't need different resources, influence, power, talents, or leaders. They just need a new planning model.

They discover how it can be possible to replace arguing with doing in answering their questions. They discover how new scenarios and questions give them options they never imagined possible. They discover hidden treasures that have been there the whole time.

They delightfully surprise themselves.

Applications

Do you think it might be time to rethink your planning model?

Why plans don't work out

In any kind of planning you can think of, there are three classic kinds of planning disappointment: we don't make plans in the first place; we don't follow them well; or we don't complete them well.

We don't make plans when it feels like we have too many uncertainties for a predictable plan. We don't follow or complete plans well when we run into uncertainties that conflict with our planning assumptions or that prevent the results we wanted.

This is what happens in flawed planning. We are undermined by unpredictable uncertainties from the start or along the way. In flawless planning, we turn uncertainties into assets and opportunities. We don't have fewer uncertainties; we simply have a different relationship with them.

Could it be that our planning model is the problem?

Some people have “solved” the flawed planning problem by simply giving up on planning. They avoid flawed planning by claiming they do no planning. They won’t admit they have a plan, but they do. It’s the plan of “doing what makes sense, seeing what happens, and going from there.” Improvising is a plan.

In their experience, if you want to know what’s not going to happen in a future situation, make a plan. The corollary principle is that if you suffer from a disappointment deficiency, make a plan.

Giving flawed planning B-school jargon monikers like “strategic,” “operational,” “project,” “agile,” “start-up,” or “business” planning, can still be flawed planning. It is still a misdiagnosis to assume that if these don’t deliver the best possible results, it’s obvious because we’re doing something wrong. We stay stuck in this unfortunate and costly loop until it somehow occurs to us that we’re not the problem—the model is.

In flawless planning, we are crystal clear that the quality of our planning results is equal to the quality of our planning model. To have different planning results, we need a different planning model.

If we want different results in any kind of planning we're doing or contemplating doing, it might be time to rethink our planning model.

Unconscious flawed planning

It's fascinating that we can spend every week, month, quarter, and year doing flawed planning and not even know it. This is unconscious flawed planning. It's a thing. This happens when it's all we've ever known, having not yet learned viable alternatives. Even if a friend one day asked us if we would be interested in flawless planning, just the suggestion would make our inner perfectionist anxious.

The cringe test for flawed planning is noticing our immediate reaction when we decide to make a plan or have to make a plan we've been assigned to make. If we cringe, it's quite likely we're thinking about flawed planning. If our initial response is interest, it's because we're likely thinking about taking a flawless planning approach.

The "good" news is there is only one flaw in flawed planning-the one flaw missing in flawless planning. It is

basing what we feel and do in planning on assumptions. Our assumptions are guesses, speculations, and opinions. We don't question them because they feel true. They paradoxically especially feel true if others have the bad manners to doubt or challenge them.

We only become conscious of doing flawed planning when we discover how to do flawless planning.

What makes flawless planning possible?

The radical principle in flawless planning is that we operate from zero assumptions. This is not saying we have zero assumptions. Our brains are wired to run millions of simulations each second to compose our moment to moment experience of what we know, feel, and do. Because of this biological reality, we cannot not make assumptions about the future.

In flawless planning, we treat assumptions as uncertainties and translate all of our initial and emerging uncertainties into questions that guide us in building the best possible results. Questions have the

power to produce results never possible by assumptions.

Flawless planning is question-based planning. New questions lead to new learning leading to new results. New results always and only come from new learning. People who love learning instantly get and benefit from flawless planning.

New questions have the unique power to keep us productive, efficient, and supported by our unlimited inner resources.

If you've ever been in a planning conversation and people raise new questions and everyone gets busy talking about how to answer them, you've seen flawless planning at work. If these questions seemed to give the group energy, focus, and momentum, that's because that's what happens when we work from the right questions at the right time.

3 1/2 Signs you're doing flawed planning

Until we learn an alternative model, flawed planning remains our less than enthusiastic norm. We apply it without question to any and every planning situation.

Even though it feels normal, it is still flawed, and as such produces more costs than benefits. It's interesting that we can do unconscious flawed planning. This is not even knowing we're doing flawed planning.

One sign we're doing flawed planning is that we limit ourselves to planning a single scenario. When we say we have "a plan" for any situation, it's one scenario. It could live anywhere along two intersecting continuums of favorable to unfavorable and likely to unlikely. A scenario is a version of a situation. It's possible to imagine more than one scenario for any situation. The more scenarios we plan, the more new options of ideas, questions, and resources we have.

A second sign is that we make planning about prediction. Prediction is a set of assumptions about a future featuring any variety of uncertainties. Working from assumptions is the prime planning flaw. In flawless

planning, we work from questions rather than assumptions. We get everything done with zero predictions, meaning zero assumptions.

A third sign is we're trying to follow a plan. The idea of following a plan is based on the assumption flaw that planning is about proving our predictions correct. In flawless planning, we waste no time trying to prove predictions correct because we're not working from predictions at any point in the process. What we do instead is learn our way into the results we will ultimately value and appreciate. We learn our way forward one right question at a time.

The other 1/2 sign is that people do not look forward to planning in the first place. They will do planning because they think or know they should. They do it to check the "planning" box so they can move onto their actual plan of "Doing what makes sense, seeing what happens, and going from there." For them, the only thing worse than having to make a plan is to endure life's disappointing promise of making uncertainty a constant.

All of this changes when flawless planning turns uncertainty into prime assets in the planning process. Finally, we have a cringe-free planning model. For once, planning is doing what makes sense.

The problem with strategic planning—and the alternative

As it is often practiced, the strategic planning ritual is an exercise rooted in mythology and superstition. The mythology is that this exercise explains why some organizations outperform others. The superstition is that doing so would make us a member of the esteemed outperformer cohort.

The essential problem with strategic plans is that they are often flawed plans.

The language of assumptions is the language of best guesses, intuitions, hunches, speculations, and hypotheses. We give assumptions the illusion of predictable certainties by arguing for the predictive reliability of data. This practice is based on the

underpinning assumption that the future will be an extension of past and present patterns.

As too many organizations know from experience, this isn't even true in a relatively stable world much less one where uncertainty is a constant norm.

So this creates a quandary. Do we continue to hope our data is a reliable predictor of the future or do we simply base our future on our best guesses?

In a flawed planning world, these seem to be our two options. Both lead to the reality that the vast majority of strategic plans fail or are quickly shelved for unreliability. In the worst cases, people call flawed operational plans "strategic" and hope no one notices or questions it.

In flawless planning, no such quandary is possible because we're working from questions rather than assumptions. We compose multiple scenarios and turn uncertainties into questions, and through action, we turn questions into answers. This process makes it possible for us to create the future we want to see.

Where in flawed planning, uncertainties are barriers to success, in flawless planning, uncertainties are assets in our success.

In flawless planning, we still consider all the available data and assumptions we have. These become optimal resources for forming new questions that move us forward in the direction of being our best in future scenarios. Being our best is the hallmark success indicator in flawless planning.

One reason people love flawless planning is because everyone can be engaged in raising and answering new questions through actions. People easily get and stay on the same page when they're not divided into arguing about assumptions. People enjoy being productive from beginning to end.

Flawless planning is designed for scale. It can happen in short or long range planning, meaning planning at the operational or project level or planning out multiple years, even decades. When people ask if a flawless long range plan is "strategic," our promise is simply that it is flawless and long range. They might

prefer that to the alternative of flawed planning at any scale.

The uncanny power of question-based problem-solving

Creating the future we want to see always involves solving problems.

Whether we frame a problem as a challenge or opportunity, it is always a constellation of uncertainties.

This is true whether our problems are simple, technical, complex, or wicked. It is also true for all the planning we do, since the heart of planning is solving problems.

The impatient temptation is to go in search of immediate solutions. Immediate solutions are predictions and, as such, are not terribly useful in a situation of abundant uncertainties. We cannot predict our way forward because the future is intrinsically unpredictable.

It's always been this way. When we think of the last few problems we solved, resolution came about because of things we did in the midst of uncertainties. At no point did we magically make the future intrinsically predictable. If we did, we would be the first of billions of humans who could pull that off.

Everything we ever learned, accomplished, or survived happened with an uncertain future. In every situation, we created something we wanted to see possible. Whether we realized it at the time, every successful thing we did was about answering new questions.

These were the classic questions like who, what, when, where, how, why, and what if. To answer these we looked into something, asked someone something, tried something, or decided something.

In some situations, we could have been unconsciously doing question-based problem-solving. We turned uncertainties into questions, questions into actions, and actions into answers. Our solutions were the ultimate answers to our unfolding-and unpredictable-questions.

This is actually how we solve problems. When we're struggling and floundering, it's because we're trying to predict our way into solutions, which is a functional impossibility.

We can make problem-solving better, faster, and easier by being more consciously and explicitly question-based.

From a flawless planning perspective, this means identifying and composing the scenarios we want to focus our problem-solving on. Then it's about composing the questions we will translate into actions that will translate into answers. Our ultimate solutions will be the ultimate answers to our questions.

Our momentum of progress in the process comes about by working on the right questions at the right time.

When we get into considering actions to answer our questions, we quickly realize that not all questions are equal. Some are not answerable, which is to say not actionable. Some will yield some progress and others will yield more progress.

There are ways to come up with good and better questions. One is working from the principle that quantity leads to quality.

More questions lead to better questions. It's the same creativity principle that more ideas lead to better ideas. Discussion, debating, and arguing only have the power to limit the quantity of questions and therefore the quality of questions.

This principle is why the more complex a problem, the more solutions require us to work through them together rather than separately.

As we act on our questions, they can lead to new answers and new questions. Some lead to nothing, which is fine because the potential yield of new questions is unpredictable. The only way to know a question's yield potential is to act on it.

The most effective and efficient way to solve problems as constellations of uncertainties is getting at the heart of the solutions, unpeeling one layer of questions at a time.

This is the amazing power of question-based problem-solving. It makes sense and works every time because it's aligned with how things actually work.

The flawed planning double-bind

One of the hallmark indicators we're in a double bind is feeling stuck between two opposing choices. Either fork in the crossroads seems like a less than optimal choice. This is the classic double bind conflict of competing, binary options.

Double binds make for bad planning. Either opposing direction creates new problems, and so both opposing directions are sub-optimal.

The essence of a double-bind is that no matter what we consider or try doing, we can't get out of the dilemma.

We get to a point where no amount of more cold data, scarce resources, or political power can get us beyond the constraints of the double bind. When we finally break free, we realize these constraints were self-

imposed because we were working from a flawed planning model.

The unfortunate and unnecessary trends in global and local level institutional breakdowns and meltdowns we're seeing today are the result of leaders trying to do planning from a context of double-binds.

Double binds have no power to take us back to better times nor move us forward to futures different from the past.

The only way out is to work from an entirely different planning model altogether.

Flawed planning is essentially a double bind because it's based on prediction and prediction is tricky. This is not only because uncertainty is a life constant but because predictions come in the assumptive polarities of pessimism and optimism. Working from the assumptions of predictions is the quintessential flaw in double binds and flawed planning.

Optimism is a problem because it disregards certain realities. Pessimism is a problem because it limits our

options. If we think of these as two wheels on a car pointed in opposite directions of left and right, steering right or left gets us in circles.

One way out of this double bind is flawless planning. In flawless planning, we work from multiple scenarios and new questions rather than single scenarios and old assumptions.

This means we work from multiple versions of scenarios that feature different aspects of favorable and unfavorable situations and outcomes. We also work from questions that turn uncertainties into assets that support our being our best in any given scenario.

Multiple scenarios and new questions instantly liberate us from the double bind of opposing predictions. We waste no time arguing over which prediction is more valid. We don't erode trust by trying to decide who's wrong.

The tension between us in self-imposed double binds is entirely a function of our flawed planning model. Double binds not only make us more tense together, they make us more limited together because they

prevent access to the inner resources necessary for being our best in any scenario.

The point of planning is being our best. This is less possible when we get and keep ourselves stuck in double binds. It is what's more possible in flawless planning.

What we don't know is more important than what we do

In planning, there are two kinds of knowing: knowing what we already know and knowing what we don't yet know.

Flawed planning focuses on what we already know. We try to rely on what we know to make our plan. Mostly, what we know appears in the assumptions of speculations, opinions, and predictions. We base our planning on these hoping that what we already know can direct us to the new results we want. We do a lot of hoping in flawed planning.

This is functionally impossible because what we already know cannot lead to new results. It can only repeat old results. Only what we don't yet know can lead to new results. Flawless planning gets new results because it focuses on what we don't yet know.

We describe what we don't yet know in the form of new questions. Flawless planning is all about new questions because, if we want any kind of new results, what we don't know is infinitely more important than what we do know.

New questions reflect things that are so far uncertain, unclear, or undecided. Our plan is a pathway of new questions. We move forward in being our best by working on the right questions at the right time.

Each new question becomes a new perspective. New perspectives reveal new options, making it possible to be our best in any planning context. Old questions cannot reveal new options because they are old perspectives.

For those of us raised in the flawed planning model, being question based in our planning takes some

getting used to. We're so used to crafting and pivoting our plans based on what we already know, it seems illogical if not unreasonable to abandon what has become essentially a superstitious practice.

When people discover the power of new questions, they quickly realize that the abundance of uncertainties can be an unlimited source of new questions. We have no shortage of questions in any kind of planning. We just need to allow ourselves to make them the centerpiece of the process. Not having all the answers becomes a gift rather than a curse.

In flawed planning, uncertainty is a problem to be prevented and fixed. In question-based flawless planning, uncertainty is a golden asset and the key to getting new results through new questions. This is the unique, wonder-full power of new questions.

The flawless entrepreneur

In teaching and coaching emerging and serial entrepreneurs across generations and geographies, I still consistently encounter people who try to operate

from an employee rather than entrepreneurial mindset. This makes the whole process far more difficult and risky than it needs to be.

They assume the resources they lack are more important than the resources they have. They assume constraints are problems to be overcome. They assume it's better to start with solutions rather than problems. They assume failing is failing. They assume what they know is more vital to their planning than what they don't know.

They do not know that the latest research on entrepreneurial mindsets indicates there is nothing more opposite to an entrepreneurial mindset than an employee mindset. They do not know coming at things with an employee mindset can and will only prevent them from developing and flourishing in an entrepreneurial mindset.

The conventional start-up founders and teams often operate from flawed employee mindsets. At the core of a flawed mindset is operating from assumptions.

These are assumptions about the problem they're solving for, the solutions they hope seduce investors, the markets they hope exist to serve them and their exit dreams-and how best to do planning in any phase of their adventures.

Flawless planning is based on questions. Entrepreneurs who operate from questions are flawless entrepreneurs. It's the same when they form their teams and lead their organizations. Flawless leaders operate from questions rather than assumptions.

In the start-up and pivot worlds, assumptions come in many shapes and sizes. They involve impassioned assumptions about the existence, character, and readiness of markets. They involve assumptions about team members, partners, and investors. And as assumptions, they are fabulous assets in the formation of new questions.

We have assumptions about markets, product fits, MVPs, and runways. Whether we try justifying these with data, speculations, or illusions, they are still assumptions, and as such, great assets for composing new questions. The power of new questions is that they

always keep us close to reality – and reality is never wrong. That’s what it means to be flawless.

Assumptions can be wonderful starting places for new questions in flawless planning. They represent what we already know, which can be valid and valuable expressions of experience, intuition, and signal sensing.

New questions instantly and persistently engage the best in the entrepreneurial team because everyone has questions. Everyone has a unique lens on the ubiquitous constant of uncertainties. Everyone engages with a mind hardwired for curiosity.

Everyone has the ability to recognize the new, accidental options revealed by the perspectives of new questions.

In a flawless planning world, we are only as smart as our questions. If you’re an aspiring entrepreneur, why not aspire to be a flawless entrepreneur?

The (one) reason plan implementations fail

Well, the plan looked good on paper. To some people. Others of us had doubts, some unexpressed – and some unfortunately expressed and exiled into the land of unwelcome questions. The absurd superstition is that an “approved” plan has the magical power to make our questions irrelevant.

The plan went forward anyway and now we’re pushing the meatballs up the hill in the unenviable implementation of an unfollowable plan. As usual, life presents us with unpredictable uncertainties through plan implementation. Because that’s what life does. Uncertainty is one of its constants and no plan has the power to change this.

The distinctions between planning, plans, and plan implementations are interesting. The implication is that planning causes plans and plan implementations. In the language of lead and lag indicators, planning is the lead indicator to the lag indicators of plans and plan implementations.

The idea of plan implementation as “following” a plan is interesting. It implies that plans are the termination points of planning. If we define planning as turning uncertainties into results, learning, and new questions, implementation without planning would be a bit bizarre. Trying to shut down the cantankerous infidels doesn’t exactly make us smarter together.

If we don’t do planning during implementation, what are we doing with the continuous evolutions of unpredictable uncertainties? If we’re doing flawed planning, we simply work from our assumptions—those from our plans or new ones that we didn’t predict in planning. We use our assumptions to essentially ignore our uncertainties.

In flawless planning, we don’t ignore implementation uncertainties because we work from zero assumptions. We translate each emerging uncertainty into new questions, actions, and outcomes.

We also don’t get tripped up by scenarios we didn’t plan for because we identify and work on multiple scenarios from the beginning. We don’t assume there is only one possible version of a situation.

We make implementation easier because we're working from definitions of what it means to be our best in the scenarios we're working on. We don't assume that our predictions have the power to make implementation successful. Without the compass of our best, it's easy to get lost, stuck, or distracted in plan implementation.

It is a misleading narrative that plan implementations fail because there is something wrong with us or with our situation. There is nothing wrong with our talents. There is nothing wrong with our time, resource, and influence constraints.

Plan implementations fail because our planning model is flawed. If we instead prefer successful implementation, all we need to do is make planning flawless and ongoing.

The flawless leadership advantage

It's an interesting mythology that assumes the state of our world reflects the state of our leadership.

It's an old conversation, assigning the vast majority of responsibility for the world to a tiny minority of people. It is the source of endless stories of leadership credit and blame at the cost of everyone else's innocence.

It's possible we will transcend the current state of the world by questioning the assumptions of this mythology. A future distinct from the past would require and result in a shift from faith in leaders to faith in everyone.

We can accelerate this shift by making possible a shift from flawed to flawless leadership.

We don't assume what people are and are not capable of doing and learning. We find out. We don't assume which ideas and questions are good and which are bad. We find out.

We don't assume what people need to be their best. We find out. We don't assume what causes people to love and resist learning. We find out. We don't assume why people do their best and worst together. We find out.

In flawless leadership, we operate from zero assumptions. The prime alternative to assuming is finding out. We find out what reality is through new conversations, research, and experiments. We operate from new questions rather than old assumptions, knowing that new results can only come from new questions, not old assumptions.

Leaders learn flawed leadership. They assume or discover that effective leaders have all the answers and ineffective leaders don't. This encourages them to be assumption rather than question based. People who operate from questions often do so because they have had mentors who encouraged a more flawless leadership model.

It is accurate to say that leaders who work from a flawless model are more disciplined and conscious than leaders who work from flawed models. It is inaccurate to assume they are essentially lazy or uncaring. People with flawed leadership have simply not yet learned what it means to work from a flawless model.

Flawless leadership is not necessarily a function of technical expertise, track records, academic degrees, or social class pedigrees. It is leading from the intelligence of wonder, curiosity, and awe.

It is easily learnable and infinitely adaptable. It brings out the best in everyone in ways flawed leadership never could. It will be a vital ingredient in our best shared future possible.

Being flawless is much like working with shaping clay on a wheel where uncertainty is the norm.

The way we make sense of the uncertainty of the materials and process is through the discipline of discovering what's possible by finding out rather than through assumptions. Assumptions show up in the immediate feedback of failed results.

It's the same with leadership. Leadership is a relationship, not a position. Relationships are conversations. In flawless leadership, we shape conversations with a potter's endless curiosity.

Why some people prefer flawed planning

I've been asking people if, given the choice, they would prefer flawless to flawed planning. It's interesting when people pause to think about it. It's a moment of doubt – if not conscious or unconscious resistance. Other people quickly respond with some version of Why not?

Whether we're doing strategic, project, or operational planning, we can take a more flawed or flawless approach. The difference is quite simple and obvious: in flawed planning, we're working from logical or illogical assumptions, and in flawless planning, we're working from new questions.

We plan from three intentions: to create a future that replicates the way things once were; to create a future that sustains the way things are; and to create a future different from the past or present. We might or might not explicitly express our planning intentions, but they eventually become obvious in the model we use for planning and our results.

Flawed planning is the optimum model when our planning intention is to replicate the past or sustain the

present. When we see problems and challenges persisting, it's not because they are intrinsically intractable. It's not because there is something wrong with the people who fail to solve and resolve them. It's precisely because they're using a flawed planning model that has no power to create a future different from the past.

It doesn't matter how much lip service we give to "wanting change." We can make all kinds of speeches and do all kinds of advocacy for change, but we are complicit in making change less possible by taking a flawed planning model.

Flawless planning creates a new future because it's based on new questions. When questions come up in flawed planning, they're typically old questions – questions we easily answer with assumptions. The questions that shape flawless planning are typically new and we translate them into new actions that lead to new results.

When we're planning together, there are usually some people who want to keep things the same or as they were and other people who want things to be different.

People who prefer flawed planning have reasons for their bias. It could be fear, overwhelm, or pessimism. They fear any form of failure, they feel intolerably overwhelmed, or they believe nothing could or will ever change.

When the group moves forward with a flawless planning model, even the change resisters discover how easy it is for them to engage in the process. They realize they were resisting flawed planning even though they seemed certain it would be able to keep things the same or the way they were.

People who appear to resist change don't resist change; they resist uncertainty. They haven't yet developed the ability to process uncertainty – the way some people haven't developed the physiology to process certain kinds of foods.

A flawless planning model teaches people – one step at a time – how to process uncertainty. People learn how to thrive in the intrinsic uncertainties of planning.

When we invite people into flawless planning the invitation is to learn it. It has to be an authentic

invitation, not a colonial expectation. As Peter Block suggests, if people can't say no, their yes is meaningless.

The first step in flawless planning is understanding how each of us thinks about the future. This instantly creates an environment of emotional safety and trust because people feel valued for the unique perspectives they bring to the table. It becomes the foundation for creating a future that works for all.

When this happens, two kinds of responses occur in the group: people who are surprised this could happen and people who are not surprised this could happen. That's the power of a model that works.

The power of getting on the same page

In any endeavor, being on the same page is about alignment. Alignment is velocity and efficiency. We move more quickly and easily when we're aligned. When we're not aligned, we waste time, get stuck or distracted, or experience unnecessary and costly tensions.

There are a variety of ways to misdiagnose when we're not on the same page. This includes assuming we are not on the same page because we have too many personality differences or constraints or not enough time, resources, or leadership. These are interesting stories, but not true.

Alignment is a function of planning any aspects of our future together. These could be planning a week, month, quarter, year, project, program, process, policy, product, or implementation.

When we're not in alignment, it's when we're not planning well together. We're hoping that everyone "doing their best" individually will make up for non-alignment. It never does.

One of the classic signs of non-alignment is when we hear people pontificating about "holding people accountable" for their individual performance. It is pure superstition that more individual efforts will make more alignment happen. The performance of any whole is the sum of the parts plus their relationships.

It is simply naive to assume the performance of the whole is simply a function of the sum of its parts. Individuals only perform at their best when aligned with others. That's how all living systems work, at least in this universe.

In planning, we decide together what success looks like within specific timeframes and how we will engage our talents to move in the direction of our success, one right question at a time. Being question-based makes planning flawless, given that the prime flaw in flawed planning is being assumption-based.

Questions expand our access to options of new ideas, questions, and opportunities; assumptions limit our access to these. In flawless planning, assumptions are risks and questions are assets. When we're divided, it's often because we're divided over our assumptions. When we're aligned, it's often because we're aligned in our questions.

When we are on the same page, we are aligned in creating the future we want to share together. Alignment makes us faster, smarter, and better

together. Alignment naturally builds trust and trust is vital to courage, creativity, and collaboration.

Imagine: Risk-free planning

If we think of planning risks as what could go “wrong,” the ultimate risk is working from assumptions. You can see this for yourself. Ask people in a floundering or failing project what’s not gone well.

Then ask what assumptions they have been operating from and they will likely not have a short list. They will use classic assumption language related to guesses, hunches, speculations, hypotheses, predictions, theories, interpretations, mind-reading, and generalizations. Each is a risk if we operate from them in planning.

The idea of managing risk is managing assumptions. We tend to have assumptions when we have unwelcome and intolerable uncertainties. Assumptions create the illusion of certainty amid uncertainties. The ultimate flaw in planning is assuming that plans need to be based on certainties. The more experienced or

anxious people are, the more likely they are to work from assumptions.

The risks of working from assumptions carry unnecessary and unaffordable costs. They cause delays, detours, diversions, divisions, and derailments. They limit access to viable options, opportunities, and resources.

Risk-free planning is question-based planning. We make this possible by translating assumptions into new, actionable questions. This transforms uncertainties from risks into prime assets in the process. New, actionable questions move us forward without the risks.

One of the natural implications of risk-free planning is that we experience more confidence in planning anything. If we don't have to fear risks, we don't have to fear planning. When we resist planning, it can be because we're resisting risks.

Imagine what would happen to your planning if you knew it could be risk-free.

A radical proposal: Reality-centered planning

If you're used to thinking about planning as making predictions and basing your actions on them, the idea of planning based on reality could sound like a fairly wild provocation.

How would that even work? Isn't planning prediction? What would it mean to base our actions on reality? Is it actually possible to base planning on reality rather than assumptive predictions? Don't we have to know the future – or at least pretend to – in order to plan it?

Well, not really. Especially when we have conflicting predictions of what we assume could, can't, will, won't happen.

Reality is what's possible in any moment. Reality lives in the present because no other time actually exists.

Funny how that works.

Two things are possible in reality: certainties and uncertainties. Certainties are what our senses discover in each moment. They include what we see, hear, feel, taste, and smell. Uncertainties are what our senses

don't know in each moment. They include what's unclear, unconfirmed, and undecided.

Whether we think certainties are constraints or opportunities, it's still a pretty good idea to create plans that are in alignment with them. Not a little alignment – 100% alignment.

Whatever our opinions about our certainties, things go wrong when we decide to make a plan that disregards the realities of what's certain. That's just the way the universe is set up. We can argue with this, but can't change it.

The opposite of reality is assumption. Assuming is pretending something is a certainty when it is actually an uncertainty. If we're not quite sure if something is an assumption, all we have to do is check in with our senses. If our senses don't experience it, it's an assumption

We use our imaginations to compose our assumptions to describe our predictive guesses about our uncertainties.

In reality-centered planning, planning is knowing what's certain and uncertain and basing our actions on these rather than on assumptions. As it turns out our assumptions are fantastic resources in the process. All we do is translate the abundance of uncertainties into new, actionable questions. We answer our questions through actions rather than assumptions.

Assumption-based planning is flawed planning. The prime flaw in planning is working from assumptions. Reality-centered planning is flawless planning because we base nothing on our assumptions.

We can do primarily reality-centered planning, primarily assumption-based planning, or a combination of the two. We might shift from assumption-based to reality-centered planning when assumption-based goes wrong.

Even though many conventional planning models are intrinsically flawed planning, they don't have to be. We can turn any planning model into a practice of flawless planning.

The good news is that we already know how to do the three things flawless planning requires. These include knowing the differences between certainties, uncertainties, and assumptions; knowing how to turn uncertainties and assumptions into new, actionable questions; and knowing how to use actions to answer our questions. We've actually known how to do these since early in our childhood development.

Assumption-based planning features risks of things going "wrong." These are things not turning out the way we assumed they would. Assumptions are risks.

Reality-centered planning is risk-free because we're not working from assumptions. Nothing turns out differently than how we assumed they would because we're not working from assumptions. We're working from questions.

Not only does nothing go "wrong" in reality-centered planning, there are no wrong answers to our questions. Each question that forms our planning leads to further discoveries of reality – the possible certainties and uncertainties. Even though we might approve or disapprove of reality, there are no "wrong" answers to

our questions. Our assumptions can be wrong but reality can't be wrong.

The prime advantage of reality-based planning is that the reality of uncertainties is an infinite space of new possibilities. Our assumptions represent a limited space of old possibilities.

If we want to repeat the past or sustain the present, we only need to work from assumptions. If we want a new future, we only need to work from reality.

Reality-centered project planning

Conventional project planning is often a classic example of flawed planning. We set (or are assigned) our objectives and milestones and assign activities on timelines. It usually looks logical on paper because it's based on assumptions. Assumptions create an aura of predictability.

In a reality-centered, flawless planning framework, objectives and milestones are simply what-if scenarios we plan for. It's fine if we start planning for one

scenario as long as we also plan for others. Planning for multiple scenarios expands our planning options – our ideas, questions, and opportunities.

It is simply more productive to plan for scenarios in multiple quadrants of favorable-likely, favorable-unlikely, unfavorable-likely, and unfavorable-unlikely.

Doing this reduces the unnecessary and unaffordable costs of negative surprises.

When projects go off the rails or get bogged down, it's often when a new scenario emerges that the project team could have easily imagined and planned for. Planning for these upstream makes the team more ready for whatever scenario could occur.

Activities and timelines based on assumptions are risks. Assumptions are the opposite of reality. Reality is the mix of certainties and uncertainties in our project. The more complex and dynamic our project, the more uncertainties than certainties we have.

Many of the common obstacles to project performance are assumption-related. The “problem” with decision-

makers, scope change, resources, budgets, and deliverable influences is actually the problem of working from assumptions about decision-makers, scope definition, resources, budgets, and deliverable influences.

When we say things go wrong in a project we mean not as planned – which in flawed planning means not as assumed.

Assumptive predictions are unnecessary and unaffordable. Planning doesn't need to mean predicting. We keep project planning reality-centered when it is question-based. All this requires is translating our iterations of uncertainties and assumptions into new questions.

Rather than answering questions with assumptions, we answer them with actions. This saves a lot of time and talent otherwise wasted in arguing, debating, and getting things wrong. Actions keep everything reality-centered. Things don't go wrong with questions because the answers resulting from actions lead to new realities. While assumptions can be wrong, reality cannot be wrong.

Actions include classic approaches like finding things out, doing small experiments with what we have, and making decisions based on our certainties. Actions lead to results and new questions in each scenario we're planning.

Questions get and keep us instantly aligned because we all have access to project uncertainties and uncertainty is a project constant in any project. There are no risks in being reality-centered because planning risks are assumptions. We have fewer, shorter, more engaging, and productive meetings. We maintain a cadence of deliverables that work because everything is based on reality.

Best of all, every project team already has all the prerequisite skills to do reality-centered planning.

How optimists and pessimists plan

We might not think of optimists and pessimists as avid planners.

Classic optimists expect things will work out whatever they do. Classic pessimists expect things will not work out whatever they do. When they talk together about the future, they don't find much to agree on. Optimists believe evidence of progress is reason for hope. Pessimists believe evidence otherwise is reason for doubt.

If we think of a plan as our sense of the future, everyone always has a plan. Each second, our brains run millions of simulations to compose our present experience.

Expecting the best or worst are plans. Doing little or much are plans. Despite these prediction polarities, they have one thing in common. They don't think planning will make a difference.

Like many people, they think of planning as prediction. When they say things did or didn't go "as planned," they mean "as predicted." Optimists and pessimists share a disinterest in planning because they think there are too many uncertainties to make any viable predictions.

Everything changes when they unexpectedly stumble on flawless planning.

They are surprised to find out that flawless planning doesn't require certainties. It has nothing to do with prediction – the way flawed planning does. Flawless planning flourishes in unpredictability because it translates the future's many uncertainties into answerable questions.

In flawless planning, we waste no time in dueling predictions. We instead work together to translate uncertainties into answerable questions. We no longer assume things will or won't work out no matter what we do.

Whatever our circumstances and assumptions, we learn how to create the best possible future, one right question at a time.

No, you don't need a hypothesis

It's always interesting when a group is in the thick of a problem-solving or planning discussion and someone confidently declares they "have a hypothesis."

Hypothesis is code for the assumptions of theories, speculations, or intuitions. They can be based on data or be unencumbered by data. For groups used to working from assumptions, they can agree to test the hypothesis with some kind of action or through group discussion, debates, or decisions by decision makers.

While the group is happily testing one assumption, there could be any number of other assumptions and uncertainties operating in their problem or planning context. Most problem and planning contexts are abundant in possible assumptions and uncertainties because prediction is only possible in a knowable future.

Instead of testing one assumption, the group could identify other possible assumptions and uncertainties and turn them into new, actionable questions. The

more questions they work from the greater their velocity toward the results they want to make possible.

Even working at the pace of a single tested hypothesis, unless the group identifies multiple questions, they have no way of knowing if the question behind their one hypothesis is the right question to answer first or next. The question behind their one hypothesis might turn out to be the right question three or thirteen questions from now.

In question-based problem-solving and planning, there is no problem with people posing single, multiple, or no hypothesis. We can identify as many assumptions as we want since we're translating each into new, actionable questions.

Getting to the right results always means answering the right questions at the right time. It is certainly not working on questions in the order they happen to randomly appear. That's the wisdom and economy of being question-based.

Why question-based planning works – Every time

Human beings have a knack for inventing new kinds of planning. We like the look and feel of roadmaps, strategies, and game plans. We favor the predictability of knowing we “have a plan.”

Our bias for predictability is genetically wired, given that our brains run millions of predictive simulations each second to compose our experience and manage our body budget from one moment to the next.

For tens of thousands of years, we have planned farms, factories, companies, guilds, cities, governments, institutions, conquests, trade, and empires. For everything we could plan, there have been at least as many things we couldn't. We can't plan languages, arts, cultures, societies, networks, politics, economies, innovations, movements, revolutions, evolutions, trends, ecosystems, or global anything.

We do civic, institutional, organizational, team, project, strategic, operational, startup, annual, contingency, and crisis planning. We do planning for one reason: to

reduce uncertainties and increase certainties in any present or future scenario.

We plan when we want to start something, solve something, or achieve something. We plan when the path forward is not immediately apparent, or when it is apparent and we need to travel it together.

We plan together to create alignment because there are fewer uncertainties in alignment than in unalignment. In alignment, we're working together on the same path in the same direction. In unalignment, we're working apart on different paths in different directions.

Planning can be question-based or assumption-based. In question-based planning, we turn the dynamic abundance of situational uncertainties into new, actionable questions. We base our actions on our questions. In assumption-based planning, we base our actions on our assumptions – our guesses, speculations, and opinions.

Planning risks are things that go wrong; planning rewards are things that go right. Question-based

planning is low-risk, high reward. Assumption-based planning is high-risk, low reward. Things go wrong when we work from assumptions; things go right when we work from questions. Questions keep us aligned with reality; assumptions keep us unaligned with reality.

Assumption-based planning makes it more possible for groups to get stuck in the costs and dramas of conflicting assumptions. Question-based planning lack these costs and dramas because everyone is quickly and continuously aligned in shared questions.

Being question-based is possible no matter how we plan. We can keep discovering, learning, and inventing varieties of planning models. It doesn't matter what people at the "head of the table" or "front of the room" say about how we're going to do any kind of planning. We can make any model more question-based or assumption-based.

It doesn't matter who starts a planning process. It can be two people, a small group, a large group, or a network of groups. As long as they are question-based, the right people will be involved at the right time

because they're working from the right questions at the right time.

It doesn't matter how many experts are or aren't at the table. It doesn't matter whether everyone knows what everyone is talking about or whether no one knows what everyone is talking about. It doesn't matter how comfortable or uncomfortable people feel.

It doesn't matter how many conscious and unconscious assumptions are shaping or limiting people's actions and interactions. It doesn't matter if people are accustomed to dominating while others are accustomed to disappearing.

It doesn't matter how many resources or constraints we have to work with and within. It doesn't matter what we assume are our strengths, weaknesses, threats, or opportunities. It doesn't matter how simple or complex our planning context. It doesn't matter how much optimism, skepticism, or pessimism is at the table.

It doesn't matter the degree to which we have influence, power, or support from others. It doesn't matter how much trust exists between us. It doesn't

matter if this is our hundredth time planning together or our first time planning together.

We can make planning question-based in any of these contexts. All it takes are the skillsets everyone has had since childhood. Question-based planning works as long as we have uncertainties in any planning context. That's why it works – every time.

Solving for the change-continuity polarity

Do we keep things the way they are or do we change things to something else? How we solve for this polarity can keep us divided and stuck or aligned and productive.

In planning, especially with complex contexts, we can be confronted with the change-continuity polarity. As with any polarity, we can take a both-and or either-or approach.

We can build questions focused on change. How could things be different in the future in contrast to the past or present? For whom do we want them to be

different? What could we do to bring about changes here?

We can also build continuity-focused questions. What's working that we would want to continue beyond the past or present into the future? For whom are things working? What could we do to make sure things continue?

In an either-or approach, we pick a side of the polarity and work on its questions to the exclusion of questions about the other side of the polarity. If our advocacy becomes inflexible, we could also actively or passively refuse and resist working from both sides. We could attack, demean, or dismiss others working on the "wrong" (other) side of the equation.

Either-or is the essence of political divisions where some people want to assume the power to eliminate others from the conversation.

In some planning contexts, all it takes to get and keep a group stuck is for some people to insist that their assumptions – or questions – about one side of the change-continuity polarity is the only valid approach. If

others take the bait and oppose by exclusively taking the other side, it will divide the group into winners and losers, which ultimately means everyone loses.

This is a self-imposed, unnecessary, and counterproductive effort. It limits our possibilities and erodes trust.

In a both-and approach, we work from both sides of the polarity – building and answering questions about change and continuity. This expands our possibilities and builds trust.

All it takes is some people inviting a both-and building of both change-focused and continuity-focused questions. This means surfacing unconscious assumptions about both and turning them into new, actionable questions.

One quick way to determine if your team is in alignment

The prime indicators of team alignment

When a team develops alignment, everyone has a tangible sense they are working together from the same page. Alignment is not a function of hope or harangue. It is something the team intentionally and rigorously develops with experience.

When alignment exists, it's obvious to the team, its leaders, and people who interact with the team.

Trust is strong. Everyone feels they can count on each other for support. Results are good. Everyone does together what no one could do alone. Velocity is optimal. Everyone moves faster together than individuals could. Engagement is robust. Everyone feels valued for their contributions to the whole. When trust, results, velocity, or engagement struggle, it's a prime opportunity to build alignment.

Faux alignment

A team can appear to be aligned, which means people could mistakenly assume alignment where it doesn't actually exist. These are the illusions of alignment.

Just having goals without shared plans for them doesn't get and keep people on the same page. It's the same with having missions, visions, and values without shared plans. It doesn't matter if these are mandated by leaders or developed by the team. The same goes for individual job descriptions, performance reviews, and incentive systems.

Mandated "fun" or "bonding" activities are important but don't create alignment. Having all the right communications protocols, systems, and technologies is also vital but doesn't guarantee alignment.

Actual alignment

There is one quick way to determine how aligned your team is. Talk to them about their sense of whether and how they have shared plans for how work gets done, how challenges are navigated, how opportunities are leveraged, and how learning happens. Aligned teams have shared plans.

Their response to your inquiry gives you an immediate and accurate picture of the actual state – and potential – of team alignment. Alignment is not something that

can be assumed, inferred, or interpreted. It is the team's actual experience of feeling and being on the same page together.

Shared plans keep everyone optimally conscious of the whole, connected with a sense of belonging, coordinated, and in sync. Resource use is optimally effective and efficient. And people personally and collectively learn from experience with greater velocity and depth.

How long does alignment take?

Alignment begins as soon as the team develops shared plans. It develops as the team works and learns from their plans.

There are teams that have worked together for while that are still not in alignment. Everyone stays busy in their own swim lanes. They work their hours, show up for meetings, and generally stay out of trouble. They do their required learning hoop-jumping.

No amount of individual efforts add up to team alignment where the whole is not only more than the

sum of its parts, the whole has characteristics and capabilities no one on the team could ever acquire.

In living systems, the performance, learning, and resilience of the whole is a function of the relationships within the whole. The system fails to develop and falls apart if these relationships don't flourish. They flourish when all its parts learn to be in relationships with one another.

Alignment is not a matter of time; it is a matter of learning.

Plans, plural

Aligned teams have shared plans for each different challenge and opportunity scenario. Each challenge and opportunity has its own constellation of certainties and uncertainties, possibilities and constraints.

Each has its own timing and timelines. Each has its own success metrics and resource requirements.

Plans are also frequently refreshed since change is a prime constant in create the future we want to see. And optimally, these are flawless rather than flawed plans.

Aligned teams work from shared plans

Every team has challenges in forms of problems, uncertainties, and constraints. High-alignment teams have as many challenges than low-alignment teams.

They could even have more because alignment inspires the kind of courage and commitment that allows people to take on more than they would if they were unaligned.

Aligned teams create and work from shared plans for any challenge that comes up. Planning is the scaffolding to their success and development. It is how they learn their way into success.

They are uniquely positioned to be self-organized. They don't wait for permissions, reminders, or extrinsic incentives to work well together. They own responsibility for their development and performance.

They are smarter, faster, and better together because they work and learn from shared plans.

Aligned teams are affordable, low-risk, and high-reward teams. Who doesn't want that?

The difference between facilitated and question-based planning

The essential difference between facilitated and question-based planning is in whose questions shape the process. In facilitated planning, the group answers the questions given to them by a facilitator. In a question-based process, the group answers their own iterations of built and emergent questions.

In even the most popular facilitation models, we're talking about 4-6 carefully selected questions for the whole process. In a question-based process, we're talking about dozens or hundreds of unpredictable questions depending on the complexity of the context and the scope of engagement in the process.

Of course, in very simple planning contexts, a handful of questions might be enough to get the group effectively through the process. The more uncertainties involved, the more questions will be required for a successful process.

A question-based process is disciplined as the group uses 3 simple rules for surfacing, timing, answering,

and learning from the right questions at the right time. It takes less time to learn these rules than it takes to enjoy a decent afternoon beverage.

So, here are the 3 rules.

- Translate any uncertainties and answers from previous questions into new, actionable questions – let more lead to better questions.
- Decide how and when to answer these through action – not talk.
- Learn from your results and keep iterating the first 2 rules.

Now, a handful of facilitator-selected questions can be quite useful to get people connecting at the beginning of a planning process. It's just that these represent a very small portion of all uncertainties that need to be turned into the right questions at the right time.

The thing about the right questions at the right time is that they are intrinsically unpredictable. They cannot possibly be pre-selected or pre-designed. They must be emergent, arising directly from uncertainties and answers to previous questions.

If a group has someone guiding them along, it is someone who simply keeps them mindful of the 3 simple rules. After they learn the rules, they require no guidance because they know what they're doing.

For people used to facilitator-directed processes, this seems a bit messy. What if the "wrong" questions come up – which they will? What if people waste time trying to answer questions with discussion and debate instead of action – which they will?

Well, we're in luck. The same 3 rules will move us toward the right questions at the right time – and keep people doing action learning. Best of all, the more we practice the rules, the more we master them – and reap the results.

When it comes to solutions, what we think and know actually doesn't matter

When we're working together to come up with solutions to problems, we make solutions possible by knowing more than we think and know so far. Solutions are things that actually work. As long our prime focus is

knowing more than we think and know so far, we have a chance to get somewhere new, beyond where we are now.

As logical as this sounds, it flies in the face of conventional superstition. Most of us have been trained to believe that knowledge is the key to success.

The narrative is that knowledge will take us where we want to go in life. Ignorance – not knowing – is the royal road to struggle and failure. This positions curiosity as a knowledge failure. In school, we were rewarded for coming away with answers, not questions.

Questions were causes of shame rather than praise. It doesn't take superior consciousness to look around our world and see things not working. We even argue over things not working from the logic flaw that what we think and know matters.

No matter what kind or scale of problems we're tackling or arguing over, coming up with solutions will not be possible by relying on what we already think and know. It will take going beyond these to discover what we don't yet think or know.

We cannot discuss and debate our way to new ideas that work because new ideas that work don't come from what we think and know. They come from what we don't yet think and know.

We can throw obscene amounts of money at problems without solutions. We can divide communities and nations over problems, only to prove once again that divisions don't lead to solutions.

One strategy is to do nothing, hoping people with power or wealth will solve these problems for us. We might not know their ability to come up with solutions is limited by being surrounded by people who get paid to monetize what they think and know.

When it comes to discovering new solutions that work, what we think and know doesn't actually matter.

What we think and know so far has been able to do one thing: to get us this far. Going further requires discovering what's beyond what we already think and know. The velocity of going further is the velocity of our curiosity. Curiosity is a passion for wonder expressed as new questions.

New questions are acknowledgments of what we don't yet know. They have the ability to take us to solutions.

What we already think and know can get us more of what we already have. It doesn't matter how tried and true strategies have been in past contexts in bringing about the current state of things.

New results require new strategies. New strategies require new questions.

The challenge for many of us is not failing to understand this principle. It's in the reality we have never properly learned how to build new questions that can make a difference.

Learning to build new questions is simple. All it takes is turning uncertainties into new, actionable questions. Uncertainties are the assumptions of speculations and the ambiguities of what's unclear.

Uncertainties are givens in any problem context. We move toward new solutions one question at a time. As long as we have uncertainties, we have all we need to build the kinds of questions that lead us to solutions.

Curiosity: the ultimate intelligence

It's amazing how smart we are. We have no lack of opinions about things we think we know much or little about. We might bristle at someone even implying that what we know is an opinion instead of an unquestionable truth.

We can read one article, see one social media post, or watch one video on just about anything and speak about it with impressive authority. If we get enough people who think they are as smart as we are, we can become an "influencer" du jour, meaning we have convinced people they are as smart as we aren't.

We can entertain ourselves and each other for hours, days, careers, and lifetimes bantering back and forth about how much we know. It only gets annoying or tense when one of us discovers others aren't as smart as they think they are. This is simply a diagnosis of unconscious ignorance—being wrong and not even knowing it.

We become and stay friends with people who are as smart as we are, which is to say, think they know all the

amazing things we think we know. We exile the disloyal who dare differ from we know. We will even sacrifice relationships on the altar of being right.

Depending on how we were raised, we might even dehumanize others who aren't as smart as we are, justifying our desire to see them punished for this unforgivable sin.

We might return some from exile back to the land of the welcome if they prove themselves to be once again smart enough to see how smart we actually are, and have been for a very long time, thank you.

We can spend time listening to political, religious, academic, and business leaders, believing they are geniuses simply on the basis that if we believe what they believe, we are as smart as they are, or at least that they are as smart as we are.

There seem to be no limits to how smart we could be. Just as we think we couldn't possibly any smarter, against the odds, we become even smarter. We are amazing that way.

There is however an underbelly to our brilliance. Believing we know everything to be known about anything we have an opinion about can lead to us to do terrible things to others and ourselves—sometimes knowing it and often not even realizing it because our brilliance makes us unconscious of our limitations.

We would have to be curious to pull that off. Because curiosity is a clear admission of our not knowing, curious is the enemy of smart, so that's a non-starter.

As it turns out, where the humility of curiosity gives us unlimited access to discovery, the hubris of thinking we know everything limits us in ways we don't even know.

Of course, we didn't invent smart. Our developing brains were wired with the belief that not knowing was cause for shame and knowing was cause for praise. In the meantime, we learned every single new ability through curiosity—wondering, exploring, and experimenting. And this would continue for the arc of our life.

Smart starts early. With the panache of an imitative chimp, a two-year-old who knows practically nothing

can issue edicts to anyone within bullying distance simply based on having an opinion.

Fortunately, there is one way out. It's living from curiosity, living from our questions rather than opinions.

It's living an abundant and engaging life of always wondering, exploring, and learning. In all of our relationships, projects, challenges, opportunities, and pursuits. This leads to a life where we fear neither death, nor life.

Curiosity is why we solve problems together, make miracles happen together, and create new futures together. Curiosity is why any new breakthroughs in any domain ever happened. It is why human beings have been and continue to be capable of extraordinary beauty, truth, and grace.

It's loving our questions, learning to get better at growing questions, and having a bias for answering our questions with actions rather than opinions. If we actually want to be smart. That's smart.

Curiosity is the ultimate intelligence. That's why flawless planning with its rigorous basis as question-based works quickly and often. That's why questions make it possible for all transformation to be linguistic.

That's why the curious will inherit the earth.

Epilogue

Each of us is responsible for the future we imagine. Not to some degree—entirely. No one can diminish this opportunity or take it from us. It doesn't matter if we agree or disagree with this reality.

Being our best in any scenario is never accidental or coincidental. We make it happen by how we plan each scenario, which is to say, how we compose each through the unlimited power of our imagination.

The future we have is the future we imagine. The present we experience is shaped by the future we compose.

This life we have is sacred. It is unlike any life before or any to follow. It is nothing less than a gift, and nothing other than a miracle that we are here, in this place, now, in this time. If even one significant thing was different in the past millions of years, we would not even be here.

Composing our best in any future scenario arises naturally from deeply knowing the sacredness of this life we've been given.

We can trust ourselves to be our best because we have everything we need to do so. We have all the time and talents we need. We have all the permissions and opportunities we need.

We already have everything we need to live into the possibility of a wonderful life.

About the author

Jack Ricchiuto writes and teaches about the possibilities of personal, organizational, and societal change. He is the developer of the open source Flawless Planning Model.

Nationally and globally, he is respected as a master in the transformational power of new questions to create a future distinct from the past.

For over 45 years, Jack has coached leaders and guided teams in organizations across dozens of business sectors as well as in urban, rural, and aboriginal communities. He is a Practice Fellow with the Strategic Doing Institute.

As a 35-time author, Jack's writing has focused on psychology, planning, leadership, community building, storytelling, and entrepreneurship.

Trained in psychotherapy, complex systems change, and noetic medicine, Jack has taught leadership in undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate programs

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Jack lives in Cleveland's historic neighborhood, Tremont. His given African name is Sekou, Wise man. Jack's personal interests include writing, cooking, improv, gardening, and hiking.

For more about Jack and Flawless Planning, visit FlawlessPlanning.org.

