Six step model for Foresight

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Summary

The Six Step Model has proven to be a useful way to organize/design foresight work. It is taught at the UH Foresight program, the world's longest running foresight program and first globally accredited Master's program. It was adopted by the Association of Professional Futurista as a competency model for foresight. The steps are designed to provide a modular approach to designing foresight and scenario project work that builds from a common foundation and encourages diversification and innovation. This article describes the development of the model over time, explains who it's for, and how and why it is used.

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1.1 Origins and emergence of the six steps

Given that this book is in part a celebration of the editor's twenty-five years of foresight and scenario work as a firm, I will take the opportunity to in turn celebrate a bit of history of what we will call the Six Step Model for Foresight (hereafter Six Steps). This approach in part addresses the recent observation that" longitudinal reflections on foresight practice are scarce.[1]"

The six steps are roughly 20 years old now and the story on how they emerged and spread is perhaps instructive as we consider how to improve foresight in the years ahead.

The blessing and curse of foresight is its incredible diversity of thought. Tools, techniques and approaches flourish, but attempts at building a common understanding or standardization have typically met with resistance. When I went through the Foresight Program at the University of

Six Steps Milestones

2006 *Thinking about the Future*, 1st Edition

2013 Framework Foresight article in *Futures*

2015 *Thinking about the Future*, 2nd Edition

2017 APF Foresight Competency Model

2020 Evolution of Framework Foresight in *Foresight*

2023 University of Houston is world's 1st accredited Foresight Master's program

Houston in the late 1980s, we were taught a wide variety of ways to explore the future. Several years after I graduated, then Program Coordinator Peter Bishop began experimenting with teaching a common approach he dubbed Framework Forecasting, which essentially covered the first three steps of the Six Step Model. When he invited me to join the program as an Adjunct Instructor in 2005, we began expanding the framework process. I was eager to share lessons learned in professional practice since I had left the program 15 years before, in particular to incorporate more of an action orientation to the academic program and the framework process.

The opportunity to develop, test, and expand the steps began in earnest in 2004 when Peter Bishop and I were commissioned to do what became the *Thinking about the Future* book.[2] Just two years prior in 2002, we were part of the founding the Association of Professional Futurists – both of us were on the Board and I was founding Chair.[3] We thus had a dual motivation to help codify foresight practice: (1) to better teach the future and (2) to provide a provide a practical framework for the new professional association.

Some of the key assumptions or aspirations that guided the initial creation of the Six Steps:

- We believed we find common ground amongst futurists in how they did their work
- We believed a framework could be designed to provide the basic essentials of foresight project works … the frame rather than the full house.
- We believed that a common ground could provide a foundation to enable more effective teaching of foresight. to teach aspiring. We have come to believe that teaching a collection of tools is fun and interesting, but very challenging for new futurists in terms of how to design foresight project work
- We believed that this foundation should be designed in a modular, plug-and-play way that could incorporate a variety of techniques

The Six Steps emerged organically from *Thinking about the Future* research. We sent questionnaires to more than a hundred futurists asking them to describe the steps they followed in doing foresight project work. We collated the entries, and they naturally clustered into what became the Six Steps. The book

then produced a set of 115 guidelines for doing foresight work organized via the Six Steps. The initial six steps with the key activities comprising the step are below:

1.0 Framing: adjust attitudes, know the audience, understand the rationale and purpose, set objectives, select your team, and create a strategic work environment

2.0 Scanning: map the system, study history, scan the environment, and involve colleagues and outsiders

3.0 Forecasting: identify drivers and uncertainties, choose forecasting tool(s), diverge—generate ideas, converge—prioritize ideas, and form alternatives

4.0 Visioning: identify implications, challenge assumptions, and think visionary

5.0 Planning: think strategically and develop strategic options

6.0 Acting: communicate results, create an action agenda, create an intelligence system, and institutionalize strategic thinking

This initial production of the Six Steps was not organized as a method per se. Several years of experimentation followed. We worked closely with the Association of Futurists, particularly its Professional Development Forum. In my view a key moment was an Professional Development Forum meeting on the Professionalization Initiative in which the lack of consensus in the field kept coming up. Peter Bishop gave an impassioned speech, later turned into a publication,[4] that asserted that, at least methodologically speaking, that was simply not true. He argued that futurists agreed on 80% of the approach and spent so much time arguing about the 20% that it created the perception of widespread disagreement. It was one of those moments where there's a hush in the room, not quite stunned silence, but the point was made and sunk in.

By 2013, the Six Steps were codified into a method that was ready for publication – it was dubbed Framework Foresight.[5] Whie the initial emphasis of the Six Steps was on teaching foresight since we were an academic program, another goal was to develop research project portfolio that would provide practical experience for the students and bring in some money for the university to help solidify our position there. Thus, Framework Foresight met the need for guiding real-world projects as well.

We indeed tested out and eventually adopted the Six Steps via Framework Foresight as our standard approach to teaching and project work. We immediately started to see an iterative or symbiotic relationship between the classroom and the projects. We would try something in our project that we came up with in class; or, vice versa, we'd start teaching something in the classroom that we developed from project experience.

Some fortunate timing intervened to help spread the reach of the Six Steps, which was still largely seen as a University Houston thing --certain Framework Foresight was -- even though the majority of collaborators on the *Thinking about the Future* were from outside the US. The Association of Professional Futurists (APF) Professionalization Task Force launched by then Chair Cindy Frewen in 2013 and carried on by her successor Jay Gary. I was appointed the chair of the effort, and among other activities, assembled a team to develop a foresight competency model.

The model was developed using the US Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration's approach that involved completing a series of templates.[6] The core team and authors included two futurists from the US, one from Germany, and one from Australia There was also an extended team of 21 people from the APF who were consulted and provided input throughout the process, which took a year to complete.

As noted above, the Houston Foresight program subsequently updated its six step models to reflect the updated competencies/steps. The transition took place over several years, with both terms included until the original was eventually dropped:

- Framing stayed as Framing
- Scanning stayed as Scanning
- Forecasting was renamed Futuring
- Visioning stayed as Visioning
- Planning was renamed Designing
- Acting was renamed Adapting

This repurposing did lead us to revisit and update our version of the Six Steps, but overall the changes were relatively minor. Nonetheless, we were very excited to see the ideas adopted more widely with the publication of the Foresight Competency Model.[7]

1.2 Audience: Who are the six steps for

Like most futurists, I stumbled into the field. We've witnessed this serendipitous entry point to the field so many times that we refer to it as the "stumble upon" phenomenon. My "stumble open" experience was taking an undergraduate course on "The History of the Future" on a whim and then I was hooked. As a relatively nascent field, with a 1945 birthdate,[8] it is rarely introduced to students in K-12, exists in only a handful of universities, and is barely recognized as a profession. Thus, the Six Steps is a significant milestone in the development of the field. But perhaps the more significant development, covered in this section, is the value of the Six Steps in promoting foresight to individuals, audiences, and organizations entering into and working in the field.

It was interesting to note that the introduction of *Thinking about the Future* explicitly identified the audience for the book as executives, analysts, and educators. Futurists were not specifically mentioned as the intended audience.[9] This expansive view is important as the field is growing it is still tiny and may well remain niche, as noted above. But the need for futures thinking and action is vital and widespread. In my current role as Program Coordinator of the academic program at the University of Houston Foresight program, we have adopted the mission of "introducing people to the future," recognizing that a small number will become full-time practicing professional futurists and a much larger number will be some form of hybrid with a primary specialty supplemented by foresight, and the much, much larger group of people are those interested simply in applying futures thinking. The Six Steps were developed to appeal to each of these groups.

It is worth noting that many, if not most, futurists, still are not formally educated in foresight. Although that may be changing. Even though represent an academic program, I believe that one can learn foresight and become a good futurist without it, although I would advocate for some sort of apprenticeship role

I suspect my initial interest in foresight -- primarily around reading some of the key works describing what the future might look like – is a typical beginning. For most, it stops there, but some take the plunge into method or “how do they do it? Here, we have an opportunity to bring more into the fold, so-to-speak, if we can explain what we do in a straightforward manner that is simple and understandable yet conveys a sense of rigor. One could argue that a key challenge for the field is that “we all think about the future” and there is no codified standard practice. Literally anyone can do it, and we all do to some degree. The methodology of course brings guidance in how to do it well.

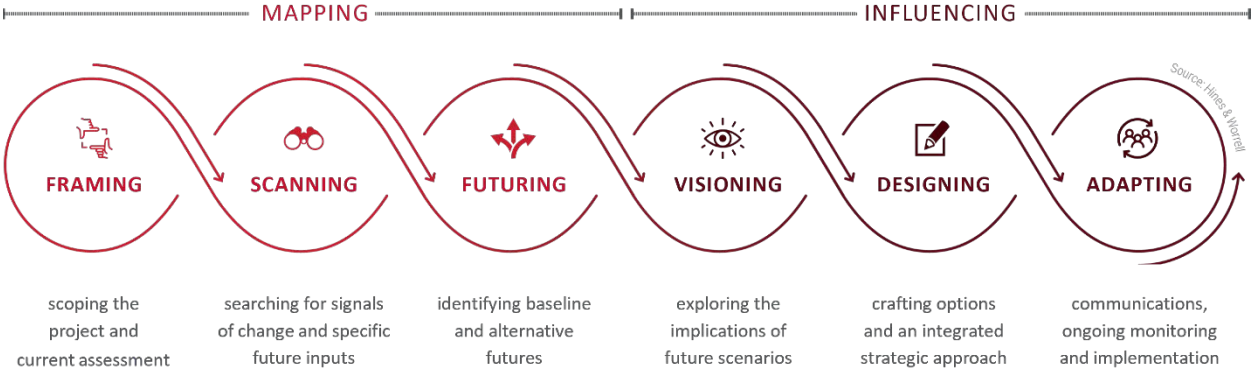
By making it simple and demystifying, we run the risk of someone reading an article or two and declaring themselves a futurist. The nascent professional association, the APF, has as a matter of policy stayed away from a policing function, has avoided providing a professional certification, and has recently relaxed membership standards to encourage new voices and an expanded membership. At the Houston program, we are concerned that participants take our week-long boot camp, which is intended as an introductory overview, and declare themselves credentialed futurists. On balance, we’ve decided to accept that tradeoff that some will misuse the credential for the benefit of expanding the pool of people with at least some basic training in foresight.

That boot camp is primarily organized around teaching the six step model. We believe it is fundamental to understanding how to do foresight work, as well to being an educated consumer of foresight work. While our work is primarily focused on the practitioners, we speak to those who champion foresight work as well as those who are simply consumers. By understanding the basics of how foresight work should be done, they become more informed consumers.

1.3 How you can use the six steps

The current Six Steps in Framework Foresight are shown in the graphic below. The key activity in each step is noted at the bottom. A recent innovation to aid in explaining the six steps that has helped project work is that they can be thought of as being in two phases. It is helpful to think of a futures project as an exploration, thus we think about the future like an explorer.

- Mapping: An exploration begins by finding or drawing a map. The first three steps of the foresight project are creating that map of the future by creating a set of scenarios.
- Influencing: Once you have the map, where do you want to go, or what do you want to avoid? The second three steps are about responding to the map and deciding what to do.



As noted above, the Six Steps were developed primarily to carry out foresight projects and teach people how to do it. But they can be used in other ways as well. The applications are arranged below from "lighter" to "heavier" use:

- Keynotes: For those new to foresight, the Six Steps provide a basic flow to help them imagine how a foresight project works. A 30-, 60-, or 90-minute keynote presentation can be organized using the Six Steps as the outline with examples relevant to the particular audience. For example, when describing the Scanning step, one can bring in scan hit examples relevant to the particular audience. The keynote can also be tailored for a leadership group that does not want or need to get into the details of the step work.
- Workshops: With more time one can design a workshop, drawing upon the steps. For many years, I have delivered one-day workshop for beginners that takes them through each of the six steps. It is designed to whet the appetite. While it is a hard day's work, it is different from most people's "day jobs" and they typically enjoy the day and want more..
- Training: More in-depth work over the course of multiple days typically involves those who will subsequently be doing the foresight project work or involved in it as extended team members or consumers.

- Teaching: For new practitioners, it is typically hard to know where to start. We want our students to be able to design a project from scratch. The Six Steps provide a basic framework to get one started.
- Project work: The Six Steps provide a basic starting point such that one doesn't have to reinvent the wheel for each project.

The modular plug-and-play nature of the six steps is suggested in the table below.

Step	Methods/Techniques
Framing	Cynefin, domain mapping, organizational foresight audit, integral futures
Scanning	Horizon scanning, content analysis, data mining, monitoring, stakeholder analysis, trend identification
Futuring	CLA, cross impact matrix, Delphi, emerging issue analysis, design fiction, experiential futures, games/simulations, integral futures, personas, predictive markets, scenarios (2x2, archetypes, backcasting, incasting, etc.) morphological analysis, systems analysis, simulations, technology forecasting, roadmapping, patent analysis, sci fi prototyping, trend analysis, worldbuilding
Visioning	Appreciative inquiry, aspirational futures, CLA, Futures Search, futures wheel, implications analysis, implications wheel, presencing, visualization
Designing	Artifacts, decision modeling, [future] personas, prototyping, risk analysis, simulations, strategic planning, technology assessment
Adapting	Action research, change management, foresight maturity model, issues management, monitoring

The flexibility of the Six Steps provides a way to innovate over time, by integrating in other techniques into the core model. By holding the core constant and introducing a variation, it provides a way to test how well the new approach worked. Indeed, the Framework Foresight version of the Six Steps is routinely enhanced by experimenting with new techniques.

1.4 Conclusion

The Six Step Model has proven to be a useful way to organize foresight work. It provides a consistent approach that is helpful to project teams in doing the work and helpful to clients in understanding what they are getting.

Beyond this direct application to project work, the Six Steps can be applied reaching a variety of audiences with different needs. They helps leaders understand what they should be asking for and recognize what good foresight looks like. They helps user client or users of foresight participate in project work or applying the results of projects. They help students learn how to do project work, and finally the help ease the entry of those new to foresight into the realm of exploring the future.

The Six Steps provide professionals with a robust foundation for doing their work, It's modular plug-and-play nature provides a scaffolding upon which incorporate other techniques and enable continuous innovation. We look forward to the next 25 years of the Six Step Model

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