

## **The Sky Is Falling, Or Is It?** **A Strategic Planning Self-Assessment**

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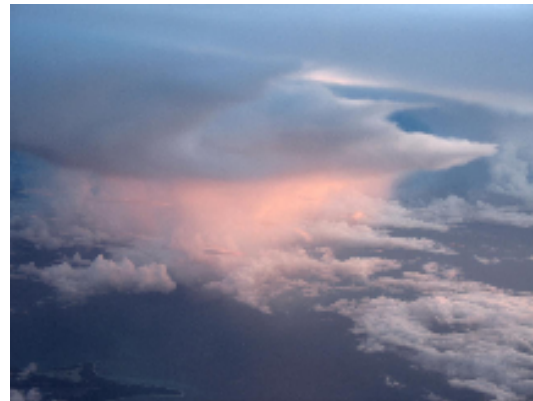
“The sky is falling, the sky is falling,” so says the strategic planning literature and Chicken Little. Venerable organizations are subject to mindless rigidity, strategic decay, and disruptive innovation. A moment cannot pass without a prestigious organization, once lauded as *great* or *excellent* or *innovative*, taking a precipitous fall.

***I am not convinced it is as grim as all that.*** I believe that people in every organization are creatively adapting and wonderfully resilient... but we often fail to even notice. Further, I believe noticing ***what is working*** and building on it creates much more momentum than finding deficits and “fixing” them. First and foremost we have to *notice* what makes our organization more creative and resilient. This is no small feat in our analytic, problem-fixated culture.

*The range of what we think and do is limited by what we fail to notice.  
And because we fail to notice that we fail to notice,  
there is little we can do to change, until we notice that  
failing to notice shapes our thoughts and deeds.* Ronald Laing

Clearly, leaders and strategic planners are facing and responding to a thicket of entangled challenges:

- Making timely decisions where no precedents exist
- Navigating from afar while depending on multiple local actions
- Reducing waste and increasing efficiency while encouraging experimentation
- Asking others to change while in the process of changing themselves
- Developing detailed plans that respond to surprise
- Being in charge but not in control



So, here is a self-assessment to help you notice and amplify what is making your planning more creative and resilient. The questions incorporate wisdom emerging from scholarly research, practitioners, and complexity science.

If you are attracted to planning approaches that suggest “operational effectiveness and optimization are not nearly enough” AND that strategy should be “adaptive, resilient, robust, renewing, transforming, revolutionary, and full of learning,” I think you will find the self-assessment practical and illuminating. Rather than focusing on “*How can I keep the sky from falling?*,” we ask, “*How can we make creative use of what is happening, relying on the imagination and resources at hand?*”

## The Sky Is Falling, Or Is It?

### Suggestions for Use

Use the self-assessment to start a conversation with people directly involved in your planning process. Be sure to “dig deep” into corners of your organization to notice where you have made creative adaptations in your process... where you are responding to a less predictable and controllable world. These topics may be sources of messy tension or controversy among participants, yet progress is well underway. *Believing* that you are making progress will facilitate *seeing* creative adaptations – believing is seeing!

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**Self-Assessment Questions**

In your strategic planning process, to what degree have you explicitly or implicitly cultivated the following elements and attributes? Provide an example-in-practice or a story from your direct experience. Dig deep into what is currently working (or showing great promise) to make your planning process more adaptive, creative, and resilient.

Note: To answer these questions, you may need to go out and observe tacit behaviors – what people do without being able to articulate “how.” Like riding a bike, you may do it well without being able to describe the process to others.

- 1. How is it that you prepare participants for surprise and real time strategy-making in contrast to finalizing the formal strategic plan?

Example-In-Practice:

To what degree: Low      0      1      2      3      4      5      High

- 2. How is it that you notice emerging direction from the fringe of your organization or market as your formal planning process is unfolding?

Example-In-Practice:

To what degree: Low      0      1      2      3      4      5      High

- 3. How is it that you help participants feel more prepared to make timely strategic decisions in the field as a result of your process?

Example-In-Practice:

To what degree: Low      0      1      2      3      4      5      High

- 4. How is it that you create opportunities to learn about shifts in the context for strategy development from the *bottom-up* and the *outside-in*?

Example-In-Practice:

To what degree: Low      0      1      2      3      4      5      High

- 5. How is it that participants are encouraged to explore disruptive innovations from new entrants on-the-scene that offer low cost, low-tech alternatives?

Example-In-Practice:

To what degree: Low      0      1      2      3      4      5      High

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6. How is it that participants are invited to make sense of BIG or paradoxical challenges at the edge of what they know?

Example-In-Practice:

To what degree: Low      0      1      2      3      4      5      High

7. How is it that participants are encouraged to share their own ideas and challenge current strategy without regard to formal position or rank?

Example-In-Practice:

To what degree: Low      0      1      2      3      4      5      High

8. How is it that unscripted sessions or groups form spontaneously in response to themes that emerge as the planning process unfolds?

Example-In-Practice:

To what degree: Low      0      1      2      3      4      5      High

9. How is it that groups, customers, suppliers, or individuals with very different or unique perspectives are included in the planning process?

Example-In-Practice:

To what degree: Low      0      1      2      3      4      5      High

10. How is it that your process cultivates “creative destruction” of non-performing initiatives as readily as it starts-up new initiatives?

Example-In-Practice:

To what degree: Low      0      1      2      3      4      5      High

11. How is it that periodic field reviews separate strategy development conversations from financial “audits” or goal setting?

Example-In-Practice:

To what degree: Low      0      1      2      3      4      5      High

12. How is it that participants utilize local knowledge of context and history so that creative adaptations arise in real-time?

Example-In-Practice:

To what degree: Low      0      1      2      3      4      5      High

13. How is it that participants are encouraged to work with the materials and imagination at hand rather than waiting for a formal plan to be finalized?

Example-In-Practice:

To what degree: Low      0      1      2      3      4      5      High

14. How is it that participants actively appreciate small, novel patterns or weak signals of an opportunity... and start to build strategy around them?

Example-In-Practice:

To what degree: Low      0      1      2      3      4      5      High

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15. How is it that periodic strategy reviews have moved from “body cavity or strip searches” to joint exploration of assumptions, risks, and opportunities?  
Example-In-Practice:  
To what degree: Low    0    1    2    3    4    5    High
16. How is it that participants are encouraged to ask wicked questions (e.g., How is our pattern of success creating its own failure?)?  
Example-In-Practice:  
To what degree: Low    0    1    2    3    4    5    High
17. How is it that you simultaneously pursue short- and long-term strategies with the expectation that some strategies will fail and others will flourish?  
Example-In-Practice:  
To what degree: Low    0    1    2    3    4    5    High
18. How is it that you differentiate strategies that *maintain* a position, *stimulate* growth, or *explore* new territory for emerging direction?  
Example-In-Practice:  
To what degree: Low    0    1    2    3    4    5    High
19. How is it that you balance resource allocation for optimizing established strategies that have strong constituencies with start-up resources for individuals or informal groups launching strategy experiments?  
Example-In-Practice:  
To what degree: Low    0    1    2    3    4    5    High
20. How is it that performance measures for new and exploratory strategies are more flexible than conventional metrics?  
Example-In-Practice:  
To what degree: Low    0    1    2    3    4    5    High
21. How is it that personnel evaluations differentiate good ideas well-executed-but-unsuccessful and good ideas poorly-executed-and-unsuccessful?  
Example-In-Practice:  
To what degree: Low    0    1    2    3    4    5    High

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## The Sky Is Falling, Or Is It?

### Scoring Your Creative & Adaptive Planning Potential

Add up your 21 assessments and see where you stand.

SCORE	QUALITATIVE "CLIMATE"	NOVELTY POTENTIAL
0-20	The sky very well may be falling. Denial, nostalgia, and/or arrogance rule.	Moribund, check for a pulse
21-35	Better the Devil you know than the Devil you don't. Operational efficiency rules.	Decay & rigidity trump new options
36-50	Discretion is the better part of valor. Rational doctrine of optimizing "what is" obscures growing obsolescence.	Glimpses of innovation may fail to thrive
51-75	Though this be madness, yet there is method in it. The "letting go" and "letting come" begins...	Coming back to life along the edges
76-90	Every journey has a secret destination of which the traveler is unaware.	A vivid imagination compels the whole body to obey
91+...	That which does not kill us makes us stronger. Preoccupation with surprise and serendipity.	All night transmogrify

*To be playful is not to be trivial or frivolous, or to act as if nothing of consequence will happen. On the contrary, when we are playful with one another, we relate as free persons, and the relationship is open to surprise; everything that happens is of consequence, for seriousness is a dread of the unpredictable outcomes of open possibility.*

*To be serious is to press for a specified conclusion.*

**To be playful is to allow for unlimited possibility.** James Carse

~ end ~

**Reading Suggestions**

Here is a sample of strategic thinking that leans toward creative adaptability in planning and organizational development. You might want to inform your survey conversation by pre-reading or following up with a few of the articles or books cited below.

Starting with Henry Mintzberg's early discussion of *emergent strategy*, the literature has blossomed. Karl Weick takes thinking to new levels, introducing *retrospective sensemaking* (we often make sense of our actions after the fact) and "believing is seeing" (we can only see what we are prepared to see). Appreciative Inquiry ups the ante by suggesting that what we are heliotropic: we grow toward what we notice and appreciate. Kathleen Eisenhardt and Brenda Zimmerman have illuminated how coherent strategy co-evolves out of loosely knit generative relationships and simple rules that guide local action. We have come a long way.

- "The Fall and Rise of Strategic Planning," Henry Mintzberg, *HBR* January-February 1994
- "Strategy under Complexity: Fostering Generative Relationships," David Lane, & Robert Maxfield, *Long Range Planning*, Vol. 29, 1996
- "Robust Adaptive Strategies," Eric Beinhocker, *Sloan Management Review*, Spring 1999
- "Patching: Restitching Business Portfolios in Dynamic Markets," Kathleen Eisenhardt, Shona Brown, *HBR*, May/June 1999
- "Strategy As Simple Rules," Kathleen Eisenhardt, Shona Brown, *HBR*, 2001
- "Appreciative Inquiry: Igniting Transformative Action," Brenard Mohr, *The Systems Thinker*, February 2001
- "The Brazil AIDS Story," Sholum Globerman and Brenda Zimmerman, excerpt from "Complicated and Complex Systems," Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada, 2002
- "The Real Value of Strategic Planning," Eric Beinhocker, *Sloan Management Review*, Winter 2003
- "The Quest for Resilience," Gary Hamel and Liisa Valikangas, *HBR*, September 2003
- "Sense and Reliability: A Conversation with Celebrated Psychologist Karl Weick," Diane Coutu, *HBR*, April 2003
- Sensemaking in Organizations, Karl Weick, Sage, 1995
- The Innovator's Dilemma, Clayton Christensen, 1997, HBS Press
- Competing On The Edge, S. Brown & Kathleen Eisenhardt, 1998, HBS Press
- Birth of the Chaordic Age, Dee Hock, 1999, Berrett-Koehler

## The Sky Is Falling, Or Is It?

Additional articles in a complexity-science-inspired series by Keith McCandless:



“Mastering the Art of Innovating: A Funny, Wonderful Thing Happened on the Way to My Deliverable!” 2006 with Linda DeWolf. *Illuminating the interplay of make-it-happen and let-it-happen innovation strategies among nine innovation grantees.*

“Oil, Water, Apples, Oranges: Bootstrapping Innovation with Social Networks,” (2005) with Linda DeWolf. *Creating a vibrant learning network among grantees of the VHA Health Foundation.*

“A Primordial Pedagogy: Caves, Campfires & Watering Holes at the Mayo/Plexus Summit,” (2003). *Learning insights and lively design methods for a complexity science conference.*

“Surprise & Serendipity At Work: Managing the Unknowable Future,” (2002) with Jim Smith. *Scenario-planning insights with a complexity twist at Group Health Cooperative.*

“Conversation As A Creative Advance Into Novelty; A Collaborative Hunch-In-Progress,” (2002). *Exploring how dialogue unleashes creative adaptability and resilience via Seattle’s public Conversation Café movement.*

“Reliability, Resilience and Results in Operations: Designed Autopilot and Collective Mindfulness At Work,” (2002). *Exploring behaviors that help people collectively and mindfully respond to surprise and complexity.*

“Integrated-Autonomy: From Shilly-Shallying to Unleashing System Vitality,” (2002). *Reflecting on the paradoxical development of distributed systems, moving beyond “bi-polar swings” between decentralized and centralized strategies.*