

“It depends on the client”—Kees van der Heijden and client-centric scenario planning: A commentary on Rowland and Spaniol 2021

Rafael Ramirez 

Saïd Business School, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

Correspondence

Rafael Ramirez, Saïd Business School, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK.

Email: rafael.ramirez@sbs.ox.ac.uk

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The “it depends on the client” mantra highlighted by Matt Spaniol in this essay about Kees van der Heijden’s approach to scenario planning brought me back to an experience, from 1986 to 1991, when Kees and the late Jaap Leemhuis were the clients with whom Richard Normann and I worked in the so-called “Shell Manufacturing Reorientation Project”.

The way Jaap and Kees acted as clients, with Richard and I as advisors, taught me a lot about how clients and advisors can collaborate effectively and work together in scenario planning and beyond.

My recollection of this intervention benefits from its having been written up already twice. The first write-up of that experience was by Peter Checkland and Scholes (1999). I find it fascinating how Checkland, who was a consultant to Shell alongside Normann and Ramirez, saw “the same” engagement so differently from how I remember seeing it. This difference is reminiscent of Gareth Morgan’s excellent 1983 book *Beyond Method* (Morgan, 1983), where he contrasted 20 well-accepted methods in the social sciences with which to consider organizational phenomena, and where he showed how a given situation is seen uniquely with the lens of one method, while it is inescapably to be seen very differently with the lens of another. Importantly, for efforts in scenario planning to mix methods and to attempt to produce “hybrid” methods, Morgan found that as there is no meta-method providing a “neutral” (meta-)stance from which to assess different methods. Instead, he found that any comparison among methods must inevitably be from the stance of one single method. The one method whose stance is used to assess the other methods frames all of them, and this perspective in

effect entails a “hostile” takeover of the other methods which are compared from its own specific stance. Morgan’s conclusion was that all we can do is see a situation from the individual points of view afforded by different methods, and then seek to learn about the situation we are examining from and with these differences. Not coincidentally, this is also what scenario planning seeks to help its users to do—to see the here and now from the point of view of different and contrasting stances in the conceptual future.

My experience of this intervention was also about how difficult it is to work with soft systems and scenario planning concurrently (cf., Lang & Allen, 2008). But if anyone has the intelligence, skill, nuance, and patience to do so, Kees certainly would come top of mind as someone who can succeed—and indeed he adapted the CATWOE mnemonic from soft systems methodology in the second edition of his book, repurposing it into the VOCATE analysis as part of contracting with a client. My colleague Trudi Lang tells me that this emerged after a strategic conversation organized at Curtin Business School in Perth in which Kees and Peter were hosted to explore the two methodologies. Also, as she recalls it, in that conversation Peter came to appreciate the ways scenario planning could bring in temporality to the soft systems methodology—that is, how attending to the future context might impact the design of “purposeful systems”. Also, she recalls that Jaap believed that soft systems methodology could be helpful in designing purposeful systems for each scenario—as a way of considering strategic responses to what each scenario might bring forth.

The second write-up is in Ramirez and Mannervik (2016) where we stated that the reorientation from a more technology-centered

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focus to a more service-oriented one of the 600 top professionals in the Hague servicing (if my memory serves me right) 53 refineries worldwide can be seen as the initiation of what later became a huge business in its own right: Shell Global Solutions. Indeed, the reason van der Heijden and Leemhuis invited us was that Richard had written a very influential 1984 “*service management*” book, and they had the idea that the way Normann framed service businesses could help them to reframe the manufacturing (refining) one (Normann, 1984). Leemhuis was the Manufacturing Strategy Director, van der Heijden at the time ran an internal consulting team for the corporate center in Shell.

It is from this experience, as he himself wrote, that Kees saw the importance of rendering explicit what the business idea of the client is when conducting scenario planning initiatives. Working with the client to elicit and firm up the business idea became, as is written by Rowland and Spaniol, the very anchor for Kees's scenario planning, in contra-distinction with the focal issue anchor championed by Schwartz (1997) and GBN more generally.

Richard and I met Kees and Jaap very often, and we carried out many interviews with the senior people both supplying the advice from the Headquarters in the Hague and receiving it in the refineries. Richard and I insisted that as many of those interviews should be done together with Jaap and Kees, which helped me to learn how good Kees was at listening to people, at letting silences linger whilst the interviewees gathered their thoughts, and how meticulous he was in writing up what had transpired. Normann and van der Heijden also concurred in ensuring that the clients' voices were attended to as a central concern in the workshops which shaped and affirmed the understanding of the reframed business idea.

Kees and Jaap were very interested to learn how the experience Normann and I were shaping with them compared with those Normann and I and other colleagues in our consulting firm were having with other clients. I had joined Normann and his consultancy at a time when the “service management” logic was being extended from firms that thought of themselves as service businesses (like hotels and airlines) to all kinds of businesses that did not classify themselves as service businesses (e.g., a company making and selling bricks) but who had found that repositioning the “service approach” as a core of their strategy and the business idea made them more competitive—such as ensuring that the right type of brick, in the right sized-pallet, was delivered at the right time and in the right place in a construction site, diminishing waste and enhancing the construction company's productivity.

Kees was a big promoter of what became the “Business Logics for Innovators” club which I had the privilege of running. Here, the Manufacturing Reorientation efforts and the conceptual clarity we were deriving from it were compared with efforts carried out, with our consultancy's support, in about a dozen other settings. In promoting this effort, Kees and Jaap as clients had expanded the learning they could derive from their advisors on the “new logics” service business idea they were adopting in Shell. I recall Kees saying

“this is too important for you to be doing it alone”. The new business logics initiative ran for several years, meeting in different companies who acted as hosts. It became manifested in two ground-breaking publications, an HBR article (Normann & Ramírez, 1993a, 1993b) and a book (Normann & Ramírez, 1994). The article was lauded by Teixeira et al. (2017) as one of the top 11 “sleeping beauty” publications in innovation research, underlining how ahead of their time these ideas were.

Kees as a client highlighted many insights on how to coproduce value and values which my colleagues in consulting and academia, and my students and I, have strived to reuse, not least with other clients.

One is that working for the future of the business is even more important than working for the present business and its management, something which became clear again in a later collaboration I enjoyed with Kees and George Burt on the future of whisky (Mackay et al., 2017).

A second one is that one's active listening to how clients see, reflect upon, and even doubt their business enables the conversation with the client to become more strategic, as Kees himself wrote in his book.

A third is that expanding the conversation to include stakeholders from other realms enriches it, and this insight we used in curating the five editions of the Oxford Futures Forum which we hosted in Oxford, the first few with Kees very much involved. They led to the production of two co-coedited books (Ramírez et al., 2008; Sharpe & van der Heijden, 2007). Working with Richard as advisors with Kees and Jaap as clients taught me that bringing forth the creative and open characteristics of the client in a collaborative inquiry enhances the value that is cocreated (Ramírez, 1999). This is something all advisors are well-advised (sic) to bring out in the work their clients do with their help. Kees very much behaved as an open, collegial creative client and a joy to work with, as was also the case for Jaap.

And finally, the fourth insight I derived from this is that in the end what matters to produce useful value is seeing the world not from the future of the business as “anyone” might see it, but primarily from the intended user's (client's) point of view, rendering what Bradfield et al. (2005) called the “intuitive logics” school a phenomenological stance on strategizing, which Kees called “the Selsky turn” (Ramírez & Selsky, 2016; Selsky et al., 2008; Van der Heijden et al., 2016).

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Author elects to not share data.

ORCID

Rafael Ramirez  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6836-1687>

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