

Kees van der Heijden, a personal reflection: Commentary on Rowland and Spaniol 2021

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Abstract

This piece is a personal reflection on the work and impact of Kees van der Heijden as part of the retrospective book review by Rowland and Spaniol (2021).

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engineer, mentor, reflective practitioner, strategist

I felt very honored to be invited to propose one of the commentaries related to Kees's contribution to our field of scenario planning and strategy—as exemplified in his book *Scenarios: The art of strategic conversation*. I have ordered my comments in three parts, picking up on Nicholas and Matthew's insights, and reflecting on my personal experience engaging with Kees and his work.

1 | KEES: THE MENTOR

I first met Kees when I was working at Curtin University in Perth where he had previously mentored Jo Barker to establish the Scenario Planning and Research Unit in the 1990s. I soon came to realize that this initiative at Curtin was just one manifestation of his commitment to mentoring and progressing the field worldwide. While Nicholas and Matthew emphasized his involvement at Strathclyde Business School, Kees also played a key role at the University of Oxford and Templeton College as an Associate Fellow where he co-established the executive Oxford Scenarios Programme. He also became involved as I understand with the Center for Organizational Learning and Change at Nijenrode University in his home country of The Netherlands. Programs at these universities—likely many others—used his book as a core text, shaping a generation of scenario planning and strategy scholars and practitioners.

His entrepreneurial mentoring extended beyond institutions to make a personal difference to the lives of many individuals—as the commentaries in this journal attest to. In my own case, it was Kees who introduced me to colleagues from companies and

research centers across the United Kingdom and Europe, providing me with a very wide variety of insights and a valuable network to support my subsequent work in the field of scenario planning. In particular, it was Kees who introduced me to Rafael Ramirez at Oxford with whom I have been fortunate to study and work over the last 16 years. I owe Kees a significant debt of gratitude for the new social capital he enabled me to build for my professional life.

As it turned out, my doctoral studies focused on how organizations could build new social capital with scenario planning (Lang, 2012) and Kees's thinking was instrumental here too. His ideas of how scenarios can improve the quality of strategic conversations were important in shaping my thinking of how scenarios can build the cognitive dimension of social capital (i.e., shared understanding and a common language). In addition, it was Kees who suggested that social capital could be thought of as another criterion with which to judge the value of scenario planning engagements.

2 | KEES: THE ENGINEER

Once at Oxford I had the opportunity to engage with him more in person. In doing so, two enduring pictures come to mind. The first was in front of a whiteboard with a group of participants in the Oxford Scenarios Program who were walking him through the systems maps that they had created for a set of scenarios they were developing. Kees was deeply engaged with them understanding the logic of the scenarios as well as the logic that related

the scenarios to each other. As he turned and walked towards the door where I was standing, I could see how animated he was and the value he attributed to what they were doing and learning. The second picture of Kees that remains strongly with me was when a person came up to him in a small group that we were in to ask if they could speak with him. This person had been working on something that he thought might add value to scenario planning and he wanted to discuss it. Kees turned immediately, honing in, eyes sparkling, and intense, so interested to explore how the practice he already knew so well could be further improved. He was always open to new learning.

I have often linked these two examples of interest in logic and improvement of the practice to the engineer in Kees. He graduated with a degree in engineering from the Delft University of Technology in The Netherlands (TU Delft) and this formative education I sensed shaped his outlook as well as probably reflected his interests. For example, just as he might have pored over engineering blueprints, he pored over systems diagrams. He seemed to be most alive in my experience when exploring how things worked, how they could be made more technically robust, and how they could deliver real value to organizations—just as you might expect the focus of an engineer to be. (I have an affinity for this view growing up on a farm where practicality and what works is a matter of survival.)

Seen from this perspective, I can imagine Kees having sympathy with Herbert Simon's conceptualization of university departments in engineering, business, law, and medicine as professional schools where the key activity should be design, rather than science. Simon (1988, p. 67) described design as "courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones" and felt it was what differentiated the professions from the sciences such as economics, physics, and so forth. Simon was concerned that the professional schools were losing this focus as they sought to become "more scientific" which may account for the frustration Kees had with academic reviewers that Nicholas and Matthew documented. Kees, I suspect, would remind us to be attentive to what we are doing in our research and teaching, to not pursue theory for theory's sake but for the purpose of advancing practice and being truly useful to managers.

3 | KEES: THE STRATEGIST

Given Kees's engineering background and his interest in how things worked and improving on them (or at the very least not having them fail), I initially found it intriguing that he viewed his body of work as structuring strategic conversations. I thought with an engineering background he may conceptualize scenarios and scenario planning as tools, but in conversation, I recall him adamantly putting forward the view that scenario planning was a process, made up of several tools. (A view that aligns with Nicholas and Matthew's observation about Kees's conversation with Peter Schwartz that scenarios are not just analytical devices).

It was not long, however, before I came to understand the value and importance of his view. Systems theorists have suggested that

social systems live, and evolve or die, as a result of the quality of their communications (e.g., Capra & Luisi, 2014). In times of deep uncertainty, these communications become even more important as executives talk together to make sense of what is changing and how they should respond. Kees deeply understood this—that these conversations are the essential infrastructure by which organizations survive, just as an engineer would consider physical infrastructure key to the survival of physical systems such as cities.

In drawing our attention to the importance of strategic conversations as the essential infrastructure in organizations he reminds us to attend to the interaction of the formal and informal conversation and how they shape each other (which the cover of the first edition of his book really brings alive); that genuine insight comes from iterative conversations as executives learn from each other and make sense together; that uncertainty shifts the emphasis from analysis to processes; that the purpose of these strategic conversations is to identify a unique role for the organization in its business environment; and that strategy in conditions of deep uncertainty is essentially hard work.

But while strategy may be hard work, it has been infinitely enriched and made that little bit easier by Kees's book and his lifetime of reflective and exemplary practice that it captures and shares.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

There is no data available to share.

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