

# The Future Is Already in the Room. Its Seeds Are Stories, Not Yet Numbers.

Sensory Leadership · Elixar · sensoryleadership.org · Feb 2026

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The future is not a statistical extrapolation of the present.

We say we know but we keep drawing straight lines into the future. The insight is not new — Pierre Wack, the architect of Shell's scenario methodology exposed the approach in the 1970s.

The urgency has renewed as A.I., which is essentially statistics on steroids, dominates the tools we use. Yann Le Cun (former VP at Meta) warns us that A.I. is maybe fantastic but nowhere near understanding and sensing appropriately our physical world. We shouldn't be fooled. Manipulating language and numbers is insufficient.

This is where the risk is: if the duo A.I. + human are both statisticians, we crash. This is also where a new horizon lies: if the human senses more, we travel way further.

*The seeds of the future are in the present. Our task is to become present enough so we perceive these seeds and so we track the conditions in which one or another may grow.*

The discipline is not about predicting what will happen. It is about expanding the range of what a team can perceive. So even if our initial hypotheses were wrong, we have primed the team to anticipate.

## CREATING THE CONDITIONS TO STAY VIGILANT

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In the Sensory Leadership journey, the topic of the future comes before strategy but after the team has done something rarer and more demanding: it has learned to see itself clearly. It has already begun to de-polarise its views (see our [previous article](#) on the *Sensory Tribe*<sup>™</sup>, indeed a team that has not yet mapped its own perceptual tendencies would plainly transpose what it already believes).

Stories are crucial to connect and engage people — Harvard Business Review offers compelling cases in its work on storytelling and organisational change — but the single-story syndrome is dangerous.

*Courage and humility come with doubt. Not with averaging numbers.  
Planning doubt will tune our senses to vigilance. Planning averages will  
numb our mind.*

Reporting and accounting have created a tradition of single-story and numbers (one date = one column) which is totally fine for the purpose of archiving past statements and paying taxes. It is somewhat understandable also to keep financial projections sharp and legible on spreadsheets and slide decks. We then often recourse to averages: it assigns probabilities to outcomes, discounts future cash flows, and produces an expected value that is defensible on a spreadsheet but rarely survives contact with reality. That tradition is not the problem. The problem is when it becomes the only lens. We should make sure it doesn't stop us catching opportunities and avoiding disasters.

This is why we must develop teams that have made peace with the concept of doubt. Doubt must be kept turned-on but structured. For a moment, set the spreadsheet aside. The team must first know that a single-story narrative — whether right or wrong — is always dangerous, because it shuts down the very vigilance that would tell us when that story has stopped being right.

The act of holding multiple stories (and futures) without prematurely choosing one develops something that has no official name in most strategy curricula but is perhaps the most important collective capability a leadership team can possess: *the tolerance for structured uncertainty*. The humility to admit that nobody in the room — regardless of seniority — knows which world is coming. And the discipline to let that doubt sharpen perception rather than paralyse decision.

## ANTENNAS, NOT CRYSTAL BALLS

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It is tempting to measure the success of a Scenario Planning exercise by whether the futures imagined eventually come true. This is the wrong measure entirely. Shell's famous 1971 scenarios — which prepared the company to respond to the 1973 oil shock far more effectively than its competitors — were not successful because they predicted the embargo. They were successful because they had prepared the organisation to recognise the signals of a world it had already imagined.

This is the true purpose of the exercise as practised within Elixar's Sensagy™ programme: not to produce accurate forecasts, but to produce teams with better antennas. Teams that notice earlier, that categorise faster, and that act with coherence because the conversation about what to do in each plausible world has already happened.

Without waiting for the future to come, the team can already position projects and foresee their viability in each world. The team can also immediately set what weak signals to monitor so to sense early when a world or another is approaching.

Instead of debating probabilities, the team can debate what weak signals to monitor, what leading indicators would give the green light to each initiative, and what the team collectively needs to become more attuned to and more skilled at.

*The ability to sense weak signals before they consolidate. The ability to tell a story about the future that makes a team capable of navigating it together. These are human capacities for collective readiness that Elixar calls **Forward-Culture** — it is built, not inherited.*

## CULTURE IS NOT ONLY AN INHERITANCE

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There is a common way of thinking about organisational culture: as something accumulated over time, transmitted from founders to successors, inscribed in habits and rituals that predate the current team. This is not wrong. But it is incomplete. It also often leads us to wrongly diagnose that a “Culture change” is needed while the issue is not deep inside the Culture but where the Culture points to.

*Stop dreaming of Culture makeovers unless you have 10 years to do so.  
Start feeding a Forward-Culture: the habit of acknowledging our  
inherited present and of questioning our plausible futures.*

Culture, more precisely, is a shared collection of markers and principles that a group uses to navigate its world. And if that is the definition, then a team can also build culture prospectively — around the futures it is preparing for, not only the past it has inherited.

*Forward-Culture* is the deliberate creation of shared language, shared references, and shared mental maps around plausible futures that the team has constructed together. It is culture as a navigational tool, not only as a memorial. When a team names its future worlds — when World X, World Y and World Z become real inhabited concepts in the room — something quiet but significant happens: The future becomes a place the team has already been to, in imagination and in conversation.

Naming those worlds matters enormously. A name is not just a fancy label. When a team agrees that one future is 'The Archipelago' and another is 'The Iceberg', they are not merely choosing words. They are encoding an entire narrative — a set of conditions, a set of relationships, a set of what counts as a signal — into a shared lexicon that can be retrieved instantly under pressure. This is like one same IP address in everybody’s brain that, when called, will unwrap synchronously at lightspeed. This is Culture.

And this is competitive edge. Not because the names are clever, but because the shared understanding they compress is deep. In the moment of pivoting — when the evidence starts pointing toward one

world rather than another — the team doesn't need to reconstruct its thinking from the beginning. The team moves already.

*The uncertainties remain but the overarching rules can already be designed to face the inevitable initial wave of the changes to come...*

## STRATEGY HAS NO PLAY UNTIL THE FUTURES ARE BUILT.

Strategy, as Peter Compo has argued, is not a description of where an organisation wants to go. It is a rule for navigating past the dominant constraint that stands between the organisation and its aspirations.

Taking the time to define the plausible future worlds — through the *Scenario Planning* method shown in the box below — is setting the scene where constraints and opportunities will evolve and where the strategy can play.

*The future is already in the room. The strategy arrives after and it must fit. It has no place to sit; it is a rule to guide the mission.*

The internal logic for adapting when the world turns out to be different is the essence of strategy.

### THE CONSTRUCTION OF MULTIPLE PLAUSIBLE FUTURES

Projecting futures without a framework produces noise, not foresight.

In consequence, a rigorous sequence must initiate with the team articulating the focal question — not 'what might happen?' but 'what do we most need to understand in order to strive?' Then the team separates what is known (robust trends: the forces that will shape the future regardless of which world emerges) from what remains genuinely uncertain (the open questions for which no evidence yet resolves the debate).

Linked uncertainties are regrouped along axes that are as orthogonal as possible — meaning they are truly independent of each other, so that the space they create is genuinely diverse and constitute complex sets of conditions that we can each call a world. The team then eliminates the least plausible combinations and distils the remaining space into three future worlds.

Finally, worlds must absolutely have a name and a narrative. Each world becomes a shared container of meaning — a name the whole team can call on when reality starts to move.

*Elixar programmes begin with sensory awareness, move through the construction of plausible futures, and carry on toward the formulation of a genuine strategy that will later be played when implementing projects and plans. It is a ritual of collective preparation open to multiple futures but guarded by boundaries...*

## WHERE BOUNDARIES ARE CATALYSTS

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The Sensagy™ approach to Scenario Planning is built around keeping three distinct futures alive simultaneously. Not two (which collapses into a binary), not five (which becomes unmanageable), but exactly three: crisply differentiated, internally coherent, each with a full narrative arc that traces how the world could plausibly move from today to that horizon. We find three to be the optimal number to ensure genuine differentiation without cognitive overload.

A reasonable objection arises here: does constraining the exercise to three futures, to defined axes, to a shared methodology, not limit the imagination? Does structure not suppress the very openness the exercise is designed to cultivate?

The research of Dr Catrinel Tromp on creativity and boundary conditions offers a precise answer: constraints, when designed well, do not restrict imagination — they direct it. The paradox of the blank page is that its infinite freedom produces paralysis, not creativity. Boundaries focus the divergent mind. They define the space within which genuine exploration becomes possible.

Setting a team to work within defined axes is not limiting the team's thinking. It is giving it somewhere precise to go — and in doing so, creating the conditions for the kind of focused depth that unconstrained brainstorming almost never achieves.

These boundaries hold the team together. Within them, imaginations collide, combine, and fuse into something the team could not have reached alone.

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If you recognise your organisation in any of these elements — the next step is a conversation.

Discover the full framework at [sensoryleadership.org](https://sensoryleadership.org) · Contact Elixar at [projects@elixar.eu](mailto:projects@elixar.eu)

#SensoryLeadership #FutureOfWork #DecisionQuality #SenseMaking

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### **About the Elixar services**

*Elixar is the sole provider of comprehensive Sensory Leadership programmes — delivered in-presence, anywhere in the world, in English, French, and Italian. Programmes range from the full Sensagy™ journey (24 hours, six modules, from sensory awareness to strategic direction) to the focused OlfaTeam™ format (10 hours, five modules, anchored in olfactory practice and project management application) to keynotes and half-day interventions in retreats and seminars.*

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### **About the Founder of Elixar**

*Jeremy Leroux is a Managing Director and strategic advisor (Cert. MCI, California) with more than twenty years of international leadership experience in B2B industries spanning beverages, food ingredients, and pharmaceutical applications to then delve into the world of perfumes (Cert. Olfactive Design, Politecnico di Milano). Having lived and worked across France, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, the United States, and Italy, he graduated in France as an Engineer and MSc in Food Processes and obtained an MBA in California. He founded Elixar on the conviction that sensory experience is and will be a foundation for the performance of humans and businesses.*

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