



Beyond COVID:

*Global, community, and individual
planning beyond the pandemic*

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As millions of Americans shelter in place to reduce coronavirus transmission, many are asking themselves questions they would never have imagined even a month ago: Will things ever get back to normal? What will “normal” even look like? How will things be different? Will my job still exist? Will my industry still exist?

Planning for this uncertain future, as the immediate need to “hunker down” relaxes, will require a different approach than we might have used in a period of stability. We must let go of assumptions we naturally carry forward from the past, and we must plan and measure our efforts in ways that make sense in the chaotic context we are now living through.

We should also ensure that we are taking sufficient advantage of the opportunities this chaos provides. For example, coronavirus has reminded us how connected we all are. Will this new awareness accelerate shifts we may desire, like universal basic income, public-private partnership, or civic engagement? Or will we simply forget again once the danger subsides?

Every community in America will need to plan its own recovery from this pandemic. This white paper describes a robust four-part process for planning amid chaos that can help communities live into a new – and potentially better – future beyond COVID.

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1: Explore Possible Futures Through Scenarios

Alternative scenarios of the future create a context for planning that incorporates the full range of changes that may occur. Professional futurists typically use scenarios to think 10-20 years into the future, but in times like these, a five-year time horizon is sufficient.

As you explore possible futures relevant to your community, remember that a good set of scenarios goes beyond the rubric of “best case” and “worst case,” which often simply caricature our greatest hopes and fears. Envision instead more nuanced scenarios using archetypes that capture expectable, desperate, and aspirational futures that may actually emerge:

- An *expectable* scenario captures the “most likely” future as a foundation for a broader discussion – e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic overwhelms health systems in New York City and other parts of the country, kills tens of thousands, and produces an economic recession, with life returning to normal in early 2021.
- A *desperate* scenario presents a collection of significant but feasible challenges – e.g., multiple waves of the pandemic kill millions and decimate social and economic life, producing riots, looting, and other violence beyond the government’s ability to respond.
- An *aspirational* scenario describes the positive future that may emerge from today’s challenges – e.g., a unified global response to the pandemic strengthens international collaboration and reinvigorates support for science as a tool for solving global challenges, including climate change. We recommend developing two alternative aspirational futures to counteract the human tendency to elevate fear over hope.

Visit www.beyondcovid.live for an evolving set of scenarios for the U.S.

Once you have developed a believable set of scenarios, place yourself mentally and emotionally in each one to explore its implications and to devise strategies with which your community might respond. Be on the lookout for strategies that could make sense no matter what happens.

2: Establish Outcomes and Principles

By design, the scenario process will jumble your mind as you contemplate the vast range of potential outcomes. At this point you could fixate on the potential negative outcomes, but we find that to be counterproductive. You do not want to merely mitigate disaster – you want to prepare for success. As your mind settles, distill your thoughts down to the three to five statements that you are 100% sure will be true of your community five years from now if you *successfully* navigate the chaos. These statements articulate the outcomes you hope for, and serve as the basis for your planning.

But how will you make these statements come true? Conventional planning artifacts, like short- and long-term goals, are unlikely to guide you when the context is constantly shifting.

Instead, articulate principles that will increase the likelihood of your desired outcomes. Principles are statements that reflect what we value, and they are based on what we know has worked in the past. However, they do not use the past simply as a template to be replicated. Rather, principles suggest a range of possible behaviors in any situation. Rather than constrain us to a limited set of behaviors, principles free us to use our own best judgment.

Because they do not prescribe specific behaviors, a set of principles may allow competing priorities to coexist in a given situation. Thus, they force us to think creatively about how to maximize possibility and align our behaviors in service of our intended outcomes. When applied thoughtfully, principles can become an effective guiding force for your community in times of chaos.

As the pandemic started, both of us (Eric and Kurt) adopted principles to guide our actions in our own lives. One of Eric's baseline principles is, "Fund the essentials" – that is, to make sure his family has housing and food no matter how long this lasts. This principle led him to apply for a 15-month 0% APR credit card, a potentially risky action he would ordinarily not take, but one that certainly aligns with the principle.

Kurt renewed his commitment to the principle, "Invest in relationships." This led him to take time out of a very busy schedule – and away from urgent tasks – to do the important work of reaching out to the people who are most important to him. This was a personal and professional expression of the principle.

We both adopted the principle, “Use your skills to help people.” Alongside the other principles of “fund the essentials,” and “invest in relationships,” this principle can create tension for our collaboration, since actions to help people do not always fund the essentials and could compete for our time with investing in relationships. In a case like this – and anything qualifying as “real life” – the challenge is to maximize our alignment with the full set of principles while negotiating the tensions between them.

“Test-drive” your principles in the scenarios you developed earlier, and in any hypothetical situations that seem relevant. What behaviors do the principles suggest? What results would likely be achieved? How might others in your community apply the principles in the same situation? This process will yield a new understanding of the principles, of the environment, and of your neighbors. Revise the principles if required based on this new understanding.

3: Involve the Community

Broad engagement is critical throughout this process if the community hopes to be successful. First, the outcomes and principles must reflect what the community actually wants. Second, the community must be invested in the process if they are to do the work that will be required in the months and years ahead.

The people around you will have suffered throughout the pandemic. Many will have lost loved ones, jobs, or wealth, and most will at least have experienced anxiety, loneliness, or despair. Create a space early on in the process for them to express these emotions and to give and receive emotional support.

Involve community members in the scenario process, but do not put them in charge of the scenarios themselves. Leave this to professional futurists – experts who have experience thinking systematically about the future, as both an art and a craft. Otherwise the scenarios risk presenting futures that few will believe. But require the futurists to solicit input from the community, paying particular attention to groups that were vulnerable before the pandemic and may have suffered disproportionately from its effects.

Engage the community broadly in subsequent steps, including setting outcomes and priorities and “test-driving” the principles in real-life situations.

4: Build Feedback Systems to Measure Success

In more stable times, you might “monitor and evaluate” external measures of your progress or impact. But what do you do in chaos, when you may not know what progress looks like, and you certainly do not know what to measure?

Imagine you are navigating a small boat in the fog. You cannot see your destination, the horizon, or any stars that might otherwise guide your way. How do you proceed?

When navigating a boat in the fog, the focus shifts from “how long until we get there?” to “how are we doing and where are we today?”

First and foremost, attend to the health and vitality of those in the boat. You do not know how long it will take to get to shore, but the wellbeing of the team is key to everything good: staying alive, weathering new storms, being able to sprint for shore when the fog lifts, and making the most of opportunities when you finally get there.

In that spirit, the most critical metrics may be:

- **Relationship quality.** Chaos reveals the strengths and weaknesses of the relationships within a community. Those who have invested in relationships in the past will likely reap a return, while those who have not will find themselves playing catch-up. Chaos is a great prompt to stay close and to remember that impact, return, and profit are fruits that grow from the roots of trust, respect, and shared commitment.
- **Individual capacity.** Individuals will vary in their level of hope, energy, and need as events unfold. Decades of “positive psychology” – and millennia of human experience before that – have highlighted hope’s role in fostering positive outcomes. Check in frequently with each person, and take steps to build them up when their hope falters.

Second, bolster your situational awareness to stay alert to small changes in the environment (a shifting tide or breeze) that may suggest either opportunity or danger. Learn your way into the chaos to identify the measures that will shape your chances of survival, recognizing that they may differ from any measures you have cared about in the past.

Third, monitor the extent to which your behaviors actually reflect the principles you have established, and check that those principles – as far as you can determine – are actually increasing your likelihood of success. If you decide that they don’t, or if you

realize that they no longer motivate the team to perform at its highest level, then change them through an abbreviated version of the process described earlier.

It is worth noting that this overall approach to measurement flips the current paradigm on its head. Before coronavirus, measures typically served external stakeholders, like funders, governments, or shareholders. This is like the investors who from the safety of their homes on shore use radar to track the boat's position. Instead, amid chaos like a pandemic, measurement is better understood as feedback to serve those actually doing the work. From moment to moment, these individuals need to know: the health status of themselves, their peers, and their relationships; the shifts in the environment around them; and the quality of the principles that guide them. By comparison, the value of any external metric is very difficult to predict.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has wrought a level of global societal disruption that few would have believed even months ago. One way or another, one day we will find ourselves in a post-pandemic world. To create a better future going forward, communities will need new tools for planning that respond to the chaos we face and harness the possibilities it offers.

For more information, visit www.beyondcovid.live or write to info@beyondcovid.live.