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FUTURES WHEEL

95-125 minutes

Objective

The FUTURES WHEEL is a decision-making tool that helps visualize the potential impacts of an event or decision. Its main objective is map out ripple effects, showing first-, second-, and third-order consequences, identify hidden opportunities and risks, and support strategic planning by analyzing the broader implications of decisions

Tool Description

The Futures Wheel, created by Jerome C. Glenn in 1971, is a structured brainstorming tool for organizing thoughts about future events, issues, trends, and strategies. It helps identify connections, causalities, and impacts, providing a model of the future based on the consequences of specific events or trends. By visualizing interrelationships through interconnecting lines, it aids in developing multiple concepts about potential future developments and enhances group brainstorming with a futures-conscious perspective.

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Connection of the tool with the module

Future literacy

The FUTURE WHEEL supports Future Literacy by helping individuals and organizations:

Visualize Possible Futures: It encourages thinking beyond immediate impacts by mapping out first-, second-, and third-order consequences of a change.

Explore Uncertainties: By identifying indirect effects, it enhances the ability to recognize unexpected opportunities and risks.

Develop Strategic Thinking: The tool helps participants build a mindset that sees the future as a range of possibilities, not a fixed path.

Enhance Adaptability: By simulating potential scenarios, it improves readiness for emerging challenges and supports the development of adaptive strategies.

Overall, the Futures Wheel fosters Future Literacy by promoting a structured exploration of how today's actions might shape multiple future outcomes.

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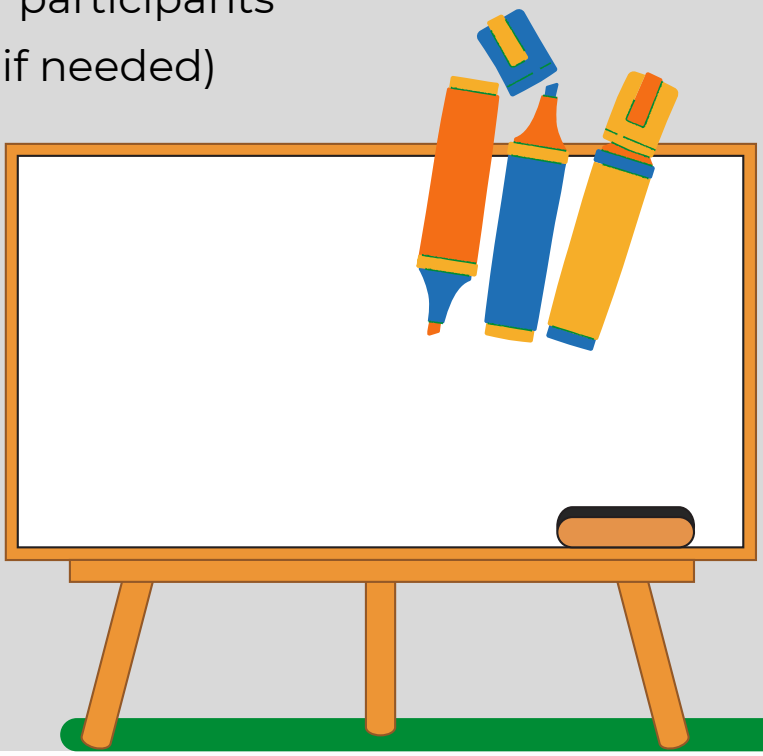
Resource materials

The Futures Wheel Tool needs:

·Large flip chart or whiteboard
·Markers (different colors)
·Sticky notes or index cards
·Pens or pencils for participants
·Tape or magnets (if needed)



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How to apply the tool

A Futures Wheel explores and maps successive cascades of impacts created by a single significant change. It will help you to extrapolate surprises, disruptions and backlashes as well as emerging opportunities.
The development of Futures Wheels takes place rapidly, and is best done with breakout groups developing their own wheels, then comparing and combining them.

I needs a minimum of 6 people; you can split into breakout groups if needed.

Step 1: Introduction and Identification of Central idea (20 minutes)

- Explain the purpose of the workshop and the Future Wheel method.
- Introduce the central idea or proposed action to be explored.
- Write the central idea in the center of the flip chart or whiteboard.
- Draw a circle around it

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How to apply the tool

To identify the central idea in the Future Wheel method, one can start either from an already outlined objective or from an open question. Here are some practical ways:

A. Predefined Objective:
If the workshop already has a clear objective (e.g. "Improve urban mobility" or "Increase public green space"), you can start directly from this objective as the central idea.

B. Guided Question:
If the objective is less clear, you can start with an open-ended question to help focus the topic.
For example: "What actions can we take to improve the quality of life in the neighbourhood?"; "What changes could we make to make the city more sustainable?"

If participants are already present, you could spend a few minutes in a quick collective brainstorming session to brainstorm ideas and priorities.
Then, choose together the most relevant or shared central idea.

!! If there are several proposals, you could use shared selection criteria, such as potential impact, feasibility or relevance to the group, to choose the central idea.

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How to apply the tool

Step 2: Generate First-Level Consequences (15-20 minutes)

Reflect and investigate on possible direct implications of change at political, economic, social, technological, environmental levels

- Ask participants to brainstorm direct consequences of the central idea.
- Write each consequence on a sticky note and place it around the central idea.
- Connect each consequence to the central idea with lines.
- Finish all primary impacts before moving onto secondary impacts.

Tip: Discuss what this future looks like. Put yourself at the time when it has already happened.

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How to apply the tool

Step 3: Explore Second and Third-Level Consequences (30-40 minutes)

- For each first-level consequence, brainstorm indirect (second-level) consequences. Identify the secondary impacts happening over the mid-term of each primary impact and write these in the second circle. Join them to the related primary impacts. This forms a second ring of the wheel. Finish all secondary impacts before moving onto tertiary impacts.
- Continue this process for third-level consequences, visualizing the ripple effects.
- Use different colors or shapes to distinguish levels of consequences.
- Continue the ripple effect to the longer term, until a picture of the implications of the event, trend or strategy is clear.

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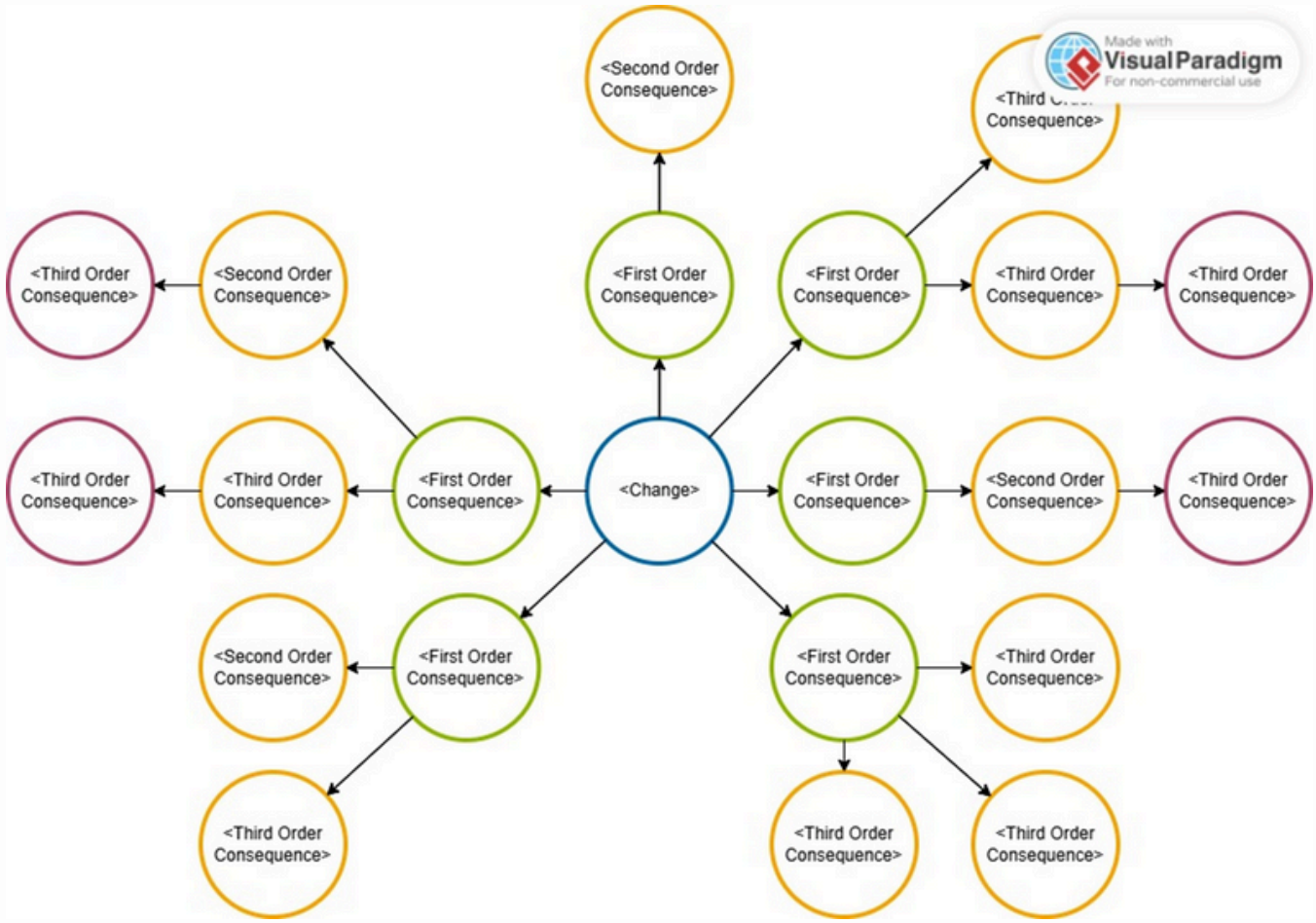
Futures Wheel

How to apply the tool

Direct Consequences: Position events or consequences directly resulting from the central term, also connected by arrows (First order)
Indirect Consequences: Position the indirect consequences of the direct consequences around the latter, connected by arrows (Second and Third order)



Source: Visual Paradigm

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How to apply the tool

Step 4: Group Discussion and Analysis (20-30 minutes)

Debrief and share insights. If multiple groups, compare your wheels and combine to create a single output.

- Begin by reviewing the entire Future Wheel with the participants.
- Facilitate an open discussion focusing on the patterns, connections, and insights observed.
- Ask guiding questions such as: "What surprises you about the outcomes?", "Are there any unexpected connections?", and "What are the most significant positive and negative impacts?"
- Highlight potential positive outcomes and possible risks or challenges.
- Encourage participants to reflect on unintended consequences and explore ways to mitigate risks.
- Summarize the key insights and ensure everyone has the opportunity to share their perspective.

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Future Wheel Discussion Template

1. Review the Future Wheel

Start by reviewing the completed Future Wheel with all participants. Ensure everyone understands the direct and indirect consequences mapped out.

2. Guiding Questions

Use the following questions to facilitate the discussion:

- *What surprises you about the outcomes?*
- *Are there any unexpected connections between consequences?*
- *What are the most significant positive impacts?*
- *What potential risks or challenges do you see?*
- *How might we mitigate any negative consequences?*
- *What additional opportunities could arise from this scenario?*
- *What insights can we draw from the patterns observed?*

3. Notes and Key Insights

Use this section to write down important insights, reflections, and potential actions identified during the discussion.

4. Conclusion and Next Steps

Summarize the main takeaways and discuss how these insights could influence future decision-making. Identify specific steps to be taken based on the discussion outcomes.

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How to apply the tool

Step 5: Conclusion (20-30 minutes)

The Futures Wheel is analyzed to identify potential impacts and develop strategies for managing or capitalizing on future developments.

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- Ask guiding questions such as: "What surprises you about the outcomes?", "Are there any unexpected connections?", and "What are the most significant positive and negative impacts?"
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What to learn

In summarizing:

Future Wheel:
Purpose: To explore the direct and indirect consequences of a single decision or event.
Structure: It starts with a central idea, expanding in concentric circles that represent first, second, and third-level consequences.
When to Use: It is helpful in the early stages of a decision-making process when evaluating the impacts of a specific action or change.
Approach: Brainstorming and mapping out consequences, encouraging lateral thinking and identifying unexpected impacts.

What participants or decision-makers can gain from the analysis of different scenarios?

- How to include more perspectives
- Bring in people from outside your policy area and/or representatives from stakeholder groups
- Run several sessions with different groups
- Share the Futures Wheel(s) with other groups and get their feedback

Futures Wheels were used in a project for a local housing association to explore the interventions they wanted to make in response to challenges to their strategy.
This enabled them to think through the implications beyond the usual one year, and to discover how these impacts could play out over time, including identifying some unintended consequences of these interventions.

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What to learn

SCENARIO MATRIX OR FUTURE WHEEL?

The Scenario Matrix and the Future Wheel are both foresight and strategic planning tools, but they serve slightly different purposes and can be used in different stages of the decision-making process

If you need to explore alternative scenarios starting from macro uncertainties, use the Scenario Matrix first.

If you already have a specific scenario or concrete decision, the Future Wheel is ideal for analyzing detailed consequences.

In some cases, they can be used alternatively. For instance, if you already have a specific decision to explore, the Future Wheel is likely sufficient.
However, if you are in a broader strategic planning phase with many uncertainties, the Scenario Matrix is more useful.

Both tools can be used together to create a comprehensive strategic vision, starting from scenario analysis to assessing practical decision impacts

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What to learn

CONNECTION BETWEEN THE TWO TOOLS:

Usage Sequence:
You can use the Scenario Matrix first to define four key scenarios in a highly uncertain context.
Then, the Future Wheel can be used to deeply analyze the consequences of a specific chosen scenario.

Complementarity:
The Scenario Matrix helps identify high-level strategic scenarios, while the Future Wheel allows for a detailed exploration of the ramifications within each scenario.
If a particularly critical or interesting scenario is chosen, the Future Wheel helps map out the ripple effects of actions taken in that scenario.

Alternativity:
In some cases, they can be used alternatively. For instance, if you already have a specific decision to explore, the Future Wheel is likely sufficient. However, if you are in a broader strategic planning phase with many uncertainties, the Scenario Matrix is more useful.

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