

Assess What Is Certain in a Sea of Unknowns

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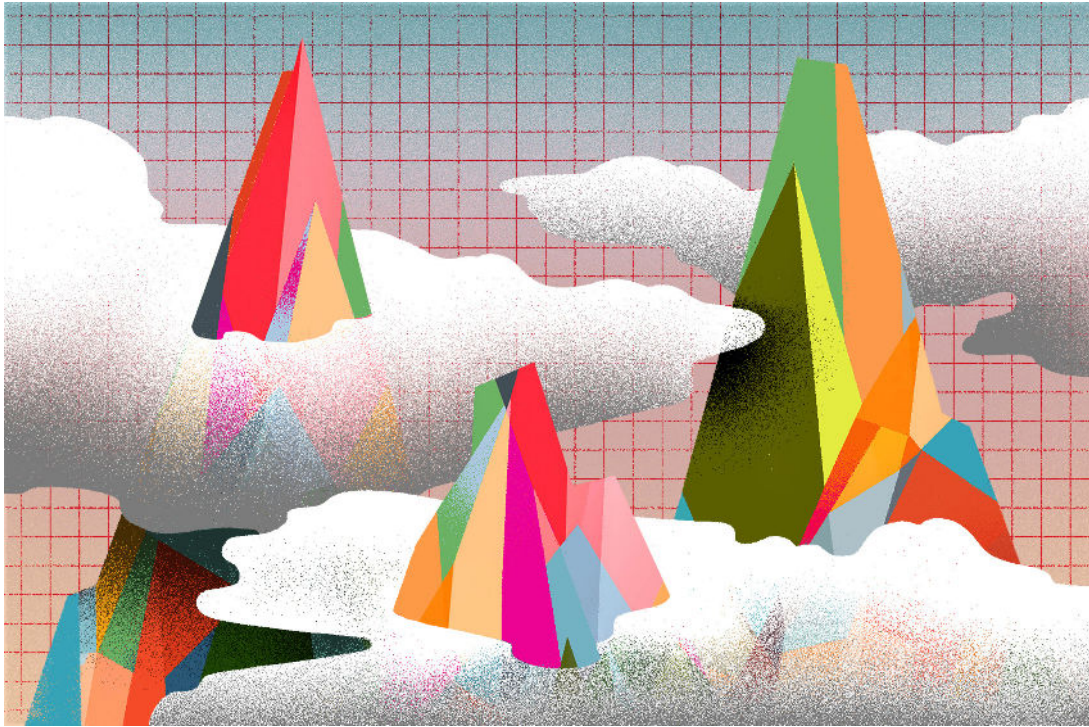
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December 8, 2025

Winter 2026 Issue, Vol. 67, No. 2

Reprint 67214

sloanreview.mit.edu



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By Cynthia Selin

IN A WORLD GRIPPED BY TURMOIL, LEADERS ARE fixated on the big unknowns. Political volatility, technological acceleration, ecological disruption, and economic instability have converged to make even short-term planning feel precarious. Uncertainty is no longer an exception — it's the baseline.

Scenario planning practices are meant to help in times like these. They offer a structured way to navigate chaotic times, not by aiming to predict the future but by constructing portraits of plausible alternative futures to surface hidden assumptions, question what's known and unknown, and tune leaders' attention to factors that strategists may have overlooked.

However, while scenario planning has earned its place as a valuable tool for examining uncertainties, I believe that its untapped strength lies in exposing and clarifying certainties. The pursuit of

as-yet-unseen disrupters has overshadowed something equally vital: what is knowable about the future.

Strategic acumen lies not only in anticipating what will change but in recognizing what won't. Certain constraints — whether physical, temporal, institutional, or cultural — shape the terrain of the future, delimiting what is possible and where meaningful shifts can occur. By surfacing these layers of certainty, leaders can shift from a vision of limitless potential to one grounded in the specific boundaries that shape change — offering a clearer basis for planning and vital scaffolding for building and stress-testing strategy.

The Future Is Not Wide Open

Envisioning the future as a blank canvas of infinite possibilities frees us from a fixed mindset that simply overlays today's issues

and trends on tomorrow. It stimulates imagination and creativity. Yet the future is not a blank slate; there are grooves from the past that persist into the future.

The landscape of the future is already being shaped by entrenched infrastructures, institutional legacies, durable social forces, and deep-seated, ongoing trends.¹ Some forces exhibit obduracy — resisting change despite efforts to disrupt them — while others evolve steadily and predictably along slower, long-wave trajectories. Some certainties, like carbon accumulating in the atmosphere, are latent but inevitable, lying in wait with consequences that are bound to unfold.

Leaders need to pay better attention to these stickier, slower, and more silent factors in their planning. In these volatile times of radical uncertainty, people tend to overfocus on uncertainties and gloss over certainties. When they perceive that everything is up for grabs, they don't notice that many paths have already been laid or are locked in.

Scenario planning is a discipline of re-perceiving that enables us to interrogate the assumptions we make about the future. It helps to tune our attention. Early pioneers worked with “known knowns” as anchors for exploring more volatile forces. For instance, Herman Kahn emphasized the importance of identifying “inevitable” trends that would shape the long-term future, such as population growth or natural resource limitations. Pierre Wack, another influential figure, spoke of certainties as “predetermined elements” that are already in motion and likely to unfold regardless of other uncertainties.

Certainties ground a future-focused analysis of change, eliminating a free-for-all consideration of limitless scenarios. Certainties help focus scenario planning and strategy efforts by shining light on how stable factors influence different uncertainties, creating narratives that are both grounded and imaginative. Knowing what you can count on is just as important as navigating what is messy and in flux.

Certainties can be understood as boundary conditions: forces that shape what forms of change are plausible, which are improbable, and where strategic interventions are most viable. They reveal the degrees of freedom that leaders have for action. That is, certainties serve as both guardrails that constrain and handholds that enable. By

uncovering the stable elements that anchor potential futures, we gain traction — and encounter the useful frictions that are often lost when we imagine the future as a wide-open space.

The Five Lenses of Certainty

Knowing what is stable — the structure underlying change — can be as liberating as knowing what might emerge. To facilitate identifying and investigating certainties so that they can be incorporated into scenario work and strategic planning, I suggest applying a framework that considers the following five types of certainties:

1. Material and physical. These certainties are rooted in environmental ecosystems, physical conditions, and hardened infrastructures that shape what is possible. They exist independently of opinion and resist quick change. They include geography, natural resources, physics, and the built environment. As physical or environmental factors that are fixed, or that evolve slowly, they provide the bedrock for future developments.

2. Knowledge- and expert-driven. Some certainties persist because they are upheld by dominant knowledge regimes, expertise networks, and institutional ways of knowing that shape what counts as “true.” Across sectors, these standardized ways of measuring and modeling reality become deeply entrenched, functioning as invisible constraints. They tend to provide coherence while foreclosing alternative perspectives, narrowing what is considered viable or even imaginable. Such epistemic certainties become codified knowledge and persist as a form of discursive substrata that appear stable. However, as the history of science shows, that stability may depend on institutional power structures that reject other ways of thinking or knowing.

3. Temporal and path-dependent. Some certainties are structured by time, such as the inertia of past decisions, long planning cycles, or intergenerational commitments. Once choices have been made — capital allocated, technologies deployed, institutions configured — systems develop temporalized patterns that resist reversal. Even when timelines can shift — say, by accelerating regulatory processes — those changes often come with significant trade-offs and costs. The likelihood of a reversal in the short term is often low due to legal, financial, or institutional drag built up over time.

4. Political and economic. Certainties are often upheld not because they are righteous or natural but because they serve some people's interests and align with power. Some certainties are firmed up through policy lock-in, interdependent market structures, or entrenched financial commitments. This is where what appears “inevitable” is often actively upheld by vested

Certainties reveal the degrees of freedom that leaders have for action.

interests. Unearthing these certainties means following the money and questioning concentrations of political power: Who is invested in the status quo, and how durable is their grip?

5. Normative and cultural. Some certainties are not material or institutional but exist in the collective imagination, defining what is seen as natural or inevitable. These are enduring societal values or organizational principles that shape decision-making and persist over time. Some normative certainties can be long-lasting across generations and are often culturally specific. They are widespread, ingrained, and largely taken for granted.

How might this framework be applied to strategic planning? If I were on the strategy team at Trader Joe's, for example, I'd use the first lens to assess how physical limits like refrigerated supply chains, port infrastructure, and climate-driven crop yields could constrain the company's growth plans. No matter how much demand there might be for new stores or new products, we'd still be bound by what could be reliably grown, shipped, and stocked. This lens would keep our ambitions grounded in the material conditions that couldn't be easily bypassed.

The political and economic uncertainty reminds us that strategy work isn't just about imagining what's next; it's about recognizing what's already in place and who is invested in keeping it that way. If I were an executive in an industry held together by strong regulations, I'd begin by mapping the policy frameworks, financial arrangements, and institutional norms stabilizing the current landscape. What's holding the system together? Whose interests does it serve? Identifying these forces reveals what is deeply rooted and helps distinguish structural constraints from surface-level turbulence. For example, in banking, structural constraints like capital reserve requirements and regulatory oversight shape the core architecture of the system, while surface-level turbulence — such as crypto volatility or rapid fintech innovation — creates disruption without necessarily displacing the deeper rules that hold the industry together.

Political and economic certainties are particularly salient for planners at the present time. The past year has seen policy mandates and governance structures once considered untouchable be surprisingly improvised or openly challenged. Institutions long viewed as immovable, such as international courts, regulatory regimes, and democratic processes, are in flux. What once offered strategic stability may no longer hold. For decision makers, the challenge is twofold: to recognize where power reinforces stability and where power now seeks to undermine once-stable forces.

Normative and cultural certainties can also be durable, though some shift gradually and others are hotly con-

tested. If you're the CMO for a global food brand exploring synthetic meat, you might begin to catalogue which values and norms are in play that could potentially influence customer acceptance. You may have sound safety data, but if public trust rests deeply on ideas of "naturalness" or ancestral diets, your campaign must work within — not against — that cultural logic.

Some certainties are helpfully stabilizing and protective of values, ecosystems, and social order. Others are maladaptive, reinforcing injustice, inefficiency, or outdated legacies. For instance, in nuclear energy, the deep commitment to safety culture is a stabilizing certainty that protects operational integrity and supports public trust. At the same time, rigid licensing regimes can become maladaptive, slowing innovation and reinforcing outdated assumptions about risk. Some certainties deserve to be defended. Others need to be dismantled. But we can't do either unless we name them.

Applying the Lenses of Certainty

Certainties can be used at multiple points in the strategic process. Whether you are interrogating strategy assumptions, building new scenarios, or refining existing strategy, this typology offers a structured way to ground foresight in what's stable.

Early in a strategy process, identifying certainties helps you set the outer boundaries — what's fixed, slow-moving, or inevitable — before exploring what's volatile or emergent. Such certainties can serve as the load-bearing structures for your scenario set. After you've built divergent scenarios, you can detect refined certainties by scanning for common elements that persist across all the narratives. The typology works as a cross-check to clarify forces that any viable strategy must address.

The initial goal in foresight is to clarify the strategic environment and test the thinking behind your views of the future. As an early move in a strategy process, you should conduct a structured environmental scan, asking, "What external forces will shape the space in which our strategy must operate?" Initiating this dialogue with your team makes your assumptions explicit and available for critique. It's a way to actively see what you're thinking and avoid letting your blind spots lead the way.

As part of the environmental scanning process, it's helpful to differentiate those factors that are uncertain and uncontrollable from those that are slower-moving and more predictable. This involves discussing, as a group, which elements of change you see as fixed, stable, or durable and which feel uncertain, emergent, or in flux. Ask, "What are we taking for granted here? What assumptions are baked into our thinking about markets, technologies, regulations, or customer behavior? Where do we dis-

agree?” This collaborative scrutiny helps to clarify the changing strategic environment and can help you avoid premature convergence around convenient but unexamined assumptions.

This matters because implicit assumptions often lurk beneath strategy, in what my colleagues Trudi Lang and Rafael Ramírez call a *ghost scenario*.² Left unchecked, our assumed views of the future that underpin decision-making can distort good foresight and derail strategic execution.

Take, for instance, a utility company planning for AI-driven energy demand. If it assumes that breakthroughs in chip efficiency will reduce energy use, it might underinvest in infrastructure. If it instead views AI’s growth and hunger for electricity as nearly insatiable, it may ramp up capacity aggressively. Which assumption should be treated as a certainty? Which should be held open as a critical uncertainty and explored through alternative future scenarios?

The work of strategy is to make such assumptions explicit — to bring certainties and uncertainties alike into the open, where they can be scrutinized, challenged, and used to build alignment.

This questioning is where the real value of the scenario planning process shines. You’re not just identifying external forces; you’re probing how people on your team perceive and prioritize them. Distinguishing between certainties and uncertainties is a dialogue designed to generate insight by examining how your team perceives change, continuity, and constraint. And in that dialogue, tensions will surface: What seems inevitable to one person may feel deeply uncertain to another, and vice versa. The process of inquiry untangles confusion. Decades of practice have taught me that distinguishing between what’s certain and what’s uncertain lends a powerful crispness to strategic thinking.

Deploying the typology can ensure a breadth of certain factors and minimize tunnel vision. Consider the following questions to identify the certainties that matter most for your strategy work.

- **Material and physical certainties:** What physical laws, geographies, or built environments define the

outer limits of what is possible? What infrastructures, supply chains, or material conditions are so embedded that they constrain future options, regardless of intention?

- **Knowledge- and expert-driven certainties:**

What counts as legitimate knowledge in this domain, and who defines it? Where do expert systems, standardized metrics, or disciplinary logics obscure viable alternatives or codify outdated assumptions?

- **Temporal and path-dependent certainties:** What processes, investments, or commitments gain inertia over time and become difficult to reverse? How does timing — adoption curves, approval cycles, generational turnover — shape what feels inevitable?

- **Political and economic certainties:** What policies, regulations, or market structures lock in current pathways? Who has a stake in maintaining this certainty, and how is it being reinforced or contested? Where does institutional power create friction or enforce continuity?

- **Normative and cultural certainties:** What assumptions and norms feel so natural that they are taken for granted? How do shared values, narratives, or societal myths shape what is considered viable, legitimate, or off limits? What futures are excluded by the dominant worldview?

In using this tool, bear in mind that strategy work, including scenario planning, is naturally bounded by what’s relevant to the organization and to those who will use the insights generated. At first, you may be tempted to enumerate baseline certainties in the natural world — gravity, human mortality, or the sun rising tomorrow. But these certainties are both too mundane and too big-picture to be strategically useful. The goal is to identify certainties that are relevant to the decision or topic under investigation. Surfacing certainties is a purposeful act of deep inquiry — a chance to interrogate and re-interrogate what you assume to know about your very specific context.

It is also important to remember that this framework may hold “certainties” that may not be as immutable as assumed. Here, the scenario planning horizon matters, for what can be judged as certain in the short term may be less so in the longer term. For example, both regulatory rhythms and demographic and generational transitions can be considered temporal certainties, but the former may be overthrown by a new governing regime while the latter cannot be.

Balance Certainties and Uncertainties

Good strategy involves balancing your attention between both certainties and uncertainties. While certainties give

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us anchors, anchors don't set direction or steer the way through radical uncertainty. Certainties and uncertainties must be put into dialogue with one another. It's the tension and interplay between what we know and what we can't know that shapes good strategic thinking.

In scenario planning, certainties aren't just static backdrops — they're the load-bearing elements, structuring the architecture of divergent, plausible futures. Critical uncertainties then play out against those anchors in different ways, animating the divergences. Putting certainties and uncertainties into dialogue means asking, "How do fixed elements constrain, channel, or amplify the unfolding of volatile forces?" For instance, if I were an executive building scenarios about the future of waste, I'd pay close attention to plastics: their persistence in the environment, the material limits of recycling, and the incentive structures around petrochemicals. No matter how divergent the futures, these factors would cut across all of the scenarios, representing a shared undercurrent shaping each narrative. More volatile forces — such as breakthroughs in biodegradable materials or consumer insistence on circularity — would then interact with these certainties, altering how they would matter in different futures.

Certainties can serve as ingredients at the outset of scenario building, but they can also be arrived at via inductive reasoning from a completed set of scenarios. After a set of divergent futures has been developed, you can scan across them to detect common elements — factors that remain constant despite differing contexts. If a factor holds steady across worlds, it stands as a stable reference point. The typology provides a structured lens to systematically comb through existing scenarios and distill foundational factors. These resulting certainties become the features you must cope with, no matter the rambunctiousness of the animating uncertainties driving the divergence in the scenarios.

This framework does not suggest a deterministic view of the future but, rather, invites reflection on which factors may outlast the others and serve to anchor wilder uncertainties. That is, certainties serve to tame the bigger unknowns. This approach insists that both certainties and uncertainties must be held in productive tension for strategy-making to be effective.

Building in attention to certainties provides richer and more honest scaffolding for the imaginative work of foresight, ensuring that strategic visions are anchored in the material, institutional, and cultural realities that will shape what is actually possible. Appreciating certainties means naming them, revisiting them over time, and using them to align actions and find grounding. This isn't a one-time diagnostic. Attending to certainties must be a habit — one that strengthens strategic imagination and

sharpens decision-making under pressure. By engaging in it, organizations move beyond the defensive posture of simply reacting to volatility and instead build greater strategic clarity.

The Power of Knowing What We Know

Scenario planning as a discipline is often associated with exploring uncertainty, but at its heart, its deeper purpose is re-perception. Re-perception is the practice of shifting how we see — not just confronting what is unknown but challenging what is familiar, expected, or taken for granted. It invites a reframing of assumptions, revealing blind spots and surfacing new possibilities.

The five lenses of certainty offer a way to re-perceive change. When uncertainty dominates, the temptation is to imagine that everything is up for grabs. Instead, this typology and heuristic shows how stability, when properly understood and leveraged, is just as powerful — and necessary.

When we ignore certainties, we risk becoming unmoored from the constraints and conditions emanating from the past that will shape tomorrow. Strategic failure often stems from misjudging what's fixed and what's flexible, by assuming freedom where there are constraints or imagining rigidity where adaptation is possible.

Attending to slower, stickier elements of change can improve scenario planning by putting it on firmer ground. Distinguishing between hardened realities and areas of greater strategic flexibility helps clarify where to invest, where to negotiate, and where to push for change. By mapping what's locked in, what's conditional, and what remains open to influence, strategy becomes more precise and ultimately more useful.

Leaders navigating an increasingly complex world must ask not just what they don't know but also what they do. It's easy to be overwhelmed by uncertainty, but the knowns — the steady forces shaping the future — can provide some clarity. The challenge is to see them and to let them shape strategy not by default but by design. ■

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