

Strategy models and frameworks

The Futures Cone

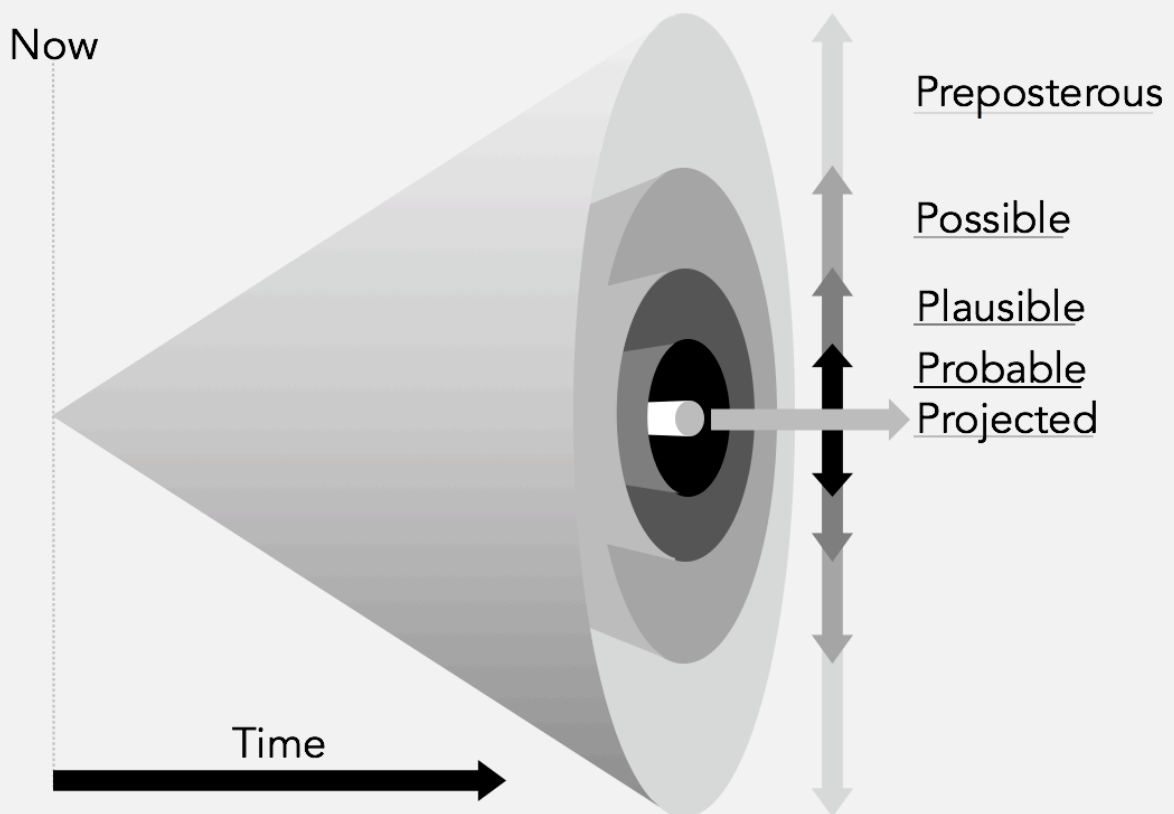


Image adapted from [Joseph Voros \(2017\)](#)

The **Futures Cone** illustrates the variety of possible futures that emanate from the current moment in time. Applied to strategy, analysis of the range of futures for any given issue can inform strategic planning.

The Futures Cone features in Goal Atlas Director, Mike Baxter's book '[The Strategy Manual: A step-by-step guide to the transformational change of anything](#)' and is also covered in our [Strategy Master Workshops](#).

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The Futures Cone

How to use it:

Envisioning the future is hard. Structured and systematic processes like the Futures Cone* make it just that little bit less hard. Futures Cone analysis (template attached) can be used to explore the range of futures for any given issue so that possible strategic risks can be planned for, so mitigating their potential harm and exploiting associated opportunities.

Explanation:

As you gaze into the future, there are a great many things that could potentially happen emanating from the current moment in time. The further into the future your gaze extends, the broader the range of potential futures that come into view. The Futures Cone visualises this expanding range of potential futures as a set of nested cones, with each cone representing a different degree of future likelihood.

Projected future: The horizontal centre-line of the cone is the projected future. This is the default option. This is what will happen if nothing changes. This is the business-as-usual line.

Probable futures: These are likely to happen, given present circumstances. The level of planning you undertake to accommodate these futures should be proportional to:

1. their probability – the higher the probability of them happening, the firmer your plans should be;
2. the extent to which you feel circumstances today are going to continue to shape the future as they are currently shaping the present. In other words, do you see disruption on the horizon?

Plausible futures: These are outside the cone of probable futures, i.e. improbable, yet they could still come about. The means by which they could come about are known and are credible. Here, you possibly don't need elaborate plans yet, but you do need vigilance to spot when a plausible future becomes more probable.

Possible futures: These are both improbable and implausible, yet substantial changes in circumstances could still see them occur. The only planning needed here is to look for possible futures that would hugely impact you and which could be planned for relatively easily and inexpensively.

Preposterous futures: These are the ones that you scoff at and dismiss, yet still occasionally come about. These can often be useful provocations in futures-planning sessions. Identify a handful of preposterous futures that are improbable, implausible and impossible. Now try to work out why they are so preposterous and what would need to change to make them possible? Now, do you still think they are as preposterous as you did originally? Part of the value of the Futures Cone is the recognition that things frequently move from preposterous to actually happening, and hence need to be planned for.

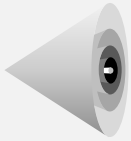
A strategy is a compelling vision of the future. It is about the destination we seek and the path we choose, to get there. As such, it should be resilient in the face of changing circumstances. A strategic plan, on the other hand, is a programme for transformational change. It is all about people, priorities, resources, targets and deadlines. It needs to adapt and evolve. A strategic plan should be designed to cater for both projected and probable futures. It should ideally have contingency plans for plausible and possible futures. And it should ignore preposterous futures until the time they start to transform themselves first into possibilities and eventually into probabilities.

**The Futures Cone was developed by Joseph Voros (2003, 2017) from the 'Cone of Plausibility' devised by Charles Taylor (1990), and the 'futures cone' model used to portray alternative futures by Hancock and Bezold (1994).*

Strategy:

Prepared by:

Date:



Futures Cone Analysis

Note: Risk includes harm to be mitigated and opportunity to be exploited – see [Strategic Risk Model](#)

What is the issue?

Projected risks

Business-as-usual; what will happen if nothing changes.

Probable risks

Likely to happen, given present circumstances.

Plausible risks

Improbable, yet could still come about.

Possible risks

Improbable and implausible, yet substantial changes in circumstances could still see them occur.

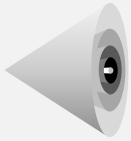
Preposterous risks

Improbable, implausible and impossible, yet still occasionally come about.

Strategy:

Prepared by:

Date:



Futures Cone Analysis

Note: Risk includes harm to be mitigated and opportunity to be exploited – see [Strategic Risk Model](#)

What is the issue?

Projected risks

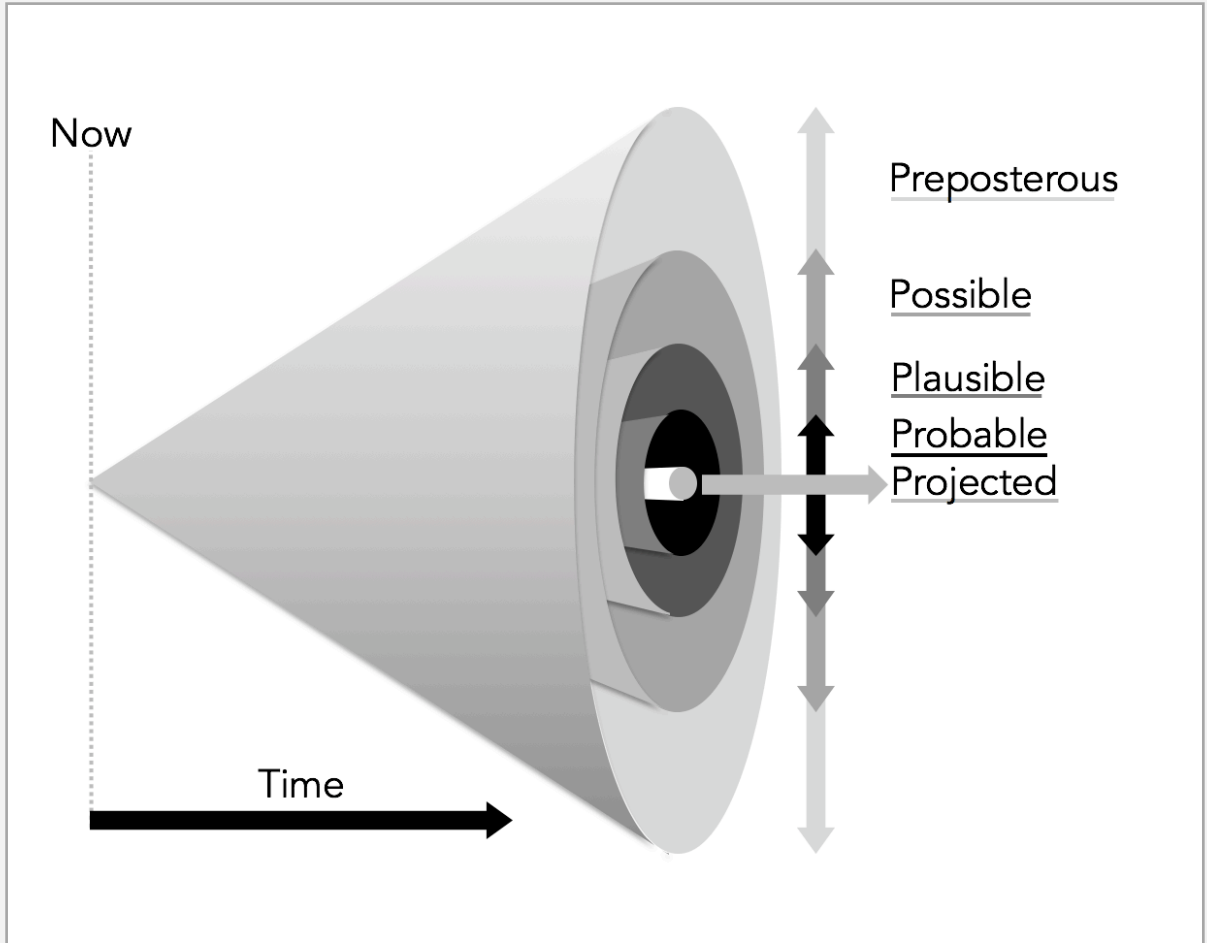
Probable risks

Plausible risks

Possible risks

Preposterous risks

The Futures Cone: Downloadable Image Asset



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