Drivers of Change: The Key to Organizing Foresight Thinking

Those practicing strategic foresight have heard about **signals** and **drivers**. But how are they different, and how are they used to envision the future?

Signals are evidence of the future that we can find in today's world. They are concrete, compelling observations about how the world is changing that give us a hint at where we might be headed.

Drivers, on the other hand, are broad long-term movements that are likely to have a significant impact on the future. A driver is usually a thematic cluster of related inputs from your scanning and research, for example: scan hits, trends, issues, plans, projections, events, laws and regulations, etc. that are driving or shaping change in your domain. Examples of some underlying or universal drivers: aging population, cybersecurity threats growing, and climate change investments increasing.

Although drivers of change move at different scales and speeds, they are always overlapping because no single driver operates in a vacuum. Drivers provide critical context for analyzing signals because they allow us to understand both the context through which a signal came to be and the implications that a signal might have for the future.

Sabrina Howard, *Institute for the Future*, described it this way in 2021: "Drivers are to signals as diseases are to symptoms. Just as a symptom is a specific, observable result of disease, signals result from drivers and when observed, call our attention to the presence of the drivers and how they might shape the future."

Once we have identified some tentative key drivers for the system or domain we're concerned with, looking closely at their implications can in turn help us extend our awareness to search for corresponding signals, thus deepening our understanding. More and better signals then help us refine our description of the drivers in a never-ending, iterative process.

These refined drivers, specific to our system or domain (as opposed to universal or underlying drivers), become the keys to building stories or scenarios that explain the possible futures we may be headed toward. It is stories that will grab the attention of those planning paths toward the preferred futures for our organizations and community.

Here are some interesting resources about drivers and their signals, including examples from organizations all over the world practicing strategic foresight:

Drivers Horizon Scans: tips for grounding foresight in quantitative indicators is an article by Rachel Maguire, **Institute for the Future Research Director,** discussing taking the time to methodically analyze the long-term drivers shaping your topic through a framework like STEEP.

In mid-2023 the Open Foresight Hub sponsored the Global Drivers 2030-2060 Initiative, which identified and analyzed the major drivers projected to influence change in the 2030-2060 timeframe. The focal question of this project was: What are the drivers that emerge from publicly available analysis regarding the 2030-2060 horizon? 27 drivers were identified and categorized.

FEMA's Strategic Foresight 2050 Toolkit is a resource providing information on programming a strategic foresight initiative as well as guidance for leveraging the research products, workshop

materials and approaches used at FEMA. It’s a very enlightening example of the strategic foresight process in practice, especially the library of signals and drivers identified.