



Strategic planning classically relies on looking at current patterns and trends in order to make forecasts about the future. In a world ruled by unpredictable change, this has become quite a difficult thing to do. In complex and dynamic environments, the only way to be prepared is to sense and interpret early warning signs of changes as they occur.

Weak signals are early signs of major changes and developments. For example, an early warning sign of Multiple Sclerosis is blurry vision. Early warning signs of the 2008 financial crisis were falling prices in the US housing market. Often, such weak signals are overlooked or misinterpreted as they do not fit into our view of the world. Consequently, there are two crucial issues related to sensing weak signals: a) identifying and filtering them out from the “noise” (the mess of events and random signs that do not point to anything bigger), and b) interpreting them in the correct way.

Identifying weak signals:

Weak signals do not find you - you must find them. Keep your eyes open, scan your social environment and media sources, check what is happening at the edges of your vision, examine curious little things even if they seem irrelevant at first glance. If a signal is repeated by several sources, starts to grow, or changes in quality, be curious. Take a closer look. This requires a systematic practice of environmental scanning and a conscious effort to reduce our natural filters of perception. We usually pay attention to what we expect to see (this phenomenon is known as “selective perception”). Consequently, things that we don’t expect are often filtered out or distorted so that they fit into our view of the world.

Interpreting weak signals:

Once you have identified a signal that seems to point toward a future change, you have to interpret what it may mean. Whether blurry vision is an indication of growing farsightedness or Multiple Sclerosis is not easily discerned, but can be interpreted with a few additional steps of analysis. Interpretations, just like perceptions, are distorted by what we expect and desire. Even groups are not immune to these distortions. (The effect of a collective tunnel vision in which interpretations that contradict the dominant belief of the group are filtered out is called “group think”.) Thus, it is best to interpret weak signals with a diverse team. Build and test multiple hypotheses and scenarios, and don’t be afraid to engage in constructive conflict about them. Over time, interpreting weak signals will become a practice that you will get better at as a team.