Trudi Lang and **Rafael Ramirez** explain how the Oxford Scenarios Programme helps organisations to strategise in the face of rapidly shifting societal norms.

PROGRAMME FOCUS:
SCENARIO PLANNING

COVID-19 is likely to change perceptions about what is acceptable in ways that we can only begin to imagine, both for individuals and organisations. Oxford itself has seen a powerful recent example, as the re-energised Black Lives Matter movement gave new impetus to the long-running campaign to remove statues of Cecil Rhodes, the 19th-century businessman and colonialist whose financial gift created the Rhodes Scholarships, from around the city, and to reassess his legacy. In this environment, how best to anticipate the effects of these new norms on one's organisational reputations and devise strategies to mitigate them?

At Oxford Saïd we use scenario planning to explore such issues. Scenarios are plausible accounts of how uncertain future contexts could unfold. They enable people to reframe reputational risks and to identify new opportunities and collaborations to help the organisation position well for the future in the face of changing social attitudes, policy changes, economic shifts, new technologies, environmental developments and so on.

Scenarios represent different possible futures of the business environment arriving in the here-and-now of strategy making. Planning with scenarios enables leaders to explore how these contextual factors could reconfigure future values which matter, and how novel relationships with stakeholders may reshape their organisation's reputation.

Below we outline how executives can develop and use scenarios to assess reputational opportunities and challenges in the post COVID-19 world.

1. **Define the user and use:** the scenarios process starts by scoping who specifically the work is being done for and for what purpose. For example, is it the corporate affairs director or the board members or the CEO who is the primary intended user? And how, specifically, will the outcomes of the scenarios work be used by them? This clarity about user and use ensures the scenarios are useful.

2. **Scope who is to be involved in the process:** the scenarios process provides an ideal opportunity to hold a deep and rich strategic conversation with existing and emerging stakeholders. Involving different groups not only provides valuable insights into how perceptions might change, but also builds new social capital that can contribute to the organisation's reputations, demonstrating, for example, transparency and inclusiveness.

3. **Scan the horizon:** explore contextual factors that could impact perceptions and reputations after COVID-19. For example, what might be the role of the state and the nature of relations between the public and private sectors? How might social attitudes shift about what it means to be "a good corporate citizen"? How might

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Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) factors be measured and reported? How might the media impact reputations?

4. **Develop scenarios:** based on the factors that are deemed to be the most useful in terms of helping the users of the scenarios reframe the post-pandemic world, develop a set of two to three scenarios. It can be useful to spell out what the "ghost" scenario is (the one implied in the current reputation strategy) to ensure the new set of scenarios provide an insightful contrast. The ghost scenario includes the expectations that are currently being made about the future environment and its impact on the organisation's reputation.

5. **Explore emerging stakeholders and/or changes in stakeholder values:** using the new set of scenarios, explore what new stakeholders might emerge, and what new values may replace current ones. How might these changes impact one's reputation in the business environment?

6. **Review the organisation's reputational behaviours, networks and narratives:** armed with the new set of scenarios and of the possible changes of stakeholders and values in the business environment, discuss with the users what changes will help position the organisation positively in each scenario and across all of them. Think in terms of robust choices – actions that make sense no matter which of the scenarios might emerge – and contingencies – actions that require more time to judge depending on which scenario is likely to be more dominant.

7. **Monitor the scenarios:** work out leading indicators or signals that will enable you to understand which scenario or aspects of the scenarios are emerging. This will help inform which actions to pursue and when.

The value of scenario planning is in enabling leaders to learn and reframe their own perceptions of factors that could impact their organisation's reputation in the future – leading to anticipatory action rather than paralysis, strategic blindness or reactive delays. The scenario planning process itself, especially if conducted in a transparent and inclusive manner, can also directly contribute to the shaping of an organisation's reputation. ∎

Trudi Lang is Senior Fellow in Management Practice, and Rafael Ramirez is Professor of Practice, at Oxford Saïd. More information at www.sbs.ox.ac.uk/programmes/oxford-scenarios-programme *and* https://tinyurl.com/ydysv67a.