



Thinking in three horizons





In processes of social transformation, societies move from a relatively stable state through a zone of disruption to a new zone of relative stability. Something old must come apart in order for something new to come together.

DONALD SCHON

What's it all about?

Thinking in three horizons encourages you to go beyond the usual focus on fixing problems in the present. It is an approach that connects the present with desired futures and also identifies some of the disruptions which might occur in moving towards your future vision. It first emerged in the late nineties through the work of Baghai, Coley and White (1999) and has been developed by a range of practitioners (Curry & Hodgson, 2008) since, notably Bill Sharpe and the International Futures Forum in Scotland.

What's it for?

The purpose of the model is to encourage you to think about the future of your business and to recognise signals about that future in the present. It is unusual as a future thinking tool in that neither the dominant view of the present nor the emerging view of the future is privileged. It also recognises the transition space in between where viewpoints, values and assumptions are often tested. The model stimulates discussion around:

- The present position and challenges that the business faces. It establishes a case for change (horizon 1)
- Your desired future state (horizon 3)
- The tensions that might occur between moving from the present position to that desired state (horizon 2)
- Signs of change in the present position, which give encouragement about moving towards the desired future state (horizon 3 in horizon 1)

Using the tool

To use the three horizons approach, you will need to work through a number of steps:

1. If you are working on your own, print off the attached template. If you are with a group, you can use flip chart pages to represent each of the horizons; put these around the room
2. Think about the issues and environmental factors that your business is facing now. Record your thoughts
 - Set your timeframe and consider plausible future states. This can be done through brainstorming with post-its or you can combine it with another technique such as Future Perfect (a tool also included in this stage). Record your results
3. Now look at the horizon 2 space and think about what issues might arise as you move towards your desired future state. Record your results
4. Look back across the three horizons you have filled in, think about what might be happening in the present that could move you towards your desired future state. What signals are there in what you are doing now that you can start to make changes? Record your findings
5. Check your findings against existing strategies or plans. Develop an action plan based on the issues raised by your desired future direction

What's Next?

Try a personal three horizons map. What are your plausible desired futures? What are your current issues? What might you need to do to achieve your possible future? Which position in time do you feel most comfortable working with? What does that tell you about the way you plan?

Quick tips

- Try using symbols or drawings rather than words when you look at each horizon. You may find it opens up your ideas
- People tend to have a particular time preference so don't worry if you get stuck for ideas at a certain point. Try some different creative-thinking techniques if the ideas dry up

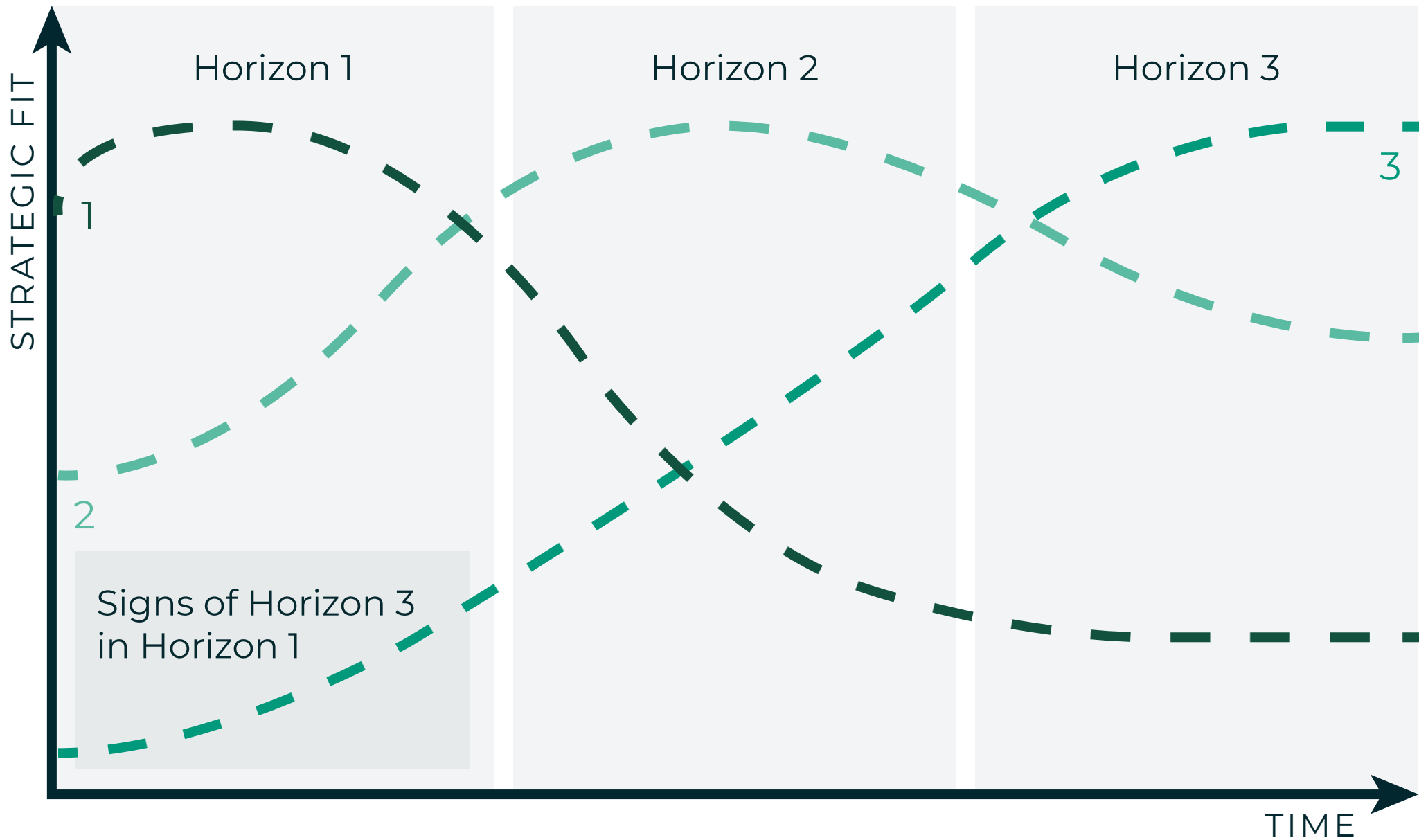
- Keep the horizon 3 views plausible
- Remember that horizon 2 is the zone of transition so don't be alarmed if there are differences of opinion

References

Baghai, M., Coley, S., & White, D. (1999). *The Alchemy of Growth*. New York: Perseus.

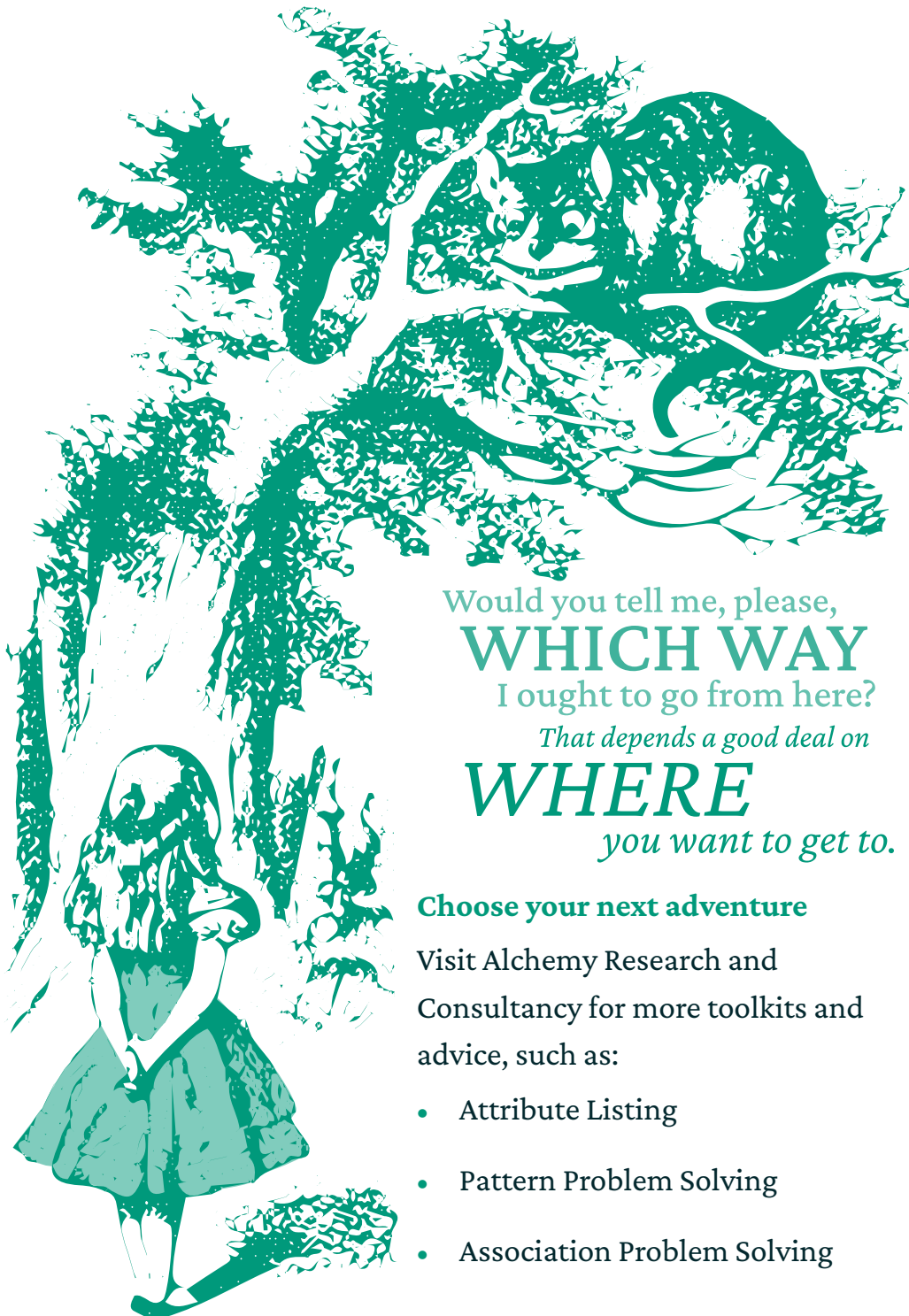
Curry, A., & Hodgson, A. (2008). Seeing in Multiple Horizons: Connecting Futures to Strategy. *Journal of Futures Studies*, 13(1), 1-20.

Curry and Hodgson (2008) credit Bill Sharpe who did a lot of the early thinking on the Three Horizons model.





Alchemy was founded to help people navigate change.
We are passionate about organisational learning and
supporting people to understand change in action.



Would you tell me, please,
WHICH WAY
I ought to go from here?
That depends a good deal on
WHERE
you want to get to.

Choose your next adventure

Visit Alchemy Research and
Consultancy for more toolkits and
advice, such as:

- Attribute Listing
- Pattern Problem Solving
- Association Problem Solving