

THE FOUR FUTURES FRAMEWORK

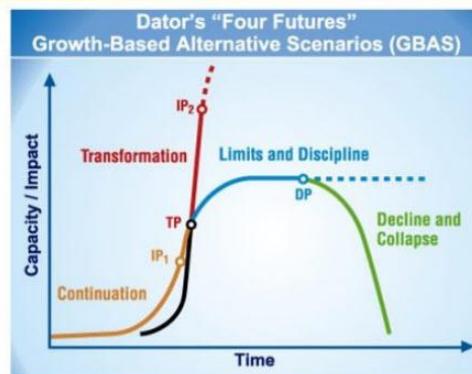
This framework by James Dator, one of the fathers of futures studies, is founded on two fundamental truths about our relationship to the future. First, we can never know for sure what lies ahead. That means we should think in terms of various possible futures, rather than attempt to make predictions with high degrees of certainty. Second, humans make sense of the future in the same way we make sense of the past: by telling ourselves stories about it. As a result, it pays to examine the stories to see our current situation more clearly while thinking about possible futures from different perspectives.

Dator suggests these four future perspectives can be represented by phases on four classic growth curves:

1. **Continuation** (the initial phase of slow or fast exponential growth)
2. **Limits and Discipline** (the saturation phase of S-curve growth)
3. **Decline and Collapse** (the decline and recycling phase of life cycle growth)
4. **Transformation** (superexponential growth)



Four Futures – Classic Growth/Change Stories

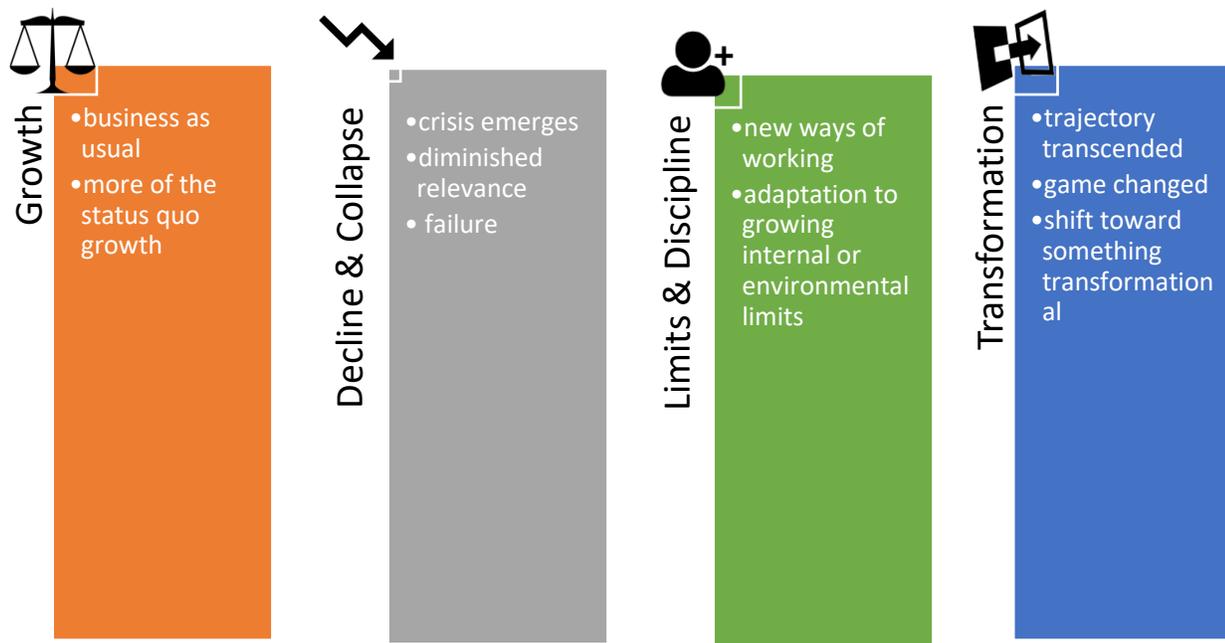


There are Four Key Stories and Expectation Sets with respect to change. Different groups experience each of these stories at the same time. The same people experience each of these stories at different times. Leaders must envision, and explore scenarios for, all four at different times.

Dator, Jim. 1979. *Perspectives in Cross-Cultural Psychology*, Academic Press.

Dator's model observes that all our narratives (stories, scenarios) on social change issues can be classified into four recurring groups of images, stories, or policies regarding the impact of that particular change.

Every future scenario we create tells us one of these four fundamentally different stories. Additionally, when the future we talk about arrives, this framework will assist us to better understand it. Ultimately these stories can be described as either **Growth, Collapse, Discipline or Transformation**.



- At a macro-level, the four categories shape the way we talk about the possible futures that lie ahead of us. **Growth** is described as continued economic growth, widening prosperity, and ongoing technological advance. A **Collapse** scenario would be a catastrophe that is the result of global warming or a financial disaster that topples life as we know it. **Discipline** is the future most people mean when they describe the actions and behaviours they see as being necessary for reducing the impact of internal or external forces. **Transformation** is a utopia that some say is possible, but no one can fully articulate right now. However, ideally it would address individual, social, economic, and environmental well-being.

Your Four Futures

When so much feels uncertain, the Four Futures framework is a powerful tool to reignite thinking on where you're at now and what comes next.

It's not as much about trying to predict the future as it is a framework to facilitate the building of useful models of potential options for consideration. These models will contribute to greater clarity about the present and the influences of the current forces of change. It will also contribute to thinking constructively about a preferred future as well as how to move toward it.

THE TOOL AND HOW TO USE IT:

The goal is to map out a realistic scenario and the most viable or likely journey towards that scenario.

Category	Description	Your Scenario
 <p>Growth</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • business as usual • more of the status quo growth 	<p>Growth. The trajectory you're on right now continues upwards. This scenario is about climbing the path ahead of you. What are the key landmarks along that journey? Map the most realistic sounding Growth scenario you can.</p>	
 <p>Decline & Collapse</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • crisis emerges • diminished relevance • failure 	<p>Collapse. What does sudden collapse in your current trajectory look like? What are the forces that could cause that collapse? Is your organization or business at risk? Are new technologies putting your entire industry at risk? Are you working in a way that won't be sustainable long term? Map a realistic collapse scenario, safe in the knowledge that this exercise is helping make sure it doesn't happen.</p>	

Category	Description	Your Scenario
 <p>Limits & Discipline</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •new ways of working •adaptation to growing internal or environmental limits 	<p>Discipline. What would it look like to moderate or contain the inner and outer forces most likely to cause Collapse. What ways of being and working, or seeking out new forms of support, would make your current trajectory sustainable for the long term? How can you do that? What needs to be moderated or restrained? What new ways of being and working could help?</p>	
 <p>Transformation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •trajectory transcended •game changed •shift toward something transformational 	<p>Transformation. What would if your current trajectory was transcended, and shifted towards something transformational? This is the most challenging scenario to map out, because by definition you can't currently know everything about this new reality. Tapping into intuition, imagination and creativity will be required.</p>	

Mapping out these four scenarios can be an enlightening exercise. Just thinking about your future (individual, organizational, or community) in this structured way will provide new insights into current circumstances and the impact of forces of change. Most of all, the Four Futures provides a structured way of thinking about a preferred future and whether or not you're headed in the right direction.