Making sense of the future

Trend Receivers and their role in foresight work

Handbook

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What to expect.

INTRO

We can make changes in our lives and in our companies to take a step closer to desirable futures.

The aspirations of the Foresight Academy.

The Foresight Academy poses the question: **"How do we want to live in 10 years".** We - cross-industry brand leaders, a forward thinking strategic innovation consultancy, a world class business school partner, cultural scientests, an international foresight consultancy and 60 Trend Receivers and rookie Trend Receivers across 3 continents – are creating a shared vision, a common picture of our lifeworld in 2030. **What does the Foresight Academy methodology provide?** Insights, perspective and a mindset that can positively shape how we make decisions, and how we plan future devlopment processes and business models. That can allow us to shake the future in the means that we can. Knowledge gained from this research can embolden and empower you to stimulate impulses of changes in your life, and in your organizations. Let it be the start of something meaningful.

The Foresight Academy is not a crystal ball to the future. We cannot predict the future. And we do not desire that. It is the future after all: by nature uncertain and shaped by emerging, dynamic constellations. But. **We can scan our horizon for potentials of the new.** And we can hypothesize about what these signals mean for how we want to live in 10 years. **We can make sense of these signals, these dynamics, these vibrations.** And together we can visualize potential futures. We can make changes in our lives and in our companies to take a step closer to those desirable futures. We might even be able to enlighten other decision makers in our networks.

This handbook explains the value underlying the methodology guiding this research. We begin by discussing the holy grail of foresight research: effectively identifying signals of change, combining qualitative and quantitative methods to filter and interpret these signals, and capturing both continuous and discontinuous innovations. We move on to explain how the Foresight Academy methodology, and Trend Receiver research in particular, is particularly adept at meeting the challenges of foresight research (specifically at capturing all potenitals of the new). Finally, we discuss what makes a Trend Receiver special in line with sensemaking theory. To find out how to execute this methodology, visit Handbook 2 which takes you thorugh the process step by step.

Signals of change & effective foresight research.

The key challenges of foresight research.

We all know the old tenet "innovate or die", thanks to the early introduction of Peter Drucker in business schools around the globe. Of course we get it. We know if you fail to sense and prepare for discontinuous change early you end up like Nokia: still flogging the keyboard when Apple had launched the iPhone. Or Northern Rock and Lehman Brothers, financial giants brought to their knees by the sub-prime crisis. This handbook will explain why we employ Trend Receiver research to optimize the effectiveness of our foresight enterprise. **Trend Receivers are individuals who perceive changes and potentials of the new in a specific domain in a highly sensitive, differentiated way** (Hofmann, 2014). We explain why they meet the challenges of foresight research on p12-15.

Foresight is the ability to "detect discontinuous change early, interpret the consequences for the company, and formulate effective responses to ensure the long-term survival and success of the company" (Rohrbeck, 2011). Moving one step further, we accept foresight to involve moving away from being passive observers of life, to being **active choreographers**. Effective scanning of the environment is a foundation block for building alternative futures through which the impact of socio-cultural, technological, political and environmental change can be explored. What are we scanning for? Our goal is to identify potentials of the new, signals of change, to distinguish the meaningful from the noise. We aim to capture nuanced, intangible intelligence that cannot be gleaned from statistics alone.

Despite the widely acknowledged importance of effective scanning of our environment to create future life-worlds, the majority of future research relies solely on strong signals (Peter & Jarratt, 2015). But it is creating research methodologies and capabilities which can tap into weak signals which leads to long term planning which can defend against future threats and capitalize on future opportunities. The Foresight Academy promises a holistic methodology drawing on both qualitative and quantitative intelligence which thoroughly scan all potentials of the new for both continuous and discontinuous innovations.
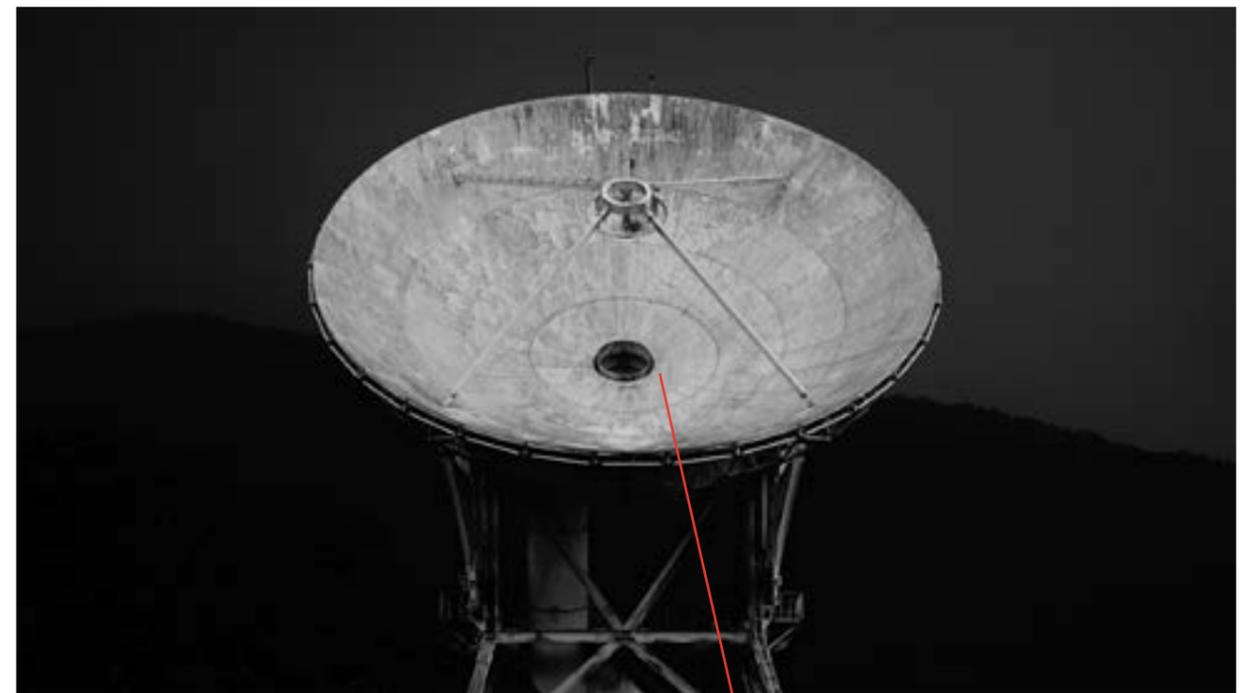
Our goals is to identify signals of change, to distinguish the meaningful from the noise.

Strong signals (or trends)
Clearly observable changes, happening now, and expected to continue in the future. Electric mobility, shifting gender roles, AI for example.

Weak signals
Fragmented, incomplete, unstructured, inadvertent data that can be refined into valuable contextual information that can be translated into strategically actionable knowledge (Mendonça et al. 2012). Consider the fragmented, incomplete snippets of information that potentially indicate that millennials are becoming more risk adverse. E.g. they are travelling less widely, they are less likely to consume alcohol, we are seeing an increase in "helicopter parenting". Tapping into these disperse "vibrations" could guide companies across industries in their future strategy.

Wildcards
An event or trend that is "completely outside our existing mental models and ways of coping" (Glassey, 2009). While less or unlikely, they are also important inputs to strategic discourse and help build future lifeworld scenarios. Consider the speed with which the #MeToo movement spread. Starting from accusations in late 2017, the „Weinstein" effect seemed to achieve global reach rapidly with powerful men across industries being arrested and loosing their positions. The lasting impact of the #MeToo movement can be seen in updated legislation for handling sexual misconduct.

How do we capture weak signals?

One driver of foresight failure is ignorance of weak signals.

"Let no man despise the secret hints and notices of danger, which sometimes are given him, when he think there is no possibility of it being real."
Daniel Defoe, Novelist, 1719

Exactly 300 years ago Daniel Defoe highlighted the importance of interpreting weak signals in his seminal fiction Robinson Crusoe. He tells us how "Friday", Crusoe's companion, is almost lured into thinking a hostile ship is there to save him. Rapidly considering disconnected clues he realizes the ship has an English flag, it is away from its usual shipping routes, there are no storms to direct the ship off course. His ability to see beyond the apparent and interpret less obvious cues are enabled by his strong capability to identify and make sense of signals.

Weak signals tend to be dismissed because they are **anomalous, strange or bizarre**. They are at odds with the dominant expectations about the future and the set of beliefs drawn on to engage in sense-making. As such, they can be particularly difficult to identify.

They can be thought of as foresight "raw material", whose potential is not always immediately apparent (Medonça et al. 2012). To realize the value of weak signals receptors must be able to tolerate uncertainty and fluidity. They allow us to speculate on "what if", and "what must happen for this to beome a reality". They materialize into the zeitgeist under the cover of darkness. All of sudden, everyone you know is doing Zumba, following the Paleo diet, or ashamed to fly.

Capturing weak signals requires highly attuned sensitivity and depends on the receiver's filters. These are a reflection of their life experiences, their curiosity, and their open-mindedness. Failure to interpret weak signals can be due to (Mendonça et al. 2012):

Surveillance filter failure
weak signals pass undetected as there is a gap in the surveillance system. Perhaps the signal receiver has a limited network, or a lack of connectedness with individuals across industries or societies.

Mental filters failure
sensemaking of a weak signal does not occur as it clashes with the receivers assumptions or schema. We explore this further on p15.

Power filter failure
this is not about ignorance, but purposefully ignoring weak signals that do not align with the receiver's (individual/organizations) goals. Perhaps they whisper the emergence of an inconvenient truth.

Consumer's motive and value sets can be conceived of as "**fluid paradigms**". On the one hand, they are stabilizers in the highly dynamic macro-environment. Consider how innovations can serve traditional desires in a modified manner. E.g. We still desire experiences and to travel, but are opting for more sustainable transport, triggering new travel services. Motive and value sets are also open to subtle changes, reflecting wider cultural and societal change. While traditional values associated with the personal family unit persist, new family units are the norm. E.g. the increased humanization of pets & robots as family members. Trend receivers have strong intuition for this paradox of continuities and changes. They process and filter weak signals in line with their understanding of the fluid paradigms of modern lifeworlds.

Foresight's holy grail.

DESK RESEARCH

QUALITATIVE
Trend Receiver
INTERVIEWS

The Foresight Academy methodology is optimal for capturing potentials of the new and building desirable futures.

In line with major international research hubs, we recognize the value of combining data from multiple sources to explore alternative futures, and to paint a desirable future. The OECD, for example, combines the "Delphi method" (a survey with experts to generate a consensus forecast on future trends); horizon scanning via desk research; and trend impact analysis extrapolating historical data in to the future. In a similar vein, the Foresight Academy combines extensive desk research by Z-punkt and gravity with qualitative Trend Receiver interviews. We discuss what makes Trend Receivers attractive interviewees in the next section, outlining their competencies and capabilities.

In addition to the desk research and Trend Receiver research the Foresight Academy is in the enviable position to incorporate the knowledge and expertise of the 13 brand partners from beginning to end of the methodology. We also embrace interactive methods to spark inspiring discussions among brand partners leading to meaningful and surprising hypotheses. Although effective foresight requires learning from qualitative and quantitative sources, we know there is a worrying lack of dialogue and exchange between those applying qualitative and those applying quantitative techniques (Haegeman et al. 2013). Combining the findings of both, particular as they relate to weak signals in the environment, is the holy grail.

The Foresight Academy Methodology

Trend Receivers : open receptors to signals of change & honed sensitivity to fluid paradigms.

Why Trend Receivers meet the challenges of foresight research.

The Trend Receiver method for gathering qualitative intelligence, divised by Hofmann (2014) in conjunction with Audi has won the test of time. gravity has 10 years experience executing Trend Receiver projects. This method has offered valuable insights across 50 projects spanning multiple industries. We employ Trend Receiver research as part of the Foresight Academy methodology. They have connections in many contexts and have discerning views of what drives people and what aspects are undergoing change. They typically have links with both art & business. In fact, they have six main competencies which, combined, allow them to receive, filter, process, contemplate, and classify signals of change.

Trend Receivers have a high mental agility, are interested in new influences and dynamics of change.

Trend Receivers competencies & capabilities

First, Trend Receivers bring **context experience** to the project. They have deep knowledge in a specific area, e.g. aesthetics, culture, fashion, mobility, travel, health.

Second, they have the ability to engage in **self-abstraction**. They are interested in a wide range of individuals and attitudes. By respecting different personalities, situations, and thought and feeling structures, they are adept at handling opposing opinions and contradictions without lapsing into relativism.

Third, Trend Receivers are driven by **curiosity** and the desire to understand relationships between signals and phenomena, they are open to all signals of change. They have fine antennae for the potentials of the new, as well as the complexities and relationships within a context.
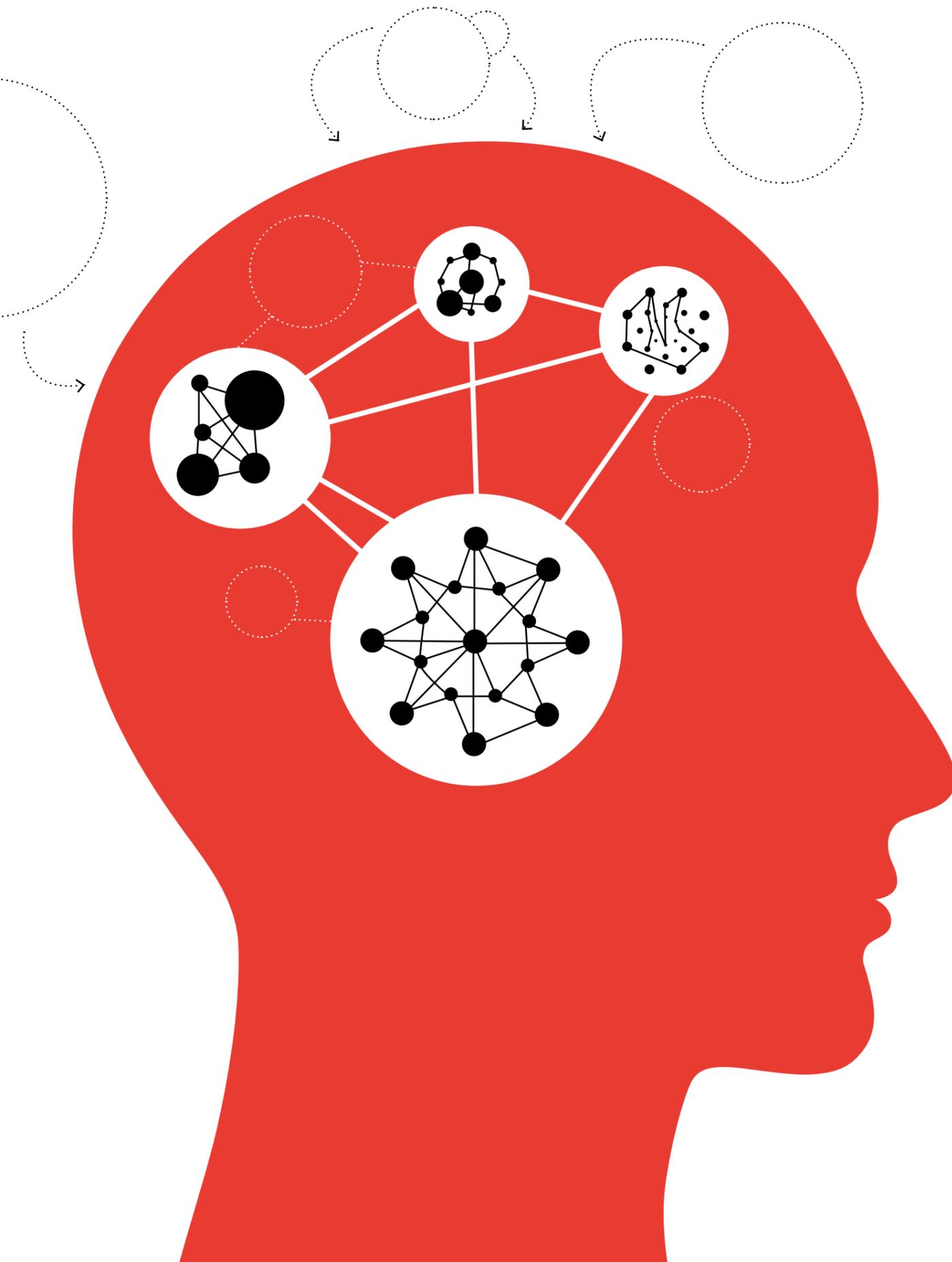
Forth, Trend Receivers are skilled at filtering signals of change i.e. identifying the meaningful from the noise. They have excellent **selection competence**.

Fifth, they have often had life changes or professional breaks which they put to good use. They are skilled at dealing with changes, frictions & paradoxes. These **biographical discontinuities** offer them the confidence, freedom, and emotional stability to take risks.

Finally, Trend Receivers have **strong communication skills**. The are typically both introspective thinkers (elaborating on relationships between phenomena) and extrovert (confident, eloquent and convincing in their expression).

Reflecting back on one critical element of effective future foresight research, i.e. scanning for all signals of change, suggests that Trend Receivers are the ideal candidates for this research. In interviewing them we avoid the three filter failures. Trend Receivers have wide networks and connections in varied contexts, avoiding surveillance filter failure. They are open minded, avoid relativism and can abstract from themselves, so have an appropriate mental filter. Finally, their career background is often characterized by disruption and is typically highly dynamic. Therefore, power filter failure is not a risk in this research.

Trend Receivers & knowledge schemas.

Imagine a very well dressed man assaults a homeless man. Onlookers may recall it was the homeless man who attacked the business man, reflecting how their schemas sensemake in line with their expectations.

Schemas are **"mental structures containing knowledge about a concept or stimulus, including its attributes and the interrelationships among those attributes"** (Dane, 2010: 580). They are frameworks representing an aspect of the world, we use them to understand the world. Schemas play a critical role in an individual's knowledge and ability to learn: people are more likely to notice things that fit their schema. Examples of schemas include stereotypes, worldviews, and social roles. Schemas dictate an individual's openmindeness. They are shaped by our cultural norms and expectations, our experiences, education and connectedness in different areas of life.

Novel information that doesn't fit easily into our existing schema can be ignored, minimized, misinterpreted, or ideally, create new schema. An example of minimizing is an individual who believes chickens don't lay eggs. Confronted with a chicken laying an egg they believe it is not a real chicken, and persist with their misconception. If perhaps the chicken has a specific marking they may accomodate their schema, and decide only chickens with that specific marking lay eggs. Those with more fluid schemas would assimilate the new information.

Schemas are dynamic. They can evolve, begining with information that is difficult to understand, leading to the devotion of significant cognitive resources to process it. This involves collecting and processing information to understand the new concept which in turn creates a new schema. Motivated individuals are engaged in continuous loops of schema expansion (George & Jones, 2001).

Schemas vary in size and complexity. Trend Receiver's curiosity, openness to potentials of the new and their diverse experiences mean they are particularly adept at developing new schema. They are likely to have **bigger** and more **complex** schema. Complex means more schema attributes, and more numerous interrelations between and within schemas. **The Foresight Academy desires interviewees that are open, unprejudiced, and sensitive to the paradoxes of human motive and value sets.** Trend receivers fit the bill. Their mental models are skilled at scanning and interpreting atypical weak signals (Day and Schoemaker, 2004). They have an intuition for the multiple relationships between the attributes of phenemona. This increases their **intuition for fluid paradigms**. It makes them highly adept at spotting cross-connections between signals and speculating about future universally relevant states beyond their personal experience.

Trend Receivers have bigger and more complex mental structures

Making sense of sensemaking.

PROSPECTIVE SENSEMAKING
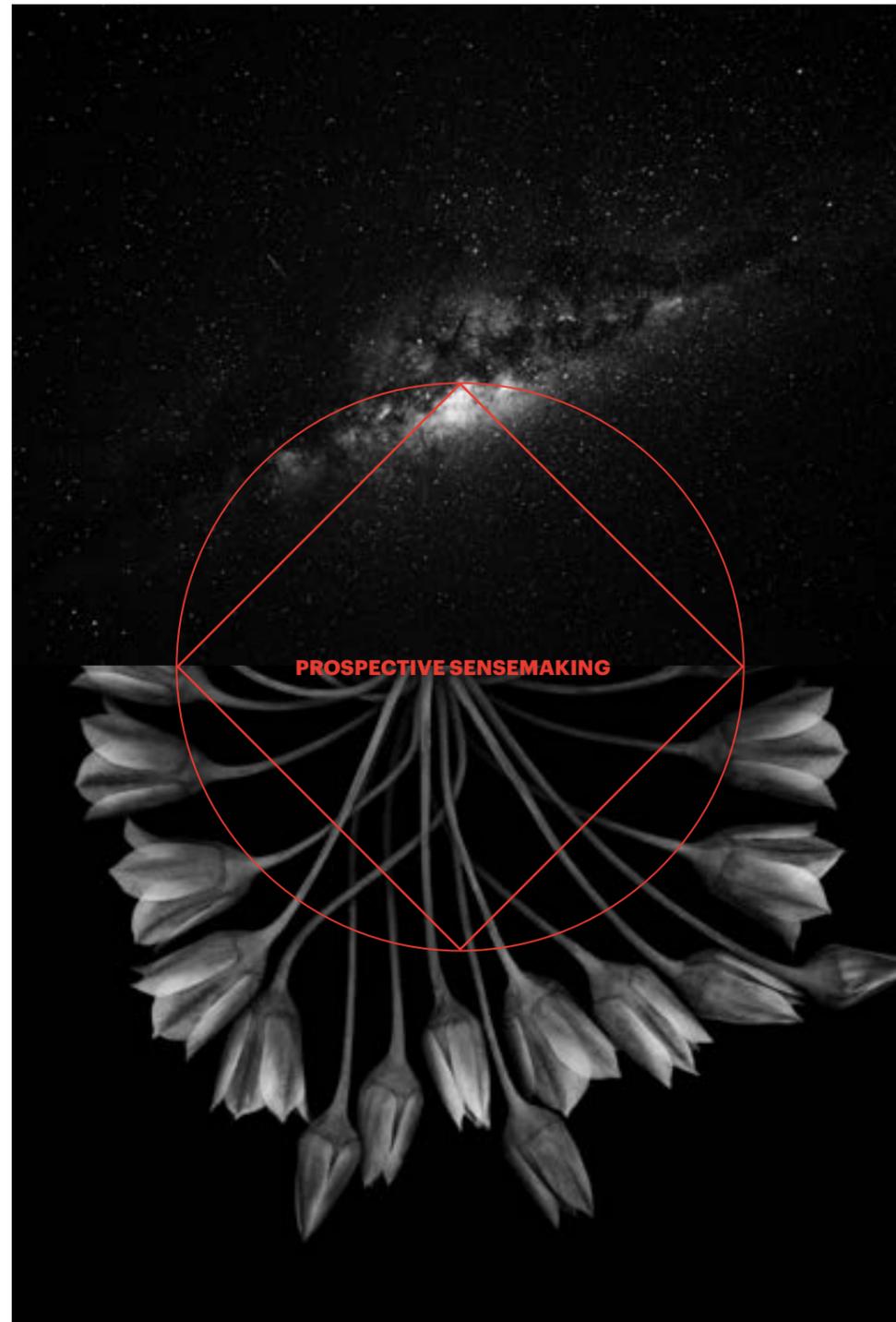
Future-oriented sensemaking is woven through the fabric of the Foresight Academy methodology.

The link between foresight research and sensemaking is widely accepted (Ramírez and Selin, 2014). One perspective views sensemaking as an **activity connecting the different components of foresight research** (Schwandt and Gorman, 2004). An alternative perspective views sensemaking as an **outcome of foresight methods** (Boe-Lilleegraven and Monterde, 2014). The Foresight Academy accepts both: recognizing the role of sensemaking throughout the methodology, as well as a takeaway for brand partners to do in conjunction with internal stakeholders in their companies. As participants of the Foresight Academy the impetus is on us to make sense of the wealth of incoming intelligence: learning from each other, from the desk research, from the academic partners, and the Trend Receivers.

We engage in **prospective (or future-oriented) sensemaking**. Prospective sensemaking entails the "conscious and intentional consideration of the probable future impact of certain actions, and ...non-actions" (Gioia et al., 1994: 378). We employ our understandings of the past to sensemake about the present, which in turn is used as a basis for developing hypotheses about the future. We move beyond "future perfect" thinking (expecting the future to change in the same manner as the past), which has been criticized for its lack of congruency with uncertain, hazy or elusive environments (Tapinos and Pyper, 2018). Prospective sensemaking involves the creation of future visualizations through selective reconstruction and creative elaboration of past learnings or indeed through the invention of new ones (Gephart et al. 2010).

The Foresight Academy leans towards future oriented sensemaking to move beyond "future perfect" thinking. **We make sense of information that may be at times counterfactual or prefactual in order to develop inspiring, potential futures.** As such, prospective sensemaking helps us to avoid future "blind spots" and construct a confident narrative of the future.

How to use a qualified visionary force to describe the future.

The Foresight Academy Methodology
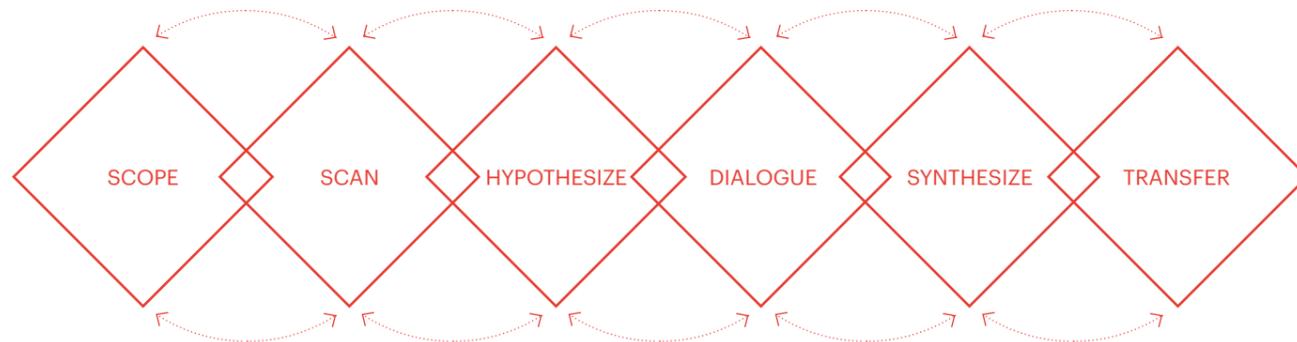
SCOPE	SCAN	HYPOTHESIZE	DIALOGUE	SYNTHESIZE	TRANSFER
Define the boundaries of your research. Move from challenges to areas of interest and specific research questions.	Search the margins of the known environment for signals of change.	Turn your key questions into tentative predictions which encompass your unvalidated assumptions.	Hit the field to gather new data which your scanning has as yet not answered. E.g. Trend Receiver research.	Sensemake the data from all inputs. Identify patterns to develop insights. These can be a springboard for future possibilities and ideation.	Make your new knowledge work for you by sharing it within your organization. This can include visual, story or interactive formats.

WHAT'S NEXT?

We know why we employ the Foresight Academy methodology. How do we do it?

Handbook 1 describes the value of the Foresight Academy methodology, focusing on its high congruency with effective foresight research.

In **Handbook 2** you can find a prescriptive description of the Foresight Academy methodology.

It takes you through the process step by step.

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