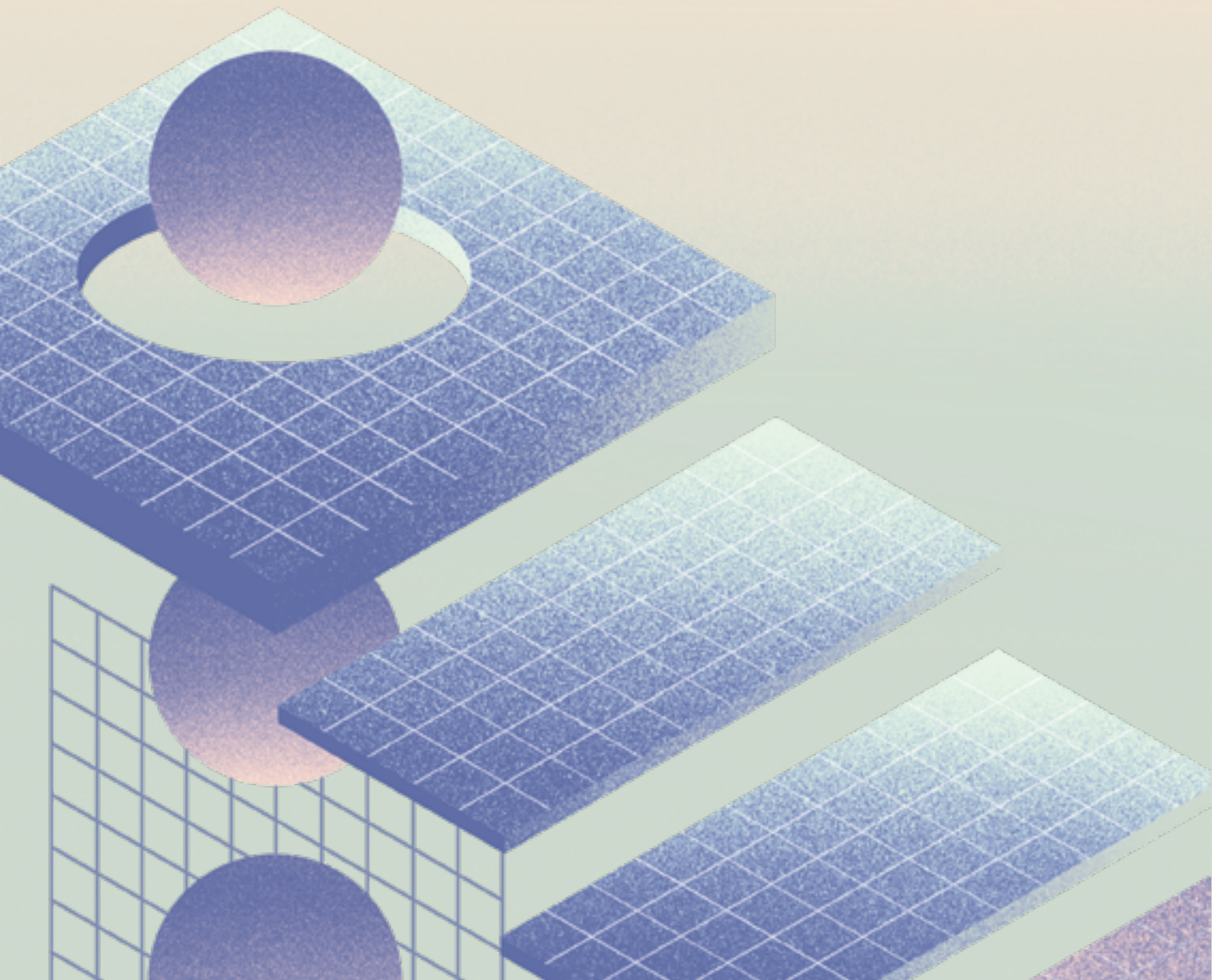


# The Seven Provocations

*Introducing a new method for making provocation a structured and standalone foresight practice.*



**T**he future is inherently unpredictable, shaped by new assumptions, behaviours, and realities that have yet to emerge. This has always been true, and it will continue to be so. Yet, when things become less certain – and therefore less controllable – individuals and organisations alike tend to retreat into the comfort of linear thinking.

Foresight exists to challenge this tendency of linear thinking. It enables individuals and organisations to question entrenched and misguided assumptions that underpin an understanding of the future that is rarely tested or questioned explicitly – and thus remain disconnected from emerging realities.

Integral to many foresight methods is the element of provocation. Such provocation serves to push people out of the comfort of linear thinking, to deliberately shift perspectives, and cultivate a more expansive understanding of potential futures. Traditional foresight methods, such as Scenario Development, Causal Layered Analysis, Three Horizons, Futures Wheel, and Futures Literacy “reframing” techniques, embed clear elements of provocation.

However, these methods can be intricate and demanding, requiring significant foresight expertise and facilitation skills. For individuals and teams with limited experience or confidence in foresight practices, meaningfully engaging with these methods can be daunting, potentially hindering effective participation and often leading to underwhelming foresight outcomes.

Building on the longstanding foresight principle of provocation, the method presented on the following pages establishes provocation as a standalone practice. It provides a systematic and intuitive process for identifying entrenched assumptions about the future, confronting them with structured provocations, and exploring potential implications that emerge from that. It is designed to be a more accessible entry point for the use of provocations in foresight, including for those with limited foresight confidence or experience.

This proposed method is shared here as a first iteration and remains a work in progress. It is expected to evolve through application and testing in real-world strategic settings, as its practical value is explored and refined over time.

# **CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION**

## **Provocation in foresight**

The term provocation can be defined as a deliberate and intentional act aimed at eliciting a response or reaction, often by evoking a sense of conflict in the one who was provoked.

Although provocation may have a negative connotation in most contexts, it can also represent a positive confrontation or stimulus to incite new thinking and fresh perspectives. In foresight, it is precisely this constructive potential that makes provocation a valuable tool for reassessing a status quo perception. It involves purposefully challenging entrenched assumptions and facilitating “reperception” – the act of shifting perspectives to think of the future in a new way, recognising that the future will likely be different from what one currently expects (Wack, 1985).

In principle, the structured use of provocations proposed here is merely a conceptual extension of longstanding foresight principles and can be attributed broadly to the foresight field’s ethos of challenging assumptions. More specifically, the key foresight approaches listed below – along with many more – integrate elements of provocation to achieve these ends:

- **Scenario Development:** Scenarios often use provocative narratives to present divergent futures that contrast both with present realities and with each other, challenging individuals and organisations to think beyond linear expectations (Schwartz, 1991; van der Heijden, 2005).
- **Causal Layered Analysis (CLA):** This method deconstructs surface-level issues and reframes them through deeper worldviews and myths, provoking shifts in perspective and understanding (Inayatullah, 2019).
- **Three Horizons Framework:** By contrasting the dominant system at present (Horizon 1) with emerging transformational shifts (Horizon 3), this frame-

work provokes a deeper understanding of how established structures might evolve, decline, and transition into new ones (Curry & Hodgson, 2008; Sharpe, 2013).

- **Futures Wheel:** This method visualises potential consequences of a change or event to provoke multi-order thinking by revealing cascading effects and interconnections often overlooked in linear approaches (Glenn, 2009).
- **Futures Literacy:** Best understood as a broader capability rather than a single method or framework, Futures Literacy encompasses various “reframing” techniques that actively use provocation to disrupt habitual ways of thinking about the future, mostly at the individual level (Miller, 2018).

### **Why this method is needed**

While provocation is embedded in many foresight methods, it is often implicit, making its application dependent on expert facilitation and experience. For individuals or teams with limited exposure to foresight, this can present significant barriers to engagement and lead to underwhelming outcomes.

On a more practical level, foresight often appears complex, abstract, and time-consuming for many people in fast-paced professional environments and organisational contexts where day-to-day priorities take precedence. This often leads to hesitation to even engage in foresight in the first place.

There is considerable evidence in academic literature that complex and abstract processes can lead to disengagement and even alienation of participants. For example, Cognitive Load Theory shows that when a task imposes a high “cognitive load” – meaning it requires holding too much complex, abstract information in one’s mind – it impairs learning and problem-solving, increasing the risk of disengagement and a reversion to heuristics (Sweller, 1988). Moreover, participants must feel psychologically safe to effectively engage with complex or abstract processes, as such contexts increase interpersonal risk-taking (Edmonson, 1999). Without sufficient psychological safety, participants may withdraw rather than actively participate.

The proposed method formalises provocation as a standalone practice, providing a structured and lightweight approach to identifying and confronting entrenched assumptions. It is particularly valuable in contexts where traditional foresight methods may prove too abstract, complex, or demanding, and hence cause reluctance to participation. Ultimately, the method provides a more accessible and practical entry point to engaging with foresight in organisations and teams with limited experience or confidence in foresight practice.

# **THE METHOD**

## **Surfacing current assumptions about external change**

Our assumptions are the underlying factors and expectations that shape how we interpret information, make decisions, and anticipate change. They influence the questions we ask, the risks we perceive, and the opportunities we consider. Any given strategic lens or outlook relies on both explicit and implicit assumptions about technology, social dynamics, markets, geopolitics, etc. Some assumptions are widely shared across organisations or industries, while others are more specific to a particular context. Regardless, if left unchallenged, they can create a confirmation pathway, leading to a flawed or overly deterministic view of the future.

Before we can meaningfully provoke new thinking, we must first establish a clear understanding of the key assumptions underpinning a current strategic outlook. In other words, making explicit the external conditions that need to hold true over time for a strategic outlook to be “on point”.

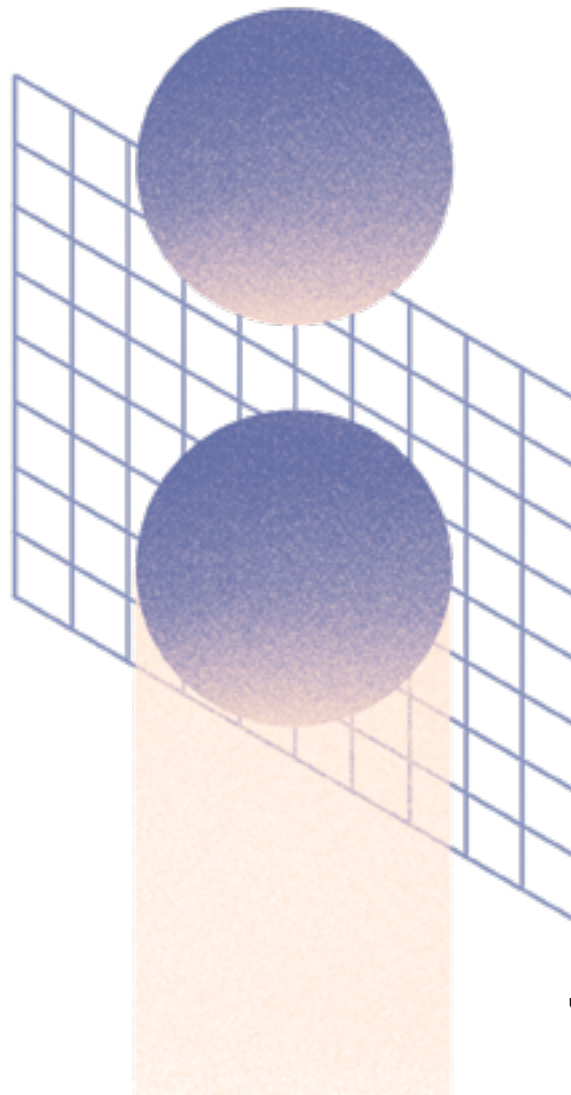
This can be done through an “assumption audit”, where we seek to clearly capture the explicit and implicit aspects that are taken for granted in relation to how the external environment will evolve.

You can prompt with questions such as:

- What conditions do you strongly assume *will not* change?
- Which developments do you assume *will continue* their current trajectory?
- Which developments do you believe *must unfold* in a specific way?
- Which beliefs or “truths” about the future do you *rarely question*, but regularly base decisions on?
- What potential developments are instinctively *dismissed* as unlikely, unrealistic, or off the table?

By forcing people to articulate why they believe something to be true, their assumptions will be embedded in these responses. The role of the facilitator is then to listen critically and to identify those assumptions – both explicit and implicit – and make them discussable. This provides the foundation that the provocations will deliberately challenge to unlock fresh perspectives on the future.

The assumption audit outlined here is described in relatively simple terms, but it could easily become a deeper area of work in its own right. Others have explored more structured approaches to surfacing assumptions in organisations within strategic and foresight contexts, for example van der Heijden (2005), whose work on scenarios emphasised the role of assumptions in shaping strategic conversations. There is an ambition to explore a more detailed and structured framework to strengthen assumption audits in a way that will have broader applicability beyond the Seven Provocations Method.



# *The Seven Provocations*

This section introduces a practical set of provocations designed to deliberately challenge assumptions that a specific organisation might take for granted about the future and on how change will unfold.

Each provocation is targeted to confront and reframe a specific type of assumption that may underpin an organisation's understanding of how the world will behave and ultimately its future strategic outlook. These are assumptions that often go unexamined in strategic thinking. Of all the provocations, the "Value Lock-in" is the most philosophically layered, and may be less operationally relevant at an organisational level compared to the others.



# #1 THE FLIP

**Provocation:** *What if an assumption you hold turns out to be misaligned, or even in direct opposition, to how the future eventually unfolds?*

**Purpose:** To directly challenge the assumptions that form the foundation of your current future (strategic) outlook, especially those considered stable, predictable, or “unchallengeable”.

**How:** Identify a core assumption or widely accepted “truth” about the future that underpins your current future (strategic) outlook. Flip this assumption and explore the (strategic) implications of this inverted reality.

## **Illustrative examples:**

- Globalisation is expected to persist, but what if it fragments or reverses instead?
- Renewable energy is expected to displace fossil fuels, but what if fossil fuel investment rebounds?
- Banks are expected to remain central to payment infrastructures, but what if banks are bypassed entirely by alternative payment rails?
- AI is expected to rapidly transform work, but what if real-world uptake stalls due to inertia or distrust?

# #2 THE DIS-CONTINUITY

**Provocation:** *What if defining features of current reality or dominant “ways of doing” are rendered obsolete in the future?*

**Purpose:** To understand how an unexpected discontinuation of the existing – often an overlooked aspect of how change unfolds – may significantly shape and impact your future (strategic) outlook.

**How:** Identify developments or conditions that you assume cannot or will not change in the foreseeable future. Consider a future where these are discontinued or made obsolete, and explore the (strategic) implications of a context without these foundational elements.

## **Illustrative examples:**

- Universities act as the primary credentialing institutions, but what if that one day is no longer the case?
- Traditional degrees are seen as the gold standard, but what if they lose their value entirely?
- Physical retail stores have historically been the primary way to access goods, but what if physical retail disappeared?
- The nation state is seen as permanent, but what if its role as a governing structure fades?

# #3 THE RESISTANT

**Provocation:** *What if a development or change you strongly expect to happen is delayed or stopped by the weight of present structures or habits?*

**Purpose:** To uncover barriers, structural resistance, or dominant narratives that may hinder the change you view as inevitable or necessary, consequently misaligning your future (strategic) outlook.

**How:** Identify developments that you strongly believe must unfold in a specific way. Consider a future where “sticky” forces of the present work to delay or stop the change unfolding in the expected way. Explore the (strategic) implications of this stagnant future outlook.

## **Illustrative examples:**

- Hybrid work is expected to become the norm for knowledge workers, but what if organisational culture and control pull workers back on-site?
- A shift to plant-based diets is seen as inevitable, but what if current habits and systems prove too resistant to change?
- Private car ownership is expected to decline, but what if status and culture keep it firmly in place?
- Autonomous vehicles are expected to be widespread, but what if regulation and social complexity continue to slow their arrival?

# #4 THE OVER-CORRECTION

**Provocation:** *What if an emerging change that appears transformative today levels off or becomes less transformative in the long term?*

**Purpose:** To challenge assumptions anchored in peak moments or strong hype cycles, which may lead to overestimating how profoundly or permanently your future (strategic) outlook will change.

**How:** Identify a development that currently feels transformative and is believed to strongly shape your future (strategic) outlook. Consider a future where the promise of this development proves highly inflated. Explore the (strategic) implications of a future where this change is much less transformative than expected.

## **Illustrative examples:**

- The metaverse was expected to reshape work and social life, but what if its relevance continues to fade?
- Vertical farming was expected to be a food systems breakthrough, but what if its long-term impact remains limited?
- Generative AI is expected to transform industries at large, but what if its real-world integration proves slower and narrower than assumed?
- Green hydrogen is expected to decarbonise heavy industry, but what if infrastructure and cost barriers stall its impact?

# #5 THE UNDER-CORRECTION

**Provocation:** *What if a change that seems marginal or easy to dismiss today becomes far more transformative in the longer run than initially assumed?*

**Purpose:** To challenge assumptions that downplay the long-term significance of emerging developments, leading to underestimations of how impactful these developments may become on your future (strategic) outlook.

**How:** Identify a development that you might currently downplay or see as marginal in terms of its significance for your future (strategic) outlook. Consider a future where this development accelerates or compounds over time. Explore the (strategic) implications of a scenario where its impact turns out to be far greater than initially expected.

## **Illustrative examples:**

- Public trust in democratic institutions and processes is in decline, but what if this decline accelerates, leading to systemic breakdowns?
- The audience of traditional news media has been declining. What if these outlets become completely marginalised?
- Achieving artificial general intelligence (AGI) is still considered a far-future scenario by many, but what if it arrives far quicker than expected?
- Decentralised finance (DeFi) is treated as experimental, but what if it eventually becomes a core financial infrastructure?

# #6 THE UNCOMFORTABLE TRUTH

**Provocation:** *Which uncomfortable or inconvenient “truths” about the future are being consciously or subconsciously avoided?*

**Purpose:** To deliberately counteract ignorance and bias around taboo topics that are being avoided, but that may significantly impact your future (strategic) outlook.

**How:** Identify developments or potential future outcomes that are often dismissed or ignored due to their challenging or undesirable nature. Explore the (strategic) implications of these uncomfortable “truths”.

## **Illustrative examples:**

- What if transatlantic cooperation is assumed to be stable, but ultimately breaks down?
- What if diversity and inclusion efforts are assumed to advance, but plateau or reverse?
- What if digital platforms capturing end-customer relationships are dismissed by traditional actors, but end up marginalising them across sectors?
- What if a global pandemic as a known risk was systematically avoided?

# BONUS: THE VALUE LOCK-IN

**Provocation:** *As we lock in on a transformation toward a system or paradigm seen as more desirable, what embedded constraints, exclusions, or dependencies might shape that preferred future in limiting ways?*

**Purpose:** To challenge the assumption that transformations toward new, desired systems or paradigms will be inherently better, freer, or more inclusive simply because they reflect today's preferred values and ideals for the future. It encourages critical reflection on how the values we institutionalise today may later feel rigid, limiting, or exclusionary as the future cannot be assumed to remain "value stable".

**How:** Identify key assumptions that underpin your understanding of a preferred version of the future. Explore how this new, desired future can potentially create constraints or "bad outcomes" – just of a different kind – as it may no longer reflect today's values and ideals over time.

## **Illustrative examples:**

- What if radical sustainability agendas embed forms of eco-authoritarian control that eventually come to feel undemocratic or coercive?
- What if human enhancement and longevity efforts create new inequalities?
- What if technological optimism around AI locks societies into high-risk dependencies with limited accountability?
- What if radical inclusion frameworks unintentionally erode perceived fairness or meritocracy?

PROVOCATION	ASSUMPTION TYPE CHALLENGED	ANGLE OF PROVOCATION
#1 The Flip	Directional certainty	Inversion of core assumption
#2 The Discontinuity	Continuity of present systems	Subtraction of what is assumed permanent
#3 The Resistant	Inevitable change	Stickiness of the present
#4 The Overcorrection	Overestimating change in the short term	Less transformative than assumed
#5 The Undercorrection	Underestimating change in the long term	More transformative than assumed
#6 The Uncomfortable Truth	Emotional/moral avoidance	Confronting what is being ignored
BONUS The Value Lock-in	Value stability over time	Exposing constraints from value lock-in



## Working with the provocations

The provocations can be used individually or in combination. While some provocations may overlap and some implications will repeat, each offers a distinct lens to reframe what is currently taken for granted about the future. When selecting which provocations to use, it is helpful to consider the nature of the assumptions you are seeking to challenge.

To support this, the provocations can be grouped into three clusters:

- **Core strategic logic**

(The Flip; The Discontinuity; The Resistant)

*Challenges foundational assumptions about continuity, direction, and inevitability that shape how the future is understood.*

- **Timing/pace dynamics**

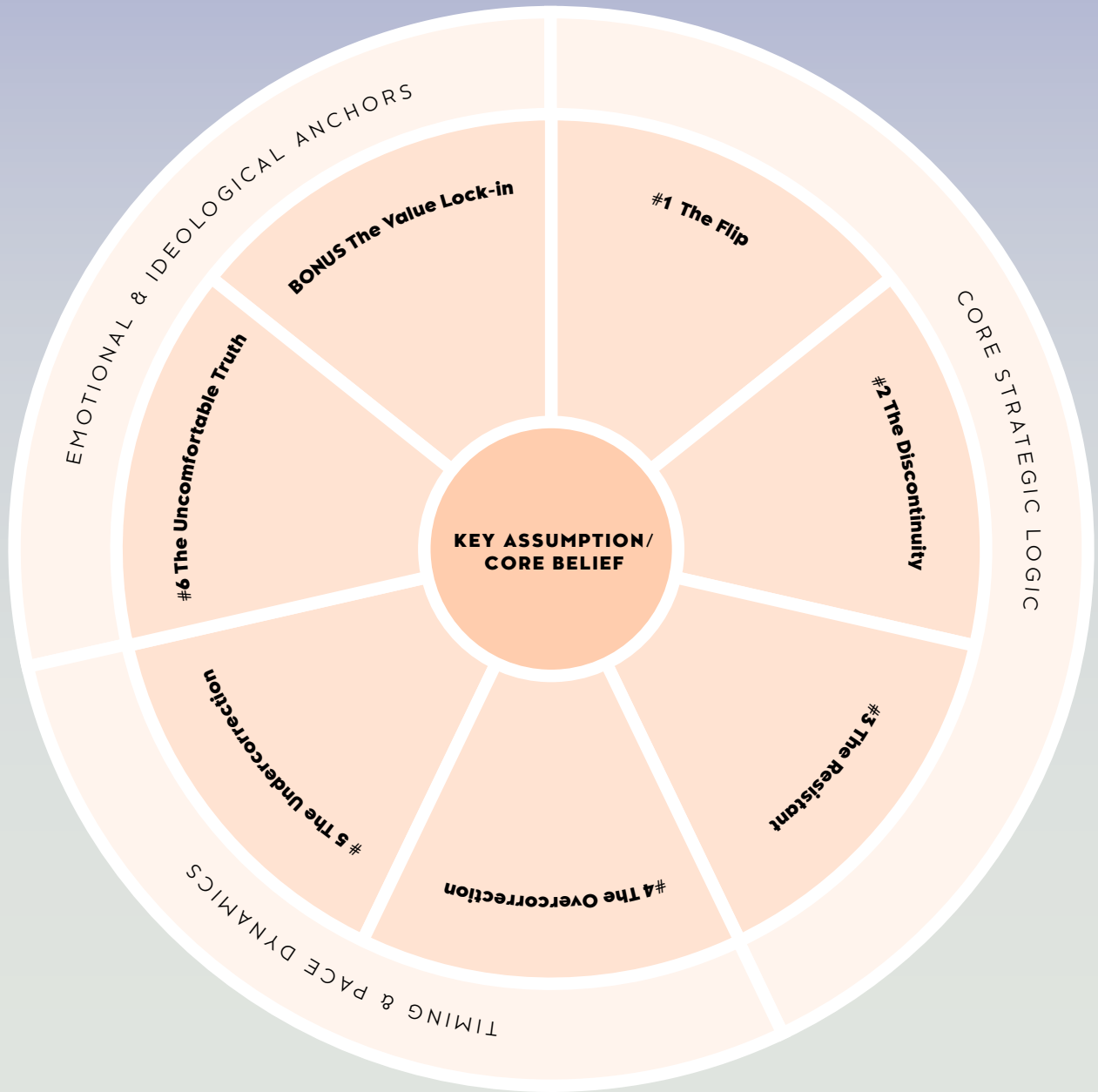
(The Overcorrection; The Undercorrection)

*Challenges how the timing, pace, and rhythm of change are perceived and interpreted.*

- **Emotional/ideological anchors**

(The Uncomfortable Truth; The Value Lock-in)

*Challenges value-laden beliefs and emotional avoidances that limit what is acknowledged when considering how the future may unfold.*



Once assumptions have been surfaced and a provocation selected, the following template provides a practical structure to work through one provocation at a time. You start with a core assumption, reframe it through the lens of the selected provocation, and explore the potential implications if the provoked version of the future were to unfold. Use the template repeatedly to test different assumptions or apply multiple provocations to the same one.

PROVOCATION USED: _____			
<b>Assumption to challenge</b> State an assumption/ expectation/belief about how the future will unfold	<b>Reframed assumption</b> Rewrite the assumption through the lens of the provocation	<b>Potential (strategic) implications</b> List key implications if this provoked version of the future were to unfold	<b>Additional reflections</b> Consider how central this assumption is to your current outlook, and whether this provocation exposes something worth exploring further

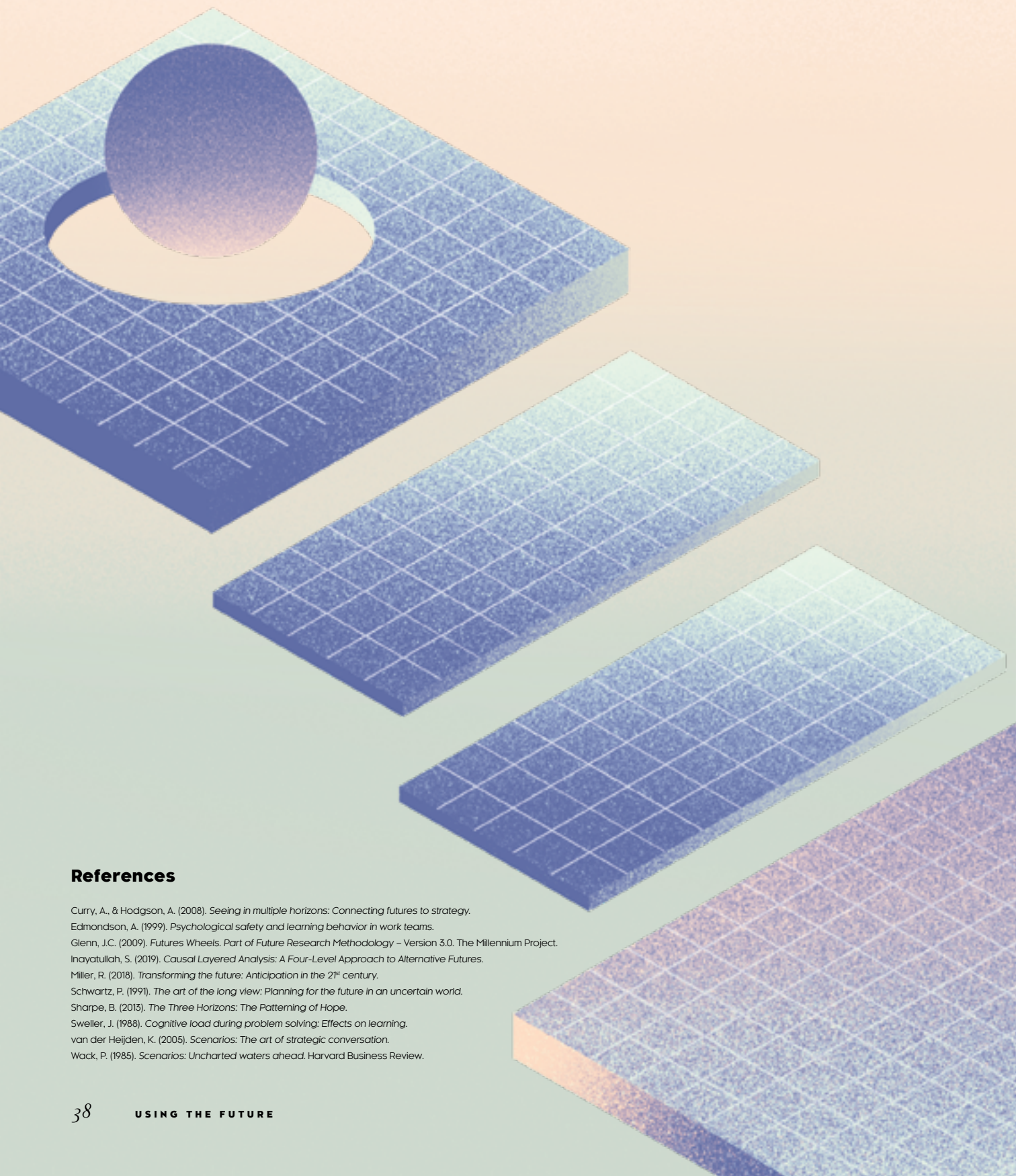
# **CONCLUSION**

Provocation is a core element in foresight practice, serving as a way to challenge entrenched assumptions, expand awareness beyond default thinking, and shift perspectives about possible futures.

The Seven Provocations Method builds on foresight's ethos of challenging assumptions by formalising provocation as a standalone practice. It offers a practical set of provocations to deliberately confront underlying assumptions that shape an organisation's understanding of its external environment and future outlook. The intuitive and accessible nature of the method makes it particularly valuable in contexts where more complex, abstract, or demanding foresight methods may be overwhelming or difficult to apply – especially for those with limited experience or confidence in foresight work.

While the method has been developed conceptually, it remains a work in progress and it has not yet been applied and tested in real-world strategic settings. Its practical value will ultimately depend on how well it can be integrated into different organisational contexts and foresight processes. Further application and refinement will be important to understand where it works best – and where it may need to evolve.

Hence, this is also an invitation to test and experiment with the method in your own context – to explore how it can add value, how it might be iterated for greater rigour and usability through real-world application, and how it can be integrated with other foresight approaches. ■



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