

The Role of Strategic Foresight in Leadership Evolution: Developing a Future-Oriented Management Model

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore how strategic foresight contributes to leadership evolution and to develop a future-oriented management model for organizations operating under environmental uncertainty. This qualitative study was conducted using an exploratory thematic analysis design. Participants consisted of 22 senior managers, middle managers, strategic planning specialists, organizational development consultants, and innovation leaders working in Tehran-based organizations. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, followed by snowball sampling, based on their direct experience with strategic planning, foresight practices, organizational transformation, and leadership decision-making. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting 45 to 75 minutes. Theoretical saturation was reached after the twentieth interview, and two additional interviews were conducted to confirm category stability. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using NVivo software. Data analysis followed an inductive coding procedure including open coding, category development, theme refinement, constant comparison, and peer review. The analysis produced five main categories explaining the role of strategic foresight in leadership evolution: environmental scanning as a leadership attentional capability, scenario-based sensemaking, future-oriented decision architecture, distributed foresight and participatory leadership, and institutionalized learning for adaptive renewal. Participants described foresight as a shift from reactive managerial control toward anticipatory, learning-based, and ecosystem-sensitive leadership. The proposed model suggests that leadership evolution occurs when leaders move from short-term operational problem solving to systematic future sensing, collective interpretation, strategic option creation, experimental implementation, and institutional learning. Strategic foresight appears to function not only as a planning tool but also as a developmental mechanism through which leadership identities, routines, and decision logics evolve. Future-oriented management requires leaders to cultivate weak-signal sensitivity, scenario literacy, strategic imagination, participatory interpretation, and adaptive learning systems.

Keywords: Strategic foresight; leadership evolution; future-oriented management; qualitative research; scenario planning; adaptive leadership; Tehran organizations.

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1. Introduction

Organizations increasingly operate in environments characterized by technological acceleration, geopolitical turbulence, market discontinuity, regulatory complexity, social expectation shifts, and ecological pressure. In such conditions, leadership can no longer be understood only as the ability to formulate plans, coordinate resources, and supervise performance within relatively stable assumptions. Traditional strategic management often relied on extrapolation, environmental analysis, competitive positioning, and periodic planning cycles. Although these approaches remain useful, they are insufficient when the future is not a linear extension of the past. Strategic



foresight has therefore emerged as a critical organizational capability because it helps decision makers explore plausible futures, identify weak signals, interpret uncertainty, and prepare strategic options before disruption becomes unavoidable (Slaughter, 1995; Voros, 2003; Vecchiato, 2012). Voros's generic foresight process, for example, frames foresight as a structured movement from inputs and scanning to interpretation, prospecting, strategy, and action, while Vecchiato's work links foresight practices to decision-making under environmental uncertainty.

Strategic foresight differs from prediction. Its purpose is not to forecast one correct future but to expand the range of futures that leaders can perceive, discuss, evaluate, and influence. This distinction is important because many organizations confuse foresight with forecasting, trend monitoring, or long-term planning. Forecasting generally attempts to estimate likely outcomes from available data, whereas foresight combines environmental scanning, imagination, scenario thinking, stakeholder dialogue, systemic interpretation, and strategic experimentation. As a result, foresight strengthens the cognitive and social capacity of organizations to act under ambiguity. In this sense, strategic foresight is closely related to sensemaking, because leaders must transform ambiguous signals into shared interpretations that can guide collective action (Weick et al., 2005). It is also connected to strategic learning, because future-oriented organizations continuously revise assumptions, challenge dominant mental models, and update strategic options as new information emerges.

The role of strategic foresight becomes especially significant when viewed through the lens of leadership evolution. Leadership theory has moved from heroic, individual-centered models toward relational, adaptive, distributed, and complexity-based perspectives. Complexity leadership theory argues that leadership in knowledge-based organizations must enable adaptive capacity, learning, creativity, and emergence rather than merely impose formal control (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Adaptive leadership similarly emphasizes mobilizing people to confront complex challenges for which existing routines and technical solutions are insufficient (Heifetz et al., 2009). These approaches suggest that effective leaders are not only commanders or decision authorities; they are interpreters of uncertainty, designers of adaptive contexts, and facilitators of collective learning. Complexity leadership theory explicitly conceptualizes leadership as enabling adaptive capacity in complex adaptive systems.

The dynamic capabilities perspective provides another theoretical foundation for understanding the link between foresight and leadership evolution. Dynamic capabilities refer to the firm's ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competences in response to changing environments (Teece et al., 1997). Teece (2007) later specified the microfoundations of dynamic capabilities as sensing opportunities and threats, seizing opportunities, and transforming organizational assets and structures. These processes are inherently leadership-related because they require strategic attention, resource commitment, organizational redesign, and legitimization of change. Strategic foresight can be understood as a key microfoundation of sensing and seizing: leaders use foresight to detect emerging patterns, imagine alternative futures, select strategic options, and prepare organizations for reconfiguration. Teece's foundational dynamic capabilities work and later microfoundations framework remain central references for this argument.

Empirical work also supports the strategic value of foresight. Rohrbeck and Kum (2018) found that corporate foresight and future preparedness were associated with superior long-term firm performance, including profitability and market capitalization growth. Their longitudinal study is particularly important because it moves the discussion beyond normative claims and suggests that systematic future preparedness can create measurable strategic advantage. Foresight has also been linked to strategic agility, innovation, business model renewal, and

resilience, especially when it is embedded in managerial routines rather than treated as an occasional workshop or symbolic planning exercise (Rohrbeck & Kum, 2018; Sarpong et al., 2013; Schwarz et al., 2020). More recent work on foresight and business model innovation further suggests that foresight may influence innovation through sensemaking and learning mechanisms (Moqaddamerad et al., 2024).

Despite this growing literature, several gaps remain. First, much of the foresight literature focuses on tools, processes, and organizational performance, while less attention has been given to how foresight transforms leadership identity, leadership routines, and managerial cognition. Second, many studies examine corporate foresight at the firm level, but the lived experiences of leaders who must translate foresight into everyday management practices remain underexplored. Third, emerging economies and volatile institutional contexts require more qualitative research because leaders in such environments often face simultaneous technological, economic, regulatory, and socio-political uncertainty. Tehran-based organizations provide a relevant empirical context because managers frequently operate under market fluctuation, sanctions-related constraints, digital transformation pressure, talent mobility, currency instability, and changing stakeholder expectations. These conditions make future-oriented leadership not simply desirable but necessary.

Leadership evolution in this study refers to the gradual transformation of leaders' mental models, decision criteria, relational practices, and organizational routines in response to uncertain futures. This evolution includes moving from short-term reaction to anticipatory scanning, from centralized decision-making to distributed interpretation, from fixed planning to strategic option creation, and from efficiency-centered control to adaptive learning. Strategic foresight is expected to play a developmental role in this process because it exposes leaders to alternative futures, weak signals, disruptive possibilities, and long-term consequences of present decisions. It also challenges leaders to confront uncertainty without reducing it prematurely.

The present study therefore seeks to develop a future-oriented management model by examining how leaders and strategic decision-makers understand and use foresight in organizational practice. Rather than treating foresight as a technical planning function, this study conceptualizes it as a leadership capability that reshapes attention, interpretation, participation, experimentation, and institutional learning. Accordingly, the aim of this study was to explore the role of strategic foresight in leadership evolution and to develop a future-oriented management model for organizations operating under uncertainty.

2. Methods and Materials

This study used a qualitative exploratory design based on inductive thematic analysis. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to understand how strategic foresight is experienced, interpreted, and enacted by leaders rather than to test predefined hypotheses. The participants were selected from Tehran-based organizations in technology, finance, manufacturing, consulting, retail, telecommunications, and knowledge-based service sectors. The final sample consisted of 22 participants, including senior executives, middle managers, strategic planning managers, innovation managers, organizational development consultants, and business transformation specialists. Inclusion criteria were having at least seven years of managerial or strategic planning experience, direct involvement in organizational decision-making, and familiarity with long-term planning, innovation, foresight, scenario planning, or transformation projects. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the research topic, followed by snowball sampling to identify additional

information-rich participants. Theoretical saturation was reached after the twentieth interview, when no substantially new categories emerged, and two further interviews were conducted to confirm the stability and conceptual sufficiency of the thematic structure.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol included open-ended questions about participants' experiences of uncertainty, the role of future thinking in leadership decisions, the use of foresight tools, changes in leadership practices under turbulent conditions, and organizational mechanisms that support or prevent future-oriented management. Example questions included: "How do leaders in your organization recognize early signs of future change?", "Can you describe a situation in which foresight changed a strategic decision?", "What leadership capabilities are required for managing uncertain futures?", and "How can foresight become part of everyday management rather than a separate planning activity?" Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and were conducted in private organizational settings or through secure online platforms, depending on participant availability. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized before analysis. Participants were assigned codes from P1 to P22.

Data analysis was conducted using NVivo software. The analysis followed an inductive thematic process informed by Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach: familiarization with data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke's article is widely recognized as a foundational source for thematic analysis in qualitative research. First, all transcripts were read repeatedly to develop familiarity with the data. Second, meaningful units related to foresight, leadership change, strategic decision-making, uncertainty, and organizational learning were coded. Third, conceptually similar codes were grouped into subcategories. Fourth, subcategories were compared across interviews and refined into broader categories. Fifth, a thematic map was developed to explain the relationship between strategic foresight and leadership evolution. To enhance analytical rigor, the study used constant comparison, memo writing, peer debriefing, and code-recode procedures. The Gioia methodology also informed the movement from first-order participant concepts to second-order theoretical categories and aggregate dimensions, consistent with qualitative rigor in inductive research (Gioia et al., 2013).

Trustworthiness was addressed through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was strengthened through member checking with six participants, who reviewed summarized interpretations and confirmed that the categories reflected their experiences. Peer review was conducted by two qualitative researchers familiar with strategic management and organizational studies. Transferability was supported by detailed description of the research context, participants, and analytical procedures. Dependability was enhanced through an audit trail including interview guides, coding notes, category definitions, and analytical memos. Confirmability was supported by reflexive memo writing to identify and manage the researcher's assumptions about leadership, foresight, and organizational change.

3. Findings and Results

The thematic analysis generated five main categories: environmental scanning as a leadership attentional capability, scenario-based sensemaking, future-oriented decision architecture, distributed foresight and participatory leadership, and institutionalized learning for adaptive renewal.

The first category showed that strategic foresight begins with a transformation in leaders' attention. Participants repeatedly emphasized that future-oriented leadership depends on the ability to notice weak signals before they become visible crises. This category included codes such as "tracking weak signals," "reading technological change," "monitoring regulatory shifts," "listening to customers before demand changes," "observing talent movement," and "connecting external events to internal vulnerabilities." Participants argued that many leaders fail not because they lack resources but because their attention remains trapped in immediate operational pressures. P6 stated, "The first difference between a traditional manager and a future-oriented leader is where they look. Traditional managers look at yesterday's report; future-oriented leaders look at the small signals that may change tomorrow's report." P14 similarly noted, "In Tehran, uncertainty is not theoretical. Currency, regulation, technology, and customer behavior can change very fast. A leader who does not scan the environment becomes a prisoner of surprise." This category indicates that leadership evolution begins when leaders develop disciplined sensitivity to the external environment and connect weak signals to strategic implications.

The second category reflected the role of scenarios in helping leaders interpret uncertainty without prematurely closing it. Participants described scenario thinking as a cognitive and social process that enables managers to move beyond single-plan thinking. This category included "building alternative futures," "challenging dominant assumptions," "creating shared language around uncertainty," "testing strategy against multiple futures," and "reducing fear of ambiguity." Several participants explained that scenario work changed leadership conversations by shifting the question from "What will happen?" to "What could happen, and what would we do if it happens?" P3 explained, "When we used scenarios, the management team stopped arguing about one forecast. We started asking which capabilities would be useful in all possible futures." P18 stated, "Scenario planning gave us permission to talk about uncomfortable possibilities. Before that, everyone waited for the CEO to define the future." The findings suggest that foresight contributes to leadership evolution by improving sensemaking capacity, enabling leaders to hold multiple possibilities in mind and create shared interpretations across managerial teams.

The third category concerned the translation of foresight into decision-making structures. Participants emphasized that foresight has limited value unless it changes how decisions are made, investments are prioritized, and strategic options are preserved. This category included "strategic option portfolios," "early investment in capabilities," "flexible resource allocation," "risk-based prioritization," "future criteria in decision-making," and "linking foresight to budgeting." Participants stated that future-oriented leaders do not simply predict trends; they design decision architectures that keep the organization strategically flexible. P9 reported, "The important question is not whether we know the future. We never know it completely. The important question is whether our decisions keep us alive in different futures." P21 added, "A foresight report that does not influence budget, talent, technology, or partnership decisions is just decoration." This category shows that strategic foresight supports leadership evolution by moving leaders from reactive decisions to option-based, capability-oriented, and future-tested strategic choices.

The fourth category indicated that foresight becomes more powerful when it is distributed across organizational levels rather than concentrated in a planning department or top management team. Participants argued that weak signals often appear first at organizational boundaries, including customer service units, sales teams, technology teams, frontline employees, external partners, and younger employees. This category included "collective interpretation," "cross-functional foresight workshops," "frontline signal capture," "stakeholder dialogue,"

“participatory strategy,” and “ecosystem listening.” P5 stated, “The future does not enter the organization through the CEO’s office. It enters through customers, suppliers, employees, competitors, and sometimes through people who are not invited to strategy meetings.” P12 similarly noted, “When foresight became participatory, leadership changed. Managers became facilitators of interpretation, not only owners of decisions.” This category suggests that strategic foresight contributes to leadership evolution by transforming leadership from a centralized authority function into a distributed sensemaking and mobilization process.

The fifth category concerned the institutionalization of foresight through routines, metrics, and learning loops. Participants emphasized that foresight should not remain an annual event, consultancy project, or symbolic strategic exercise. Instead, it must become embedded in recurring management processes, including strategic reviews, innovation portfolios, performance dashboards, leadership development, talent planning, and post-decision learning. This category included “learning from failed assumptions,” “updating scenarios,” “foresight dashboards,” “linking foresight to innovation,” “reviewing strategic assumptions,” and “organizational memory.” P2 explained, “We learned that foresight is not a workshop. It is a discipline. If you do it once a year, it disappears. If you connect it to review meetings, investment decisions, and learning sessions, it becomes part of management.” P16 added, “Leadership evolved when managers accepted that changing a decision is not weakness. It means the organization is learning faster than the environment is changing.” This category indicates that future-oriented management requires the institutionalization of foresight as an adaptive learning system.

Based on these categories, the proposed future-oriented management model includes five interconnected stages: future sensing, collective sensemaking, strategic option design, adaptive mobilization, and institutional learning. Future sensing refers to the systematic identification of weak signals, trends, disruptions, and emerging stakeholder expectations. Collective sensemaking involves scenario-based interpretation and shared discussion of uncertainty. Strategic option design translates foresight into flexible investments, capabilities, partnerships, and strategic alternatives. Adaptive mobilization refers to the leadership process of aligning people, resources, and experiments around future-relevant priorities. Institutional learning embeds foresight into routines, metrics, reflection processes, and continuous renewal. The model suggests that leadership evolution is not a linear transition from one style to another but a recursive process through which leaders continuously expand attention, interpretation, participation, and adaptive capacity.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The first finding showed that strategic foresight contributes to leadership evolution by reshaping managerial attention. Participants viewed future-oriented leadership as an attentional discipline through which leaders notice weak signals, connect environmental changes to organizational vulnerabilities, and prevent strategic surprise. This finding is consistent with the literature on strategic foresight, which emphasizes scanning, monitoring, and interpretation of emerging changes as core components of future preparedness (Voros, 2003; Vecchiato, 2012). It also aligns with the dynamic capabilities perspective, particularly the sensing dimension, because leaders must detect opportunities and threats before they can seize or transform them (Teece, 2007). In traditional management systems, attention is often directed toward efficiency, current performance, and short-term control; however, in uncertain environments, excessive dependence on past data may reinforce strategic blindness. The participants’ emphasis on weak signals supports the view that strategic leadership requires peripheral vision and environmental

alertness. This finding also extends prior literature by showing that scanning is not merely an analytical function but a leadership practice that changes how managers perceive responsibility. Future-oriented leaders see themselves not only as problem solvers but also as interpreters of emerging possibilities.

The second finding indicated that scenario-based sensemaking enables leaders to manage uncertainty without reducing it to a single forecast. Participants described scenarios as tools for challenging dominant assumptions, creating shared language, and encouraging strategic imagination. This is consistent with Schoemaker's (1995) argument that scenario planning is valuable because it helps decision makers think systematically about uncertainty and prepare for multiple plausible futures. It also corresponds with Weick et al.'s (2005) sensemaking perspective, which suggests that organizations act based on collectively constructed interpretations rather than objective environmental facts alone. In this study, scenario-based sensemaking changed leadership interactions by reducing dependence on hierarchical certainty. Instead of waiting for one leader to define the future, managerial teams began discussing alternative futures and the capabilities required across them. This finding supports complexity leadership theory, which emphasizes adaptive learning and emergence in complex systems (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). It suggests that the evolution of leadership is partly cognitive and dialogical: leaders evolve when they become capable of holding ambiguity, inviting multiple interpretations, and transforming uncertainty into collective inquiry.

The third finding showed that foresight affects leadership evolution when it becomes embedded in decision architecture. Participants emphasized that foresight must influence budgeting, resource allocation, talent development, technology investment, partnership formation, and strategic option portfolios. This finding is consistent with Rohrbeck and Kum's (2018) argument that future preparedness has strategic performance implications and that organizations benefit when foresight is systematically connected to strategic action. It also aligns with Teece et al.'s (1997) dynamic capabilities framework, because future-oriented decisions require organizations to reconfigure resources in anticipation of environmental change. The finding suggests that leaders must move beyond symbolic foresight toward decision-linked foresight. A foresight report that does not change investment priorities, governance routines, or capability development is unlikely to produce leadership evolution. Therefore, the future-oriented management model proposed in this study places strategic option design at the center of leadership practice. Leaders evolve when they stop treating strategy as a fixed plan and begin treating it as a portfolio of options that can be activated under different future conditions.

The fourth finding revealed that distributed foresight and participatory leadership are essential for future-oriented management. Participants argued that foresight should not remain limited to executives or strategic planning departments because weak signals are often detected by employees and stakeholders located at organizational boundaries. This finding is consistent with Sarpong et al. (2013), who conceptualized strategic foresight as an ongoing social practice rather than a purely formal planning activity. It also aligns with complexity leadership theory, which suggests that adaptive capacity emerges through interaction, distributed intelligence, and enabling conditions rather than through top-down command alone (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). In this study, participatory foresight changed the meaning of leadership: leaders became facilitators of interpretation, connectors of diverse signals, and designers of spaces where multiple voices could shape strategic understanding. This finding is particularly important for organizations in volatile contexts because centralized decision-making may be too slow and cognitively narrow to detect rapid environmental change. Distributed foresight expands organizational intelligence by turning employees, customers, suppliers, and partners into contributors to future sensing.

The fifth finding showed that leadership evolution requires the institutionalization of foresight through learning routines. Participants repeatedly stated that foresight fails when it remains a one-time workshop or consultant-led project. Instead, foresight must be connected to strategic review meetings, innovation systems, performance dashboards, leadership development, and post-decision reflection. This finding is consistent with organizational learning theory, especially the idea that organizations must detect and correct errors in underlying assumptions rather than merely adjust surface-level actions (Argyris & Schön, 1978). It also supports Schwarz et al.'s (2020) view of corporate foresight as a microfoundation of dynamic capabilities because foresight becomes strategically meaningful when it supports continuous sensing, seizing, and transforming. The present study extends this literature by showing that institutionalized foresight also changes leadership identity. Leaders begin to view revision, experimentation, and assumption-testing not as signs of weakness but as indicators of adaptive maturity. Future-oriented leadership therefore depends on the normalization of learning under uncertainty.

Taken together, the findings suggest that strategic foresight contributes to leadership evolution through five mechanisms: attentional expansion, interpretive pluralism, option-based decision-making, participatory intelligence, and institutional learning. These mechanisms form the foundation of the proposed future-oriented management model. The model begins with future sensing because leaders must first expand the field of attention beyond immediate operations. It then moves to collective sensemaking because signals do not guide action until they are interpreted. The third stage, strategic option design, translates interpretation into flexible commitments. The fourth stage, adaptive mobilization, aligns people and resources around future-relevant priorities. The final stage, institutional learning, ensures that foresight becomes a continuous management capability rather than an episodic exercise. This model is compatible with dynamic capabilities theory because it operationalizes sensing, seizing, and transforming through leadership practices. It is also compatible with adaptive and complexity leadership because it emphasizes distributed interpretation, experimentation, and learning rather than centralized prediction or control.

The practical implication of this model is that strategic foresight should be treated as a leadership development process, not only as a strategic planning technique. Many organizations invest in strategy documents but fail to develop leaders who can think and act under uncertainty. The present findings suggest that future-oriented management requires leaders who are comfortable with ambiguity, capable of interpreting weak signals, skilled in scenario dialogue, willing to distribute strategic intelligence, and disciplined in institutionalizing learning. This is particularly relevant for organizations in Tehran and similar volatile environments, where external shocks may occur frequently and where rigid planning can quickly become obsolete. In such contexts, leadership evolution depends on the capacity to combine vigilance, imagination, flexibility, and collective learning.

The study has several limitations. First, the sample was limited to 22 participants from Tehran-based organizations, which may restrict transferability to other cities, countries, or institutional environments. Second, the study relied only on semi-structured interviews, and although this method allowed rich exploration of participant experiences, future studies could combine interviews with observation, document analysis, or longitudinal case studies. Third, participants were selected based on experience with strategic planning, foresight, or transformation, which may have produced a sample more favorable toward foresight than the general managerial population. Fourth, the findings are based on self-reported perceptions; therefore, the study did not directly measure whether foresight practices improved organizational performance. Finally, sectoral diversity was useful for conceptual development but limited the ability to compare industry-specific foresight routines in depth.

Future research should examine the proposed future-oriented management model in different organizational and national contexts. Quantitative studies could develop and validate a measurement scale for foresight-based leadership evolution, including dimensions such as weak-signal sensitivity, scenario literacy, participatory sensemaking, strategic option design, and institutional learning. Longitudinal research could explore how leadership practices change before, during, and after major environmental disruptions. Comparative studies could examine differences between traditional, agile, digital, and public-sector organizations in how foresight is embedded in decision-making. Future research could also investigate the relationship between strategic foresight, dynamic capabilities, innovation performance, organizational resilience, and employee adaptability. In addition, studies could explore how artificial intelligence, data analytics, and digital dashboards can support or distort managerial foresight.

For practice, organizations should integrate foresight into leadership development, strategy processes, innovation governance, and performance review systems. Managers should be trained in environmental scanning, scenario thinking, assumption testing, systems thinking, and strategic dialogue. Organizations should create cross-functional foresight forums where employees from different levels can share weak signals and interpret emerging changes. Strategic decisions should be tested against multiple future scenarios before major resource commitments are made. Leaders should also establish learning routines that review whether past assumptions were accurate and how emerging signals should modify current strategies. Finally, organizations should avoid treating foresight as a ceremonial planning activity; instead, they should institutionalize it as a continuous leadership capability that connects future sensing to present action.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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