

## Portraits of Plausibility: Reflection by Thomas J. Chermack -- Colorado State University

My familiarity with the term “plausibility” is in its use as one of three criteria to assess the utility of scenarios in scenario planning. Collective knowledge (based heavily on writing from former Shell women and men) suggests that scenarios must be plausible, challenging, and relevant in order to provoke strategic insights from their users. The American Heritage Dictionary defines plausibility as something “seemingly valid, acceptable, or credible” (2001, p. 703).

In medical research, the term plausibility also refers to an alternative explanation, but stresses that the alternative must be likely and expresses a direct correlation (i.e., the more likely an alternative explanation is, the more plausible it is). For example, a recent editorial by Sampson (2007) was highly critical of current medical studies of homeopathic medicine, unrefined plant products, prayer, and acupuncture, dismissing them as “implausible”-- even though these techniques have thousands of years of anecdotal evidence. In the context of medical research, the explanation that is judged most “likely” is the one that “wins”. This example reflects the rigid mind set in the medical profession that there is only one way to treat a disease. What if, like so many other disciplines, there are multiple effective ways to address the dilemma?

At the other end of the spectrum might be the practice of law. Those famous words “beyond a reasonable doubt” suggest that the defense will argue any possible alternative is an acceptable decision point to make an innocent judgment. Here, practitioners of law stress that an alternative explanation must merely be possible and that its likelihood is irrelevant.

Pierre Wack wrote about the difficulties in engaging managers in the scenarios. He emphasized that the first generation scenarios were “learning scenarios” that often provoked a response of “so what?”. He found that a second set of scenarios (called “decision scenarios”) was useful and required tailor-fitting to the mental models of the managers who would use them.

Pierre never documented his process for moving from learning scenarios to decision scenarios. One might assume that part of this transition was increasing the plausibility of the scenarios to make them more relevant to managers. This assumption implies a relationship between plausibility and relevance. To my knowledge the relationships among the criteria for assessing scenarios have not been explored.

From a practical perspective, I am interested in exploring plausibility as a strategy for moving from learning scenarios to decision scenarios. I am intrigued by understanding the role of plausibility in increasing scenario relevancy for managers. From an academic perspective, I am intrigued by how the brain interprets information and alters a judgment, moving it from “unbelievable” to “believable”. How the “suspension of disbelief” works, cognitively, is a fascinating topic, and certainly, plausibility plays a role.

### References

- American Heritage Dictionary (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). (2001). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.  
Sampson, W. (2007). Whatever happened to plausibility as the basis for clinical research and practice after EBM and CAM rushed in? *Medscape Today, January 26, 2007*. Accessed at: <http://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/548128>