

# Don't be an ostrich: get your head out of the sand and choose!

Jeroen Toet | Jester Strategy



When I was recently asked, during a working session with a board of directors, to make sense of the current state of the world and of how so many organisations seem to be responding to it, I found myself thinking of the metaphor of the ostrich. The world is so turbulent, so much is changing... Let's just hold off on taking important decisions or making investments until the dust has settled a little. Or let's hope we can carry on as before once the danger has passed. In short: bury your head in the sand until the storm has, hopefully, blown over.

## Standing still, disguised as prudence and good governance

It is a very human response to uncertainty. The strategic ostrich is rarely stupid or lazy. On the contrary: it often has good reasons to wait a little longer. The business is still ticking over. The figures are still acceptable. The timing feels awkward. And, of course, sometimes keeping calm and holding your position is the right thing to do. Not being swept along by every passing hype and not overreacting are genuine strengths. But standing still, and not daring to address (structural) uncertainty, is also all too easily disguised as prudence, as realism, as responsible governance. And, strategically speaking, not choosing is also a choice. What you are choosing then is to keep existing assumptions in place for longer, to postpone investments, to give competitors room to manoeuvre and to let customers slowly grow accustomed to the alternatives. The bill for this delay rarely arrives all at once. It seeps in: in missed opportunities, declining relevance and an organisation that becomes ever better at explaining why now is still not the moment.

Heraclitus said it millennia ago: change is the only constant. Admittedly, a great many pieces are shifting at once these days, and everyone is wrestling with the question of whether calm will ever return. And if you look hard enough, you will always find some new uncertainty that offers an excuse to postpone important choices. You can wait all you like, but the world keeps merrily turning, with or without you. And then, all of a sudden, you find you have transformed from an ostrich into a dodo (a bird that is perhaps worth an article of its own)!

## How do you avoid becoming an ostrich (or a dodo)?

The fact that you don't know exactly what the future will look like, that the world is so uncertain, need not mean that you can do nothing and had better (sit and) wait. With the help of foresight methods such as scenario



planning, you can force yourself and your organisation to get that head out of the sand. By collectively putting yourselves in a range of different futures (a kind of 'exposure therapy'), a shared picture emerges of where the opportunities lie, where the threats are and, above all, what you can do as an organisation to respond to them (starting now).

Exploring several futures together is not about predicting which of them will come true. That is something we simply cannot know for now. It is about making better choices under uncertainty. By living through different futures together, a sound, structured conversation emerges that actually gives you a grip on uncertainty and provides a basis for daring to make well-considered choices. Which actions are robust, always a good idea, whatever the future holds? Which options do we want to open up now? And which signals should we watch in order to adjust course in good time?

In short: get that head out of the sand. Not because you can suddenly predict the future, but because you can explore it. It is precisely by facing uncertainty together that you discover which choices are robust, which options you want to keep open and where you are prepared to take a deliberate risk. The world keeps moving. The question is not whether you know everything for certain (spoiler: you never do), but whether you dare to look beyond your comfort zone in order to choose in good time. Easier said than done, of course, but bear in mind that if an ostrich keeps its head in the sand for too long, it will suffocate\*.

*\*: the notion that an ostrich buries its head in the ground when danger threatens is, in fact, a myth. The bird would suffocate if it did. Ostriches do, however, forage on the ground for food or for small stones to aid their digestion, and they lay their eggs in nesting holes in the sand. Even so, 'never let the truth get in the way of a good story' – or, in this case, a metaphor.*

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## About the author

**Jeroen Toet** is a managing consultant at Jester Strategy. He is co-author of the book [Scenarioplanning in de praktijk](#). Using foresight methods such as scenario planning, Jeroen helps organisations – ranging from Fortune 500 companies to SMEs, and from (G4) municipalities to housing associations – to get a grip on uncertainty and to give structure to the strategic conversation in the boardroom.

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