

SIGHTS ON THE FUTURE:

EMDR THERAPY AS A TOOL
FOR TRANSFORMATIVE
FORESIGHT

By Suzanne Aikins and Christina Doyle



Strategic planning is at a crossroads. Across industries, leaders are deploying every tool – scenario planning, design sprints, innovation labs – to stretch their teams’ thinking and spark transformative ideas. Yet despite these efforts, many find themselves stuck in cycles of incremental change.

According to the State of Strategy Report 2025, 70% of leaders say strategy isn’t embedded in daily operations, 80% of teams aren’t aligned on what really matters, and only 3.55% of companies reach true execution maturity (Cascade Strategy, 2025).

Ultimately, the issue runs deeper than flawed planning – it’s cognitive overload. The *Global Leadership Forecast 2025* found that 71% of leaders report increased stress, and leaders experiencing burnout are 3.5 times more likely to leave their roles to improve their well-being (Development Dimensions International [DDI], 2025) – which has been shown to reduce cognitive function, slow decision making and diminish accuracy (D’Arcy, 2025). These findings reflect a growing truth: even high-performing leaders face internal, personal barriers—unresolved emotional triggers, survival-based mindsets, and chronic stress – that limit their ability to think expansively, inspire teams, and lead decisively in uncertain futures.

THE NEUROBIOLOGY OF STRATEGIC CONSTRAINT

A traumatic experience leaves a lasting imprint on the nervous system, shaping how a person relates to themselves, others, and the world. Everyone has five survival responses – fight, flight, freeze, flop, and fawn – which are activated when the brain shifts into survival mode. The amygdala detects danger and triggers the hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, releasing stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol. This impairs the prefrontal cortex (responsible for reasoning and emotional regulation) and disrupts the hippocampus (which organizes memory), often causing fragmented or sensory-based recall (Van der Kolk, 2014; Silveira et al, 2020).

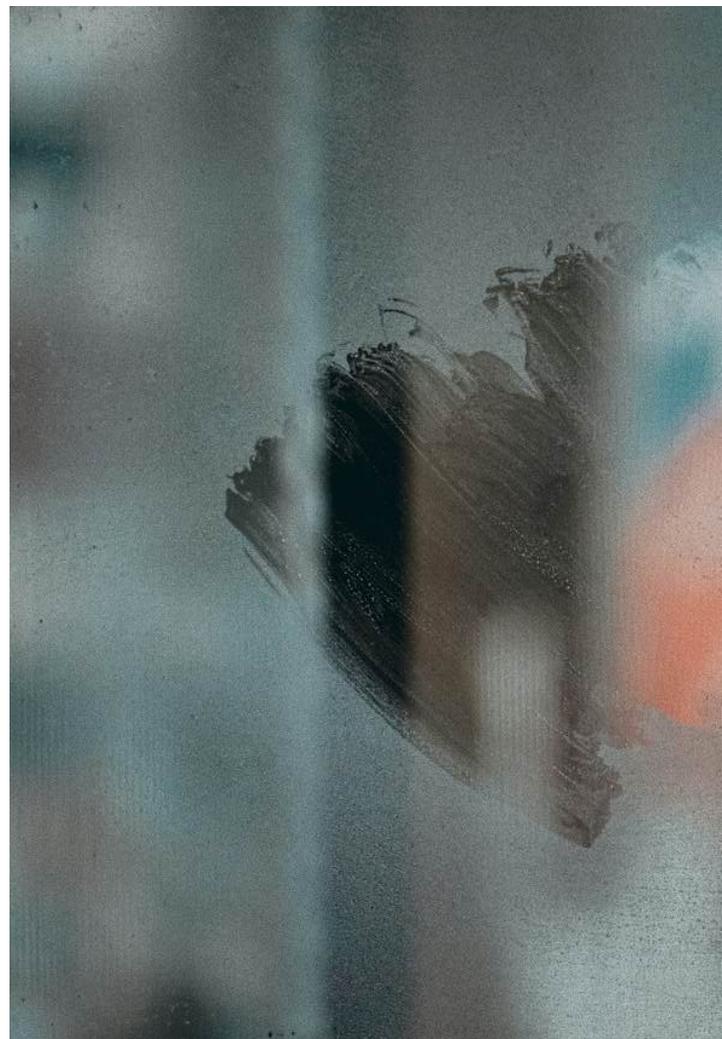
When unresolved, these responses can become chronic, keeping the brain and body stuck in survival mode. Under chronic stress, the amygdala becomes hyperactive, suppressing the prefrontal cortex – the region responsible for planning, imagination, and decision making (Silveira et al., 2020). When individuals or teams operate from this hijacked nervous system state, creativity and foresight can be compromised.

EMDR THERAPY: A STRATEGIC FORESIGHT ENABLER

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) Therapy, originally developed for trauma healing, offers a radical new approach: clearing the mental blocks that limit imagination and strategic foresight. EMDR is an evidence-based therapy that helps people process traumatic or distressing memories that feel “stuck.” By using bilateral stimulation (such as eye movements or tapping), EMDR activates the brain’s natural information processing system, allowing these memories to be integrated into a person’s life story. Instead of being re-experienced as if they are happening in the present (“trauma time”), the memories can be stored in a way that feels more distant and manageable. By helping leaders reprocess unresolved experiences and reduce cognitive clutter, EMDR enables sharper thinking, bolder decision making, and more visionary leadership (Shapiro, Wesselmann, & Mevissen, 2017).

The Proof: Jennifer’s Story

Jennifer, a senior executive, had long avoided high-risk innovation, driven by a fear rooted in childhood. At 13, her father’s business failed, triggering financial strain and family conflict. She internalized her mother’s harsh judgment and came to equate bold decisions with personal ruin. EMDR Therapy helped Jennifer reprocess these formative memories, shifting them from emotionally charged to integrated and neutral. This cleared the cognitive blocks that had constrained her strategic thinking. She soon approved a high-stakes product launch that doubled growth, describing the shift as “moving from strategic paralysis to visionary action” (EMDR Therapy Sydney, n.d.).



DRAWING FROM PSYCHOLOGY: ADDRESSING THE EMOTIONAL ROOTS OF STRATEGY

In nearly every strategic planning session, a familiar cast of behavioral archetypes tends to surface*. These roles, such as the skeptical “Nay Person,” the overwhelmed “Burnout Boundary,” or the agreeable “Nodding Head”, can subtly shape the direction and depth of strategic conversations. While facilitation techniques like “blue sky” brainstorming, “yes, and...” dialogue, or idea “parking lots” help manage group dynamics, they often fall short of addressing the deeper emotional and cognitive patterns that influence how individuals engage with the future, and each other.

Psychological research reveals that many of these behaviors are not random – they often stem from personal or professional experiences that have shaped a survival-oriented or fixed mindset (Silveira et al., 2020). For example, a leader who consistently resists bold ideas may be drawing from past failures that left emotional residue. Similarly, someone who avoids contributing may be navigating a lack of psychological safety or fear of judgment (Edmondson & Lei, 2014).

Rather than viewing these behaviors as obstacles, we can use insights from psychology to understand them as signals or indicators of unresolved narratives or emotional constraints that influence strategic engagement. By integrating approaches such as EMDR Therapy, which helps individuals reprocess past experiences and reduce cognitive rigidity, organizations can begin to unlock more expansive thinking. This creates space for leaders to move beyond habitual responses and engage with strategy from a place of clarity, creativity, and confidence. In doing so, strategic planning becomes not just a process of forecasting and alignment, but also an opportunity for personal and collective transformation. When emotional barriers are acknowledged and addressed, the future becomes more accessible – not just as an intellectual exercise, but as a space for genuine possibility.

STRATEGIC PLANNING COLLABORATION: BEHAVIORAL ARCHETYPES

*In nearly every strategic planning collaboration, a cast of familiar characters emerge, each playing a subtle but powerful role in how the future gets imagined or constrained.

- **Nay Person:** "It won't work," or "We already tried that"

Pro: Offers valuable historical context and lessons from past efforts that failed.

Con: Their skepticism can be contagious or discouraging, potentially stalling momentum.

- **Tactical Thinker:** "Things are on fire today – we should focus on the near-term only", "If we don't fix today, there is no tomorrow"

Pro: Can be powerful activators, especially when redirected to operationalize future-focused plans.

Con: May become overly focused on immediate issues and lead conversations into short-term rabbit holes.

- **Nodding Head:** "I agree with my colleagues and superiors on everything," or "I have nothing to add"

Pro: Helps build consensus easily enabling smoother transitions between topics.

Con: May lack psychological safety or confidence in sharing independent or dissenting views.

- **Burnout Boundary:** "I have too much on my plate, I can't take that on," or "Is this of value to xyz anymore?"

Pro: Comfortable setting their boundaries to protect their capacity.

Con: May show limited imagination and engagement with it comes to growth opportunities.

- **Worried Wordsmith:** "We need to finish alignment on the specifics before we can move forward," or "Can we circle back on the terminology and framing for the vision/mission?"

Pro: Essential for crafting clear and cohesive communications.

Con: May struggle to shift from a linear, waterfall process to more dynamic, emergent collaborations.

INTEGRATING EMDR WITH STRATEGIC FORESIGHT

Authentic leadership, supported by psychological safety, has also been shown to boost creativity and strategic capacity. Studies indicate that when leaders feel safe to express their true selves, they foster environments that support innovation, emotional commitment, and deeper collaboration (Černe et al, 2013), (Chaudhary, R., & Panda, C.,2018). This alignment between personal values and professional roles enhances not only well-being but also the ability to imagine and lead toward bold futures. In this way, healing and foresight become intertwined. When leaders are supported in reconnecting with themselves – emotionally, cognitively, and strategically – they unlock the clarity and creativity needed to lead with conviction. The most transformative leadership may not come from new tools or frameworks, but from minds freed from the weight of the past.

The Futures Triangle, developed by Prof. Sohail Inayatullah, offers a valuable framework for reflecting on how the weight of the past, the push of the present, and the pull of the future shape strategic possibilities (Inayatullah, 2023). If some of the “weight of the past” could be addressed and alleviated through EMDR, we could all be working in more fertile ground for effective corporate planning and collaboration.

By integrating EMDR's neurobiological benefits with the strategic foresight lens of the Futures Triangle, organizations may unlock deeper, more authentic visions of the future – not just intellectually, but emotionally and neurologically. Especially in sectors such as healthcare, where entrenched mindsets can impede transformation, the most radical innovation may be a mind freed from the past.

TOWARD A HEALING-CENTERED APPROACH TO STRATEGY

This multidisciplinary approach invites a new kind of strategic planning, one that is not only imaginative but also healing. If collective foresight invites us to courageously provoke and reimagine what is possible, might it also demand a parallel kind of bravery that turns inward to confront the personal traumas and unresolved narratives that quietly shape our professional visions of the future? While foresight is not therapy, it is a deeply reflective practice. To imagine and plan for futures that are truly transformative, leaders must be willing to examine the emotional and cognitive patterns that influence how they perceive change, risk, and possibility.

What if the key to visionary strategy isn't choosing the right method – but breaking free from the mental patterns that limit how we think? As two practitioners from different disciplines, we set out to explore what becomes possible when foresight, psychology, and systems thinking converge – driven by curiosity, grounded in practice, and shaped by lived experience.

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