



TRAINING

HOW POLICY WORKS

Q&A

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NEARLY EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO
KNOW ABOUT HOW POLICY WORKS...

Simon Newman



TRAINING

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"You mentioned the burglary scenario. I remember watching an interview with Alan Johnston, when he was Home Secretary. He was told by his advisor that when times are hard and money is scarce burglary goes up. Conversely, when times are good and people have more money, burglary still goes up. How do you deal with a policy situation like this, when you're 'damned if you do, damned if you don't'?"

That's a great question and a really good example. It's hard to deal with situations like that because policy interventions may not make much of a difference and in certain cases, you may actually see a significant rise in offences being reported to the police (giving the impression that the policy has made the problem worse!). However, it's important (from the public's perspective at least) that the Government is seen to be doing 'something' even if the effect is limited or uncertain.

Q

"You say talking to your target audience is important as is formal consultation. However, it is difficult when our stakeholders and people who take part in consultations are not represented widely. I think what I am trying to say is how do we get our policy making as diverse and inclusive as possible."

It's great that you are thinking about how to make your policy-making more inclusive. Engaging with hard-to-reach stakeholders (or those who are disinterested) requires a different approach to more mainstream communication channels. Otherwise, you end up getting feedback from a very limited group which can give a misleading representation of the impact a policy may have and therefore, unduly influence the potential direction of the policy.

Personally speaking, I would start by highlighting this challenge right at the beginning of the policy cycle.

Try and find out why certain groups don't engage - is it because they typically don't engage with Government, or is it because there is a particular way in which they like to engage. Are their groups or people who can act as intermediaries for you (trust is a really important component here). You may also want to think about doing some 'pre-consultation' as a way of preparing them for the real thing.

Also think carefully about messaging - a one-size-fits-all approach won't work for everyone. Finally, I would tap into the experience around you (and across other civil service departments) to identify what has worked successfully elsewhere. One of the key attributes a policy professional needs is the ability to network - but you may find you will have to do this yourself!



"Are there any tips you can share on how organisations can position themselves so that they would be identified as a key player to policymakers on the Mendelow Matrix?"

I'm really pleased you've asked this question as I'm a passionate supporter of greater collaboration between the private and public sectors. I've written this from the perspective of how I would advise a private sector client, but I'll also add some thoughts from the perspective of a civil service department wanting to shift a stakeholder to have a greater level of interest in the policy. The first thing I would do is to do some homework on the department. Have a read of the departmental plan, strategic objectives etc and work out how and where your own organisation aligns or supports those objectives. This will help you focus on the things that policymakers are interested in. The second thing is to find out who the key people are. This can be difficult as civil servants in policymaking roles aren't always visible and turnover of staff is reasonably high.

Always target a civil servant at Grade 7 or 6 level - they are the ones who tend to lead policy work and have a good grip on the detail. There may be some nervousness within the civil service about engaging with the private sector, but your role here is to simply build that relationship to help them better understand aspects of the policy area they may not be familiar with.

Try and find where they might be having difficulties. Finally,(and using the first two points), I would think about how you can demonstrate your value to the Department. Producing reports with statistics is one way, running events and inviting policymakers along to participate or observe is another. I also think it can be helpful if you can find a unique angle as it sets you apart from others. It takes time and can be frustrating, but keep with it. The final piece of advice I would give on this is about the importance of understanding how Government works. I work mostly in the private sector these days and I'm staggered at how little major suppliers to Government actually understand what goes on inside Whitehall. Decision-making and accountability can often appear convoluted and overly complex!

In terms of the other perspective (i.e, how the civil service gets an organisation to play a more active role), I would be absolutely clear upfront what you need from them. Running industry days or policy workshops can help secure buy-in and gives you the chance to set out the 'ask'



Q

"Regarding the 5 case model, what if there is a limited commercial/ economy case for a new policy. I work for an environmental ENGO and we can't always make that case."

This is a great point - you are absolutely right in that there are some policy areas where certain parts of the 5 case model will prove challenging. There's no problem with that - sometimes we find ourselves required to implement international treaties which have no, or very limited economic benefit to the UK. In these instances, make it clear in the business case, but where possible, see what you can find instead to 'hang' the policy off. For example, will it help the UK Government achieve certain strategic objectives?

One of the things I've been taking a close interest in recently, is how some countries are changing the way they measure the effectiveness of Government. We're seeing a growing trend for measures such as 'happiness' as opposed to GDP and I think environment-related measures will almost certainly become part of the process within time. I would also have a look at how other countries have dealt with this - networking is a key attribute for policy professionals and I think building a network of contacts domestically and internationally can really aid your knowledge in this area.





Q

"What advice do you have as to how can we better deliver policy effectively when working online?"

The impact of Covid-19 has meant that a large percentage of the population now spend the majority of their time working online - and I see that unlikely to change in the short term. Technology is great in many ways as it has the potential to increase reach, but it's important to remember that accessibility is a problem for some stakeholders which risks excluding them from the process. Therefore, despite the shift to more online working, I think there is a real need to have a more blended approach.

In terms of your specific question, I'm not sure whether you are referring to the actual process of delivering policy (i.e., implementation) or about working with your team(s) to develop policy. If it's the first point, I would say that a clear communication strategy is essential. Within it, clearly define key messages, communication channels, frequency and how you measure success. Speak to your comms team so that you have an evidence base of what works. If it's the latter, I would suggest regular online meetings. Keep them focused and make sure whoever chairs the meeting has the skills to include everyone.



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