

H4 Consulting Brief

Ask a Silly Question

Decisions about policy and legislation, government priorities and commitments, and allocation of scarce public resources are influenced by many factors, including expert advice and often complex and incomplete evidence. Decision makers, who often ask very specific questions of experts, can be quick to criticise capability within publicly funded organisations if they do not like the answers, and may eventually stop asking questions altogether.

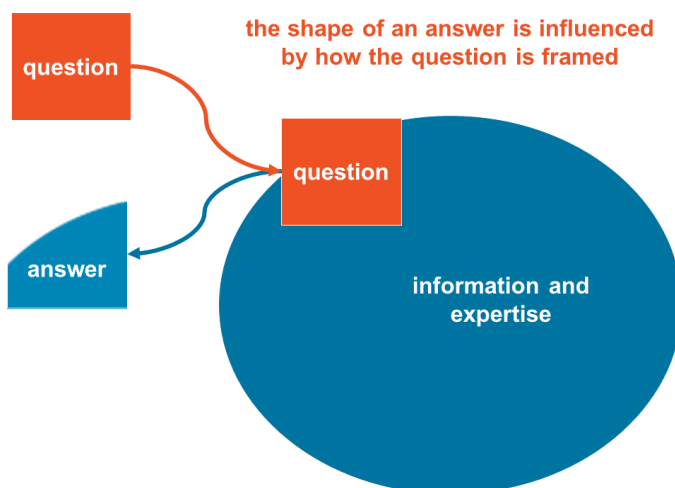
It's easy to blame the producer when a product falls short of expectations; much easier than considering whether those expectations were communicated clearly. The same is true for expert advice of analysis. If the answer is not what a decision maker wanted to hear, or is not framed in the way they expected, it's very easy to dismiss the advice or analysis from a publicly funded organisation as being of poor quality.

Giving and receiving expert advice is a complex communication task between unequal partners. Decision makers have more power, and experts have more knowledge and information. When dealing with challenging content, it can be hard for non-specialists to ask questions that are not naïve and will yield useful insight, and to interpret the answers they receive.

When communication is unclear, decision makers can miss important information because their question was defined too narrowly, or overlook insights because the parameters for analysis were defined poorly.

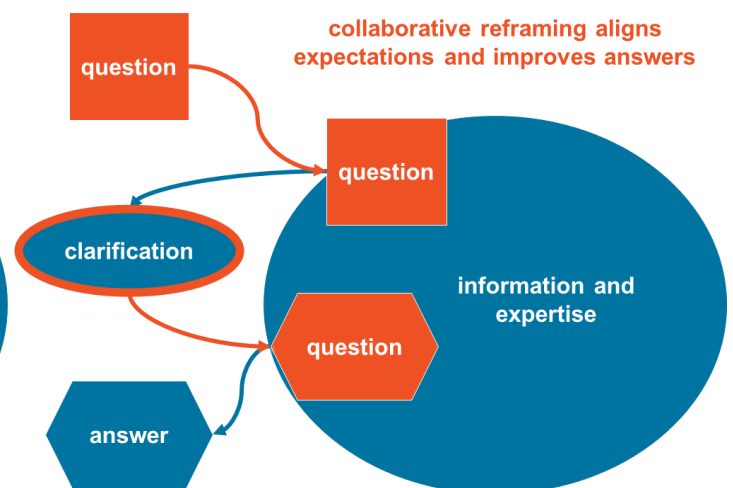
Frustration with this outcome may discourage decision makers from seeking expert advice, relying more heavily on assumptions and ideology. A potentially valuable source of advice may be rejected without consideration of whether it is being used well.

Experts may learn to distrust and dismiss decision makers who seem not to value evidence. They may even adopt malicious compliance strategies to minimise effort, like answering naïve questions strictly as asked, further eroding their perceived value.



Decision makers can get more value out of expert advice by adopting a partnership, rather than transactional, model of engagement with experts. Decision makers and experts can work together to understand the purpose of a request and the utility of available evidence. By combining their relative strengths, they can frame better questions that can be expressed in terms of the source information, leading to better answers that can be expressed in terms of the decision maker's authority.

Instead of just providing raw data, information, or advice in response to narrow requests, experts who work in partnership with decision makers can help to interrogate and interpret the evidence to co-create actionable advice.



Collaboration between decision makers and expert advisors can define a request for information in ways that better fit both the evidence and the decision it will inform. Defining parameters, like the Terms of Reference for a formal inquiry, by working with experts who understand the knowledge base means that decision makers are more likely to get the information they really need, rather than the information they think they want. In turn, experts engaged in real problem solving, rather than transactional information supply, will contribute more of their deep content knowledge to create better answers.

Expert advice should not be a box to tick, or a detour on the path to a predetermined answer. It should be a partnership that asks and answers the right questions.

To find out more about how you can use this approach in your organisation, contact us: info@h4consulting.com.au
Find additional resources at www.h4consulting.com.au/resources