

H4 Consulting Brief

Empirical Storytelling

Different people are persuaded by different kinds of information and have different expectations about evidence. People who work in publicly funded organisations tend to prefer robust, empirical evidence but many, perhaps even most, policy makers and stakeholders tend to find stories more persuasive than facts and figures. This can lead to frustrating miscommunications, with both sides convinced that the other needs to get their story straight.

Publicly funded organisations often have strong and proud cultures that emphasise merit, objectivity, and independence. These organisations tend to select and promote people who value, understand, and are persuaded by empiricism and rigorous analysis.

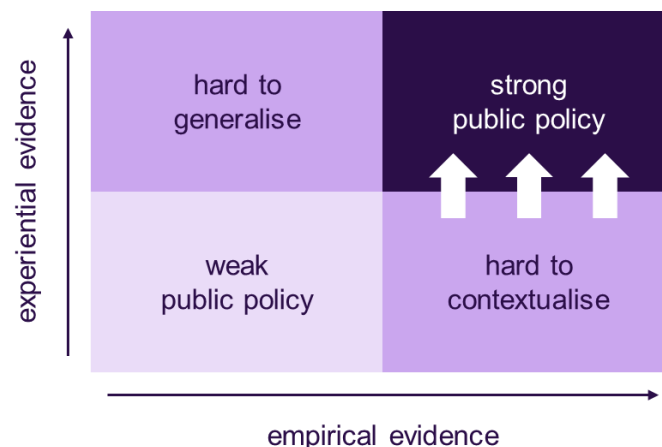
Over time, such organisations tend to select out people who put greater value on feelings or intuition. Analysts speak fluently to each other about evidence, or the lack of it, and rarely practice communicating persuasively about how people feel or are affected.

In the community, however, many people are more persuaded by stories and emotions than data and statistics. Highly technical, research-driven expertise may be viewed with suspicion and dismissed as cold or out of touch.

Decision makers who need to win public support are often frustrated by policy advice based on robust analysis that seems to lack context and narrative. Policy analysts are often frustrated by repeated demands for anecdotes that cannot be generalised and oversimplify complex factors. Both sides tend to dismiss the arguments raised by the other as invalid.

Decision makers may choose weaker options with better stories, despite available evidence, or the lack of it. Policies that may *feel* right, like abstinence only, or tough on crime, often underdeliver at scale.

Policy workers may champion rational policy positions that are unacceptable to stakeholders, further alienating and discouraging people who are persuaded by different kinds of information.



For public policy to be effective, it needs to be capable of both effectiveness and acceptability. Achieving both standards requires analysts to draw from evidence of many kinds and from many sources, not just the varieties of evidence that they or their colleagues find most persuasive. If public policy were based on empirical standards alone, then peer-reviewed research would routinely lead to legislation.

Policy analysts need research and models and robust analysis, but they also need to get better at hearing, telling, and valuing the stories that express and enrich data-driven analysis. Anecdotes from lived experience can be rich sources of insight, and experiential evidence helps to make sense of empirical evidence for analysts, decision makers, and stakeholders.

Many, perhaps even most, people understand their world through experiences, stories, and feelings much more than data and formulae. They want to know how and why they, and the people they care about, will be affected by proposed policies. They want meaningful and accessible narratives, not just numbers and facts that are hard to interpret. That preference does not make people wrong, misguided, or unintelligent, as too many policy analysts are too quick to assume.

Learning to access and express empirical evidence through stories can strengthen policy advice and make it more likely that evidence-based policy will be accepted and implemented. Telling good empirical stories encourages better decisions by presenting all options on a more accessible footing, making it harder for a good story to get in the way of the facts.

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