

H4 Consulting Brief

Most Likely to Succeed

Publicly funded organisations are essential to implementing policy decisions, but their role as contributors to policy debate is often undervalued. Sources of policy advice have expanded, while traditional policy units have become increasingly engaged in selling the policy decisions made by politicians. Good policy proposals are increasingly self-censored, based on assumed preferences of decision makers, surrendering ground in the contest of ideas.

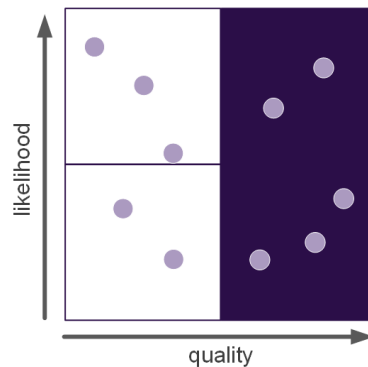
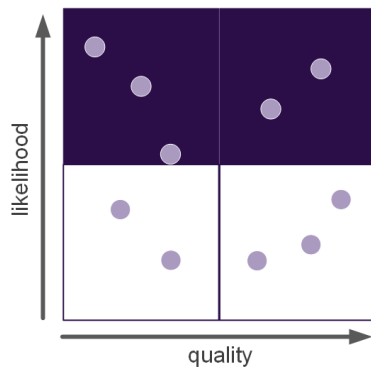
Retail politics has become more accepted, and a more contested market for policy ideas has developed. Policy effort within publicly funded organisations is increasingly diverted from development to 'selling' a policy fait accompli such as an election commitment. These trends tend to narrow the range of proposals that decision makers see, or choose to consider.

Policy workers want their ideas to be well received and have a chance to be implemented. More polarisation of political agendas, the increasing power of political advisors as gatekeepers to decision makers, and institutional fatigue have all increased the tendency for previously impartial policy advice to be more politically tailored. Policy workers self-censor proposals, placing too much weight on the perceived likelihood that an idea will be accepted, and too little on quality.

Potentially good policy ideas that are assessed as unlikely to be well received by decision makers are never proposed, weakening the contest of ideas. Growing unwillingness to propose a range of quality options has left a vacuum to be filled by other players, like partisan think tanks and policy advisors. This has exaggerated the gradual skewing of policy positions to the extremes, as the vicious cycle of policy workers attempting to guess and pander to the preferences of decision makers becomes self-reinforcing.

Attempts to satisfy assumed preferences often fail in their immediate aims because preferences are unclear or inconsistent, or were derived from a small sample of public statements. Attempts to second-guess the preferred policy positions of decision makers are, therefore, often inaccurate or outdated.

proposals advanced based on assumptions about how likely they are to 'get up'



proposals advanced based on assessments of how likely they are to deliver outcomes

Publicly funded organisations can, however, rely on quality criteria to assess the merits of ideas, independent of the perceived likelihood that the ideas will be accepted. Emphasising the quality of, and evidence for, policy ideas, means that proposals will be considered from a broader range of political perspectives, formalising the contest of ideas and making it transparent. Decision makers may retain partisan preferences, but these will be anchored by high quality proposals from more diverse perspectives.

Formalisation leads to normalisation, as assessment of ideas based on quality is reintegrated into the core functions of publicly funded organisations. Redefinition and clarification of the roles and boundaries of politics and policy will help restore a framework for policy workers to give their best advice to decision makers.

Recommending proposals based on quality, rather than the perceived likelihood that they align with the preferences of decision makers, ensures that the best ideas are at least considered as part of the policy process. Even if policy decisions are partisan by nature, an impartial presentation of meritorious ideas kicks off the debate and decisions from the perspective of outcomes rather than ideologies.

A structured framework for determining what policy ideas to propose, and why, empowers policy workers to privilege efficacy over perceived acceptability to decision makers. This clarifies and upholds the legitimate role of impartial policy advice from publicly funded organisations in the contest of ideas, rather than the contest of assumed ideologies. This, in turn, increases the chances that an idea that is accepted might also be the one most likely to succeed.

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