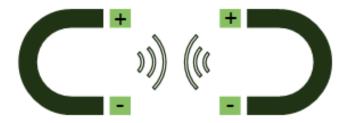# H4 Consulting Brief

Awkwardness Gap

People are social animals and may sometimes be inclined to concede a point for the sake of collegiality and minimising conflict. In pursuit of good policy, this may mean that lower quality ideas prevail, while some good ideas end up on the cutting-room floor. Tolerating the awkwardness of social distance for a little bit longer can create the space to explore and agree more good ideas, before we close ranks for the sake of social harmony.

People in publicly funded organisations, perhaps more than in some other workplaces, generally try to minimise interpersonal conflict and pursue consensus. Most people prefer to be polite most of the time and believe that cooperative working relationships are more productive and effective as well as pleasant. It is a very human instinct to shift our opinions and perspectives to achieve consensus within a group.

Large organisations employ many people, bringing together different ideas and opinions that may conflict with each other, and with the status quo. Compromise is essential to maintain momentum and relationships, particularly where the consequences for public outcomes are high. Organisations with a strong bias toward consensus can therefore encourage and reinforce this response when ideas are in conflict.

Making compromises to avoid interpersonal discomfort can mean that weaker options are supported over stronger alternatives. Accepting less effective actions or less robust policy thinking, or overlooking important perspectives can all result from people being too quick to flip from holding the line, to falling in line.

Compromising too early may trade long-term priorities for short-term comfort without enough consideration of the consequences. Compromising too early can also affect the volume and timing of effort and outcomes, such as by deferring deadlines that should ideally not be delayed, or agreeing to take on extra work that is avoidable or unnecessary. In these cases, social pressure to compromise in the interests of comfortable relations can override a healthy focus on producing good work in the public interest.
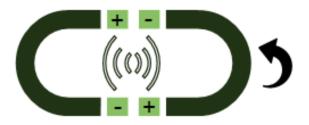

awkwardness gap

social harmony

Creating and tolerating an 'awkwardness gap' allows space to keep more options alive for longer. This means consciously and respectfully suppressing the urge to defuse social tension too quickly, resisting the impulse to compromise until a broad range of options and information has been considered. This encourages people in sometimes highly charged situations to recognise and resist social pressure to conform for its own sake, making the costs of each option more apparent, and privileging the quality of ideas over intolerance of social awkwardness.

Where compromise is warranted, the decision to 'flip' should be active rather than passive or reactive. Compromise should be informed by consideration of the action that will maximise public value, rather than the action that will minimise social awkwardness.

An awkwardness gap creates time and space to identify, explore, and choose options that maximise public value. This involves temporary discomfort for participants in the process, in deliberate pursuit of a better outcome. Better decisions may result from a different party giving ground, or an entirely new option being identified while exploring conflicting ideas. This process contributes to both more robust ideas and more efficient use of resources.

The discomfort of the awkwardness gap is temporary and is ultimately resolved when parties adopt a shared position. Social harmony is restored as participants close ranks around a solution they can all advocate or accept with greater confidence and less risk of resentment, without feeling that they've compromised outcomes in pursuit of social harmony.

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