

H4 Consulting Brief

Frank and Fearless

There are many clichés about people who work in publicly funded organisations, including that they have no new ideas and are risk averse to the point of paralysis. These clichés conflict with the image of the frank and fearless servant of the public who promotes good ideas and leads from the front. The meritocratic ideal competes with a combination of the scarecrow and the cowardly lion from the Wizard of Oz, lacking both brains and courage.

Publicly funded organisations have traditionally held legitimate authority, drawn from expertise, access to information, and responsibility for implementation. The skills and techniques of public administration increasingly borrow from politics, where demonstrating political 'nous' dominates traditional values of frank and fearless advice to decision makers.

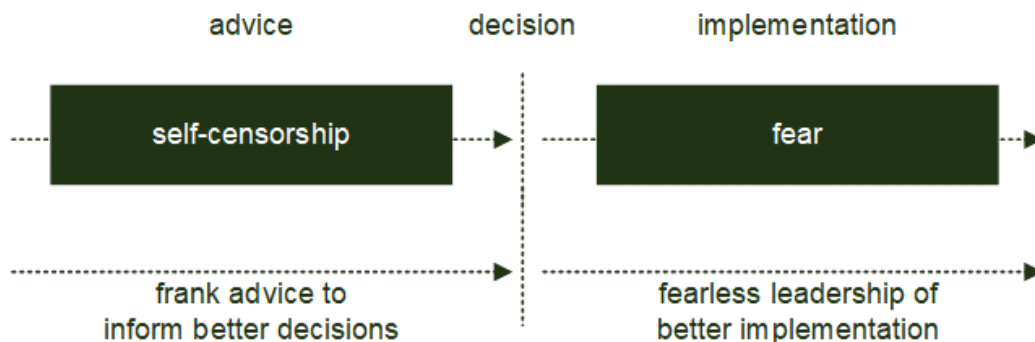
The market for ideas about public problems has become more contested, with many voices promoting sometimes partisan ideas. In this echo chamber, there is a lot of pressure to make advice congenial to decision makers.

Cautious implementation also makes sense in settings where the consequences of failure can be catastrophic for sometimes vulnerable individuals.

When frank debate and fearless leadership within publicly funded organisations are stifled, ideas are subject to less rigorous and impartial challenges. Opposition becomes the exclusive domain of political actors, and frank analysis can be drowned out by shallow, partisan critiques. Reasoned advice takes on the flavour of stakeholder opinion, where stakeholders influence more than the quality of their thinking.

When weak ideas are not weeded out or refined, this has the dual effect of reducing the quality of decisions, and creating a vacuum to attract more weak ideas.

Worse ideas are often harder to implement well, so the risks for a leader to show personal courage in championing ideas are correspondingly higher. For advisers who are not wise, it gets harder to be brave.



Sustaining a culture of both frank advice and fearless leadership requires internal discipline and healthy boundaries around publicly funded organisations.

Internal discipline includes adopting practices to prevent advice from being self-censored too early. Creating and protecting space for ideas to be challenged and refined internally helps to build skills and confidence to make or accept external challenges.

Establishing and enforcing healthy boundaries includes both practicing and demanding respectful honesty. Frank advice should mean presenting genuine options to legitimate decision makers, not narrow or unworkable ideals. Clarifying when and where respectful dissent is appropriate can help to build trust in the integrity of both advisers and advice.

Giving frank advice to decision makers is a core function of publicly funded organisations that should be performed with the same diligence and integrity as any other function. This means giving robust, actionable advice that respects both the integrity of the organisation, and the legitimacy of the decision maker. This is a function of culture as well as capability.

When people have given their best advice to inform decisions, people working in publicly funded organisations can, and should, have the courage to commit fearlessly to implementation.

Only by fully engaging in both the journey to a decision and the implementation of that decision can people in publicly funded organisations give the best of both their brains and their courage.

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