

H4 Consulting Brief

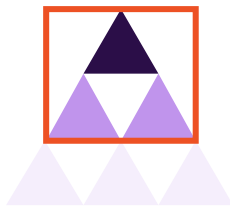
Out of Bounds

Routine decisions by political leaders are typically informed by, and selected from, a set of options prepared and presented by policy workers. By including or omitting options from the set presented to decision makers, policy workers can intentionally, or unintentionally, shape the field in which decisions are made. This means policy workers can, whether by choice or oversight, pre-emptively rule potentially legitimate options out of bounds.

Decision makers exercising their legitimate authority tend to dislike being treated as a 'rubber stamp', preferring to pick from a range of options. They expect the options prepared for their consideration to draw from a range of alternatives that respond to political priorities, available evidence, and practical constraints.

Policy workers recognise that resources to address public needs are scarce and want to maximise the value of any policy action. They may be tempted to minimise the risk of a missed opportunity by fielding a set of options that strongly suggest their preferred action, such as by presenting only weak alternatives.

Policy workers are often experts in their fields. If they judge one option to simply be the best, they may try to nudge decisions by non-experts in that direction.



presenting an artificially narrow range of options can create an illusion of choice while strongly suggesting a 'preferred' answer

Policy advice should support the legitimate exercise of government authority. That means policy workers need to recognise and adjust for their own preferences and blind spots by consulting widely across diverse points of view when identifying, analysing, and presenting options to decision makers.

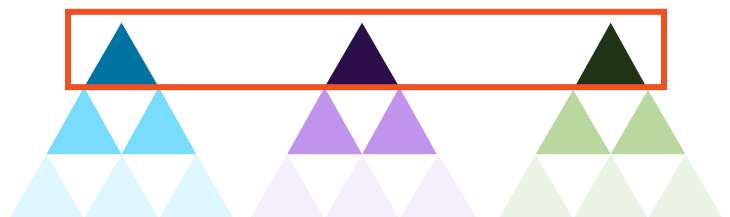
Just because policy workers dislike an option does not mean that it is without merit or unworthy of consideration. Options presented to decision makers should acknowledge and respond to the political, economic, and social interests of government, not just the considered opinions of specialist policy insiders.

If a 'bad option' is in the mix, explain its merits and deficiencies up front rather than waiting for it to emerge from left field in the decision process.

When the number or nature of options presented to a decision maker is artificially narrow, it creates an illusion of choice. But the policy worker, rather than the legitimate decision maker, could be calling the shots.

Policy workers preparing advice from a specific area of expertise and point of view may only see part of the picture. It is easy for even the best-intentioned policy workers to unintentionally downplay the merits of options that differ from their preferences, potentially discounting or even excluding viable alternatives.

Decision makers who feel blindsided, or suspect that good options are being withheld or downplayed, are likely to lose trust in the advice of policy workers. This can lead to more captain's picks, where decisions are made without the support of robust policy analysis.



broadening the field to include a wider range of options builds trust with decision makers and gives them more visibility and flexibility to respond to policy challenges

This is a delicate game. Policy workers need to cull weak and infeasible ideas to avoid overwhelming decision makers with too much choice. They also need to keep viable options in play to give decision makers flexibility to act.

Seeking and respecting diverse points of view, including from non-specialists, can help compensate for policy blind spots. This can strengthen the field of options presented to decision makers and ensure that 'bad' options are explained rather than ignored. This reduces the risk that decision makers will choose options from outside the policy workers' playbook.

Decision makers and policy workers are a team. When trusted advisers give decision makers a strong field of options, policy action improves by leaps and bounds.

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