

H4 Consulting Brief

Don't Stop

For the workers providing public services, an announcement that departmental responsibilities will be restructured brings uncertainty about how work already in progress will be affected by Machinery of Government (MoG) changes. Some workers misinterpret uncertainty as withdrawal of the authority, and obligation, to act. They perceive current directions to have lapsed, so, in anticipation of potential future redirection, they stop and wait.

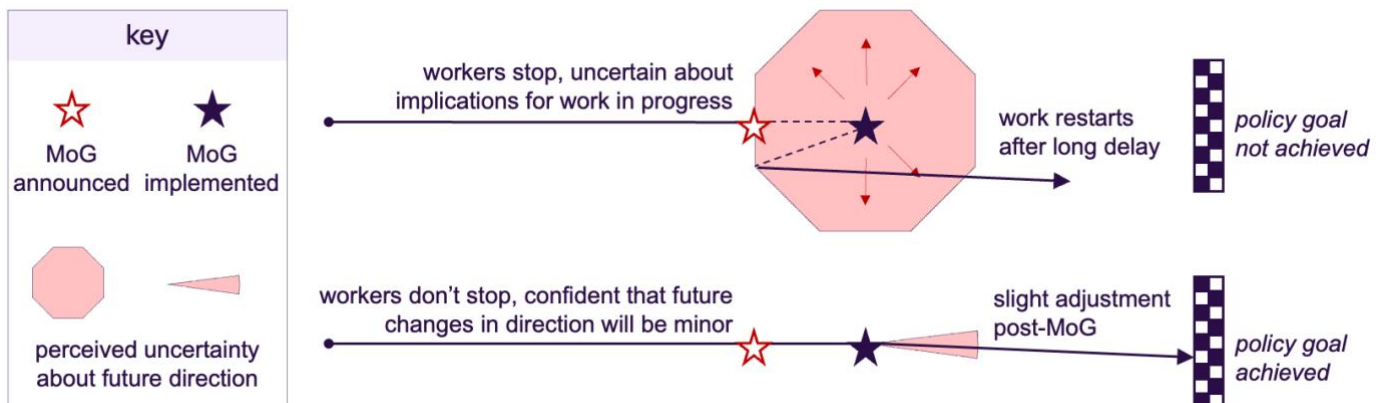
Action within the public sector is tightly controlled by formal instruments of authority and accountability. No individual has independent authority; it must be legally delegated. Workers understand this framework, and they expect to be punished if they act outside the limits of the authority formally delegated to their role.

Announcement of a MoG foreshadows a potential change of the individual leaders who will direct future work. The preferences of possible future leaders are unknown, raising ambiguity beyond the comfort level of some workers. This can be common among non-frontline workers, for whom public need may be diffuse and impersonal, and administrative workers, for whom even minor changes of executive preferences can materially affect their day-to-day work.

The mere possibility of a future change in direction is not a direction to stop, or start, or change anything. Announcement of a MoG does not grant authority to stop and wait for new instructions or, more likely, for very similar instructions from a new leader.

Paradoxically, workers who pause work on current priorities because priorities may change are acting beyond their authority. Stopping without authorisation, they fall victim to the very risk they sought to avoid.

Public workers who stop out of concern that future decision makers might have different preferences for how work is done also fail in their duty to deliver public value. Stopping work to wait for direction disrupts and delays delivery of the priorities of the government of the day, which are unlikely to change much, if at all.



MoGs affect public workers much more than they affect the public or its needs. The uncertainty around announcement of a MoG might seem huge to an individual worker, but it's tiny relative to a public policy or service. It's rare that new delegated executives will demand major changes in direction, so continuing to move forward is almost always the right direction.

Uncertainty about possible future changes of authority must be balanced against immediate accountability. Public workers have an ongoing obligation to deliver authorised work and exercise delegated authority in the public interest. Those obligations stand until formally revoked. Public workers should keep working just as hard on current priorities until, and unless, instructed to change or stop. Just as authority to act must be delegated, so must authority to stop.

By recognising that MoGs change organisations, not public needs or value, public workers can remind themselves that a change of director is not the same as a change of direction. Any change in approach that follows a MoG is likely to be minor, and the costs of any future course correction negligible compared with the costs of stopping to wait for more information.

By keeping up the good work, workers continue to meet their obligations to the public, and to the government of the day. That accountability can be met only by acting confidently within existing authority.

The public demands, and deserves, continued focus and fair value from public workers, even when those workers feel a little more uncertain than usual. The direction from the public is clear: don't stop.

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