

Approaching Policy Communication as Story Telling

For some time, Jim Mitchell and I have maintained a running dialogue about the need to differentiate policy communication from policy development. We see a “blind spot” in the policy process, namely, that the development of policy is so preoccupying that the subsequent communication of these new ideas is almost an afterthought, taken as a given. Experience, however, tells us that there are no “slam dunks” when it comes to convincing Deputy Ministers, Ministers or Cabinet Committees of the “rightness” of a given policy proposal.

Inspired by those conversations, I have explored these ideas and have embodied them in a Sussex Circle training module titled: “Approaching Policy Communication as Story Telling”, which focuses primarily on building better policy slide presentations. Presented below are some of the key points in this approach.

Rationale – Why it makes sense to approach policy communication as story telling

- Policy communication is all about telling (or selling) the “what” of a policy proposal. This is the logic of *presentation*.
- By contrast, policy development is all about the “how” of a proposed solution. This is the logic of *discovery*. But senior decision-makers don’t have the time or the inclination, necessarily, to know how the policy was developed or how the solution “on offer” was discovered. So, focus on the “what” and communicate it effectively.
- Competition between ideas is a reality of the modern public policy process in Canada. The public service no longer enjoys even a quasi-monopoly on policy expertise, and if you fail to communicate your ideas in a short, compelling and convincing manner, i.e., in the logic of presentation, then there will be any number of private think tanks, academic experts or directly interested organizations all too glad to “fill the vacuum” created by your “failure to communicate”.
- On a more technical level, and given the availability and pervasiveness of slide presentation technology, it is almost certainly the case that far too much time has been invested in what might be termed “production values” – attractive backgrounds, embedded images, advanced animation, etc. – at the direct expense of actually focusing on telling a simple, compelling and convincing policy story.
- Thus, it is argued here that story telling can be seen as a “difference maker” in the public policy process. As noted above, this policy story telling has to meet three criteria – short, compelling and convincing.
 - a) **Short:** Sometimes, you don’t get the time to tell your full story, and wind up working in the public sector version of the elevator briefing scenario – “The Deputy has to take a call from the Minister in ten minutes, so can you wrap up your presentation in the next five minutes?”

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- b) **Compelling:** Your policy story may not carry the day, sometimes for reasons well beyond your control. But if your policy story has been compelling, has held the interest of senior decision-makers, then you have created credibility that will support your future attempts to tell a policy story.
- c) **Convincing:** You may not get approval for everything you are recommending, again, for reasons well beyond your control, but a powerful policy story may prove convincing with respect to securing approval for the essentials of your proposal.

The Simple Three-Part Structure of Policy Story Telling

- There are three parts to a policy story – the statement of the issue, the development of the issue and the resolution of the issue.
- **Issue:** This is where you where you clearly define the problem or opportunity to be addressed. If you can reframe an issue and get decision-makers to think differently about it, you increase the chances of coming up with a different “take” and a different solution.
- **Resolution:** This is where you present your proposed resolution of the problem posed in the issue. This is an opportunity for you to show an alternative concept of a future that makes an improvement on the current situation.
- **Development:** This is where you develop the issue and create a bridge between the issue and the resolution.
- **Pop quiz:** Map “issue”, “resolution” and “development” onto the format of a Memorandum to Cabinet (MC), to confirm for yourself that the MC is a model for accelerated and compressed story telling.

1. Starting strong with a compelling statement of the Issue

- Whether you ask the right question, employ the right metaphor or present a gap that needs to be filled, you are framing or re-framing the way you want decision-makers to consider the issue in question.
- Think of JFK’s inaugural address when he said “Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country”.
- More recently, consider President Obama’s 2011 State of the Union address, where, faced with a hostile Congress that wants to dismantle key achievements of his first term in office, the President moves to reframe the entire political debate in the United States by calling on America to “win the future”.

2. Closing strong with a convincing proposal for the *Resolution* of the issue

- Always keep in mind that your “closing argument” should focus on one or two issues. Too many points and you risk “selling past the close” and thus “snatching defeat from the jaws of victory”.
- Even in situations where there are an unavoidably long list of more detailed recommendations required, always remember that the audience needs to be clear about your core “ask” – “if we do nothing else in the next fiscal year, we need to do X ...”

3. Developing the issue – building the “hinge” that moves the audience from *issue* to *resolution*

- This is where you challenge the conventional wisdom on an issue and create new intellectual capital – if the audience is not learning something new or profound about the issue in question, you are not doing your job in terms of presenting a compelling and convincing argument.
- This is where you present and then discard options, unveil new models or approaches – so think of the *development* as the hinge section upon which the entire policy story turns.

4. Story lines and other devices that “pull the story forward”

- Story lines are narrative models that decision-makers will recognize from other policy issues or from life experience.
- So, for example, there are a number of *challenge-related* story lines – e.g. crisis, cross-roads, “bet the business” risks, etc. – where the task at hand involves responding, out of necessity, to a development, positive or negative, that is external to the organization or policy in question. Kind of a “respond or perish” scenario.
- There are, as well, a number of *change-related* story lines – e.g. policy renewal, program innovation, or “re-inventing” the organization – where what is being presented is an opportunity (or necessity) for evolution for reasons internal to that policy, program or organization. Kind of an “evolve or perish” scenario.
- There are also *organization-specific* story lines that can make a policy story more compelling or convincing. For example, there is an appeal to the organization’s identity: *what should an organization like ours do in a situation like this, or, what has this organization done in the past when confronted with these same challenges or opportunities?*
- Also useful at times is an appeal to the organization’s direction or sense of destiny: *we are drifting, we have lost our way and we need to re-direct our efforts in a new and more productive direction.*
- Finally, there are a number of organizing devices that will help generate a flow to the policy story.

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- In some cases, the concept of a *continuum* is a useful device for organizing points: e.g. the learning *continuum* from early childhood development through K-12 and on to Post-Secondary Education and continuing education.
- A *graphic image* might prove helpful – think of the pyramid presenting Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, or of intersecting Venn diagrams capable of describing the independent and interdependent dimensions of complex policy or program dynamics.
- Sometimes, a *numerical approach* will help build the bridge from *issue* to *resolution*: there are three issues in play, or four options to be assessed, etc.
- In still other situations, a *chronological approach* will be useful – i.e. picture of yesterday (where this policy has come from), picture of today (where this policy is right now, and the problems it is encountering), picture of a recommended tomorrow (where this policy needs to be, to respond to current challenges and/or take advantage of emerging opportunities).

5. Compression – Less is more

- Decision-makers work at the level of forests, not trees, so be attentive to the level of aggregation of the policy story you are telling.
- Make every slide, every point and every word count – focus on “difference makers” and treat everything else as “annex material”.
- Avoid the “usual suspects” in terms of pitfalls – jargon, passive rather than active voice constructions, too much detail, too long.
- Always remember that the *development* segment – the dynamic middle or “hinge” section of the policy story – will almost certainly be where you will lose your way in the first draft of the policy story, or where you will miss opportunities to “pull the story” forward in a powerful and compelling manner. Think of the *development* segment as the “heart of darkness” that can never be taken for granted – don’t assume this part of the policy story will just “write itself”.
- In this respect, always *book-end* your policy story. Think of the *issue* and the *resolution* as “book-ends – if you are clear about where you start and where you end up, then you will be able to collapse your policy story to its essentials any time you are confronted with an “elevator briefing” scenario.
- Then, use *book-ending* to *discipline the development segment*. If you have a limit of 12 slides for a presentation to the Deputy Minister, and you know you need three slides for the *issue* and two slides for the *resolution*, then you have a maximum of seven slides for the *development* of the issue. At this point, you have to make every word count inside the space allocated for the *development* or “hinge” section of your policy story. This may sound simplistic, but if you manage space allocation, you maximize the power of your policy story telling.

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- Final point: think about *mountain-topping* your policy story, to determine if it is “ready for prime time”. The approach is simple but effective. You should be able to “read out loud” your slide titles or lead sentences in each slide – from front-to-back – and tell the essence of your story. These lead sentences are the “mountain-tops”, and the “valleys” are the bullets below the slide titles or lead statements. Effective policy story telling is first and foremost about getting the mountain tops right.

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