

The long march to quality

It's all about keeping on keeping on.

Different shops follow different tracks

At NZIER, we have been assessing the quality of policy advice and assisting agencies in raising their games for many years now. Looking back over the experience, we are struck by the diverse course of the quality improvement process in different outfits. Many have striven to permanently improve their quality, but few have managed it.

Experience shows building a quality policy shop is a long job

What have we seen?

While the process of improvement has been different for each organisation, none have been able to create a lasting quality output quickly. Even those who have achieved high scores have typically found it challenging to maintain this over time.

Nevertheless, we have seen a few examples of agencies where the policy team have been able to achieve sustained quality improvements over the years. It has always been a long slog.

It's a unique problem

Advising Ministers is demanding. Each piece of advice has its own needs and its own story and each Minister their preferred presentation. The underlying demand to present a complex issue and its potential treatment in limited space and easily absorbed language is tough. In the main, each example is effectively a new specific problem requiring a specific solution. Attempts to use normal systemisation methods – like standardisation – have so far made limited headway except for regularly repeated tasks.¹

¹ For example, regulatory annual fee adjustments; regular reporting on delivery; decisions under certain regulations (e.g. drought declarations) and some aspects of Crown entity monitoring.

Obviously previous work can be helpful with frameworks and in providing history. Other jurisdictions similarly can suggest useful approaches. This is not surprising: good advice is handmade, tailored to the issue and the audience.

In addition, there is often little available to give drafters a head start. Training and experience in other types of work do not generally set people up for this. Skills tend to be learnt on the job, with the guidance of experienced senior advisors.

So, for many issues, normal office practice of looking to minimally modify previous work is not the individual approach required. On the other hand, best practice examples can be extremely useful – either from your own agency or from others. The background in Masterclass 10² on how to approach various types of advice distils this good practice.

We consider the challenge of quality advising is frequently unique. No wonder sustained improved output is hard to manage and even harder to build into a shop.

The setting – the New Zealand Public Service

Despite the common elements like the legal and organisational backdrops of the various policy groups in Wellington, there is always a distinct feel to each unit. Clearly, it reflects the agency surrounding it with its history and functions. But it goes further to have a degree of individuality, which has lasted through attempts to standardise policy advising. We call it their culture. It seems long-lasting and beyond the control of any one person. It is the background that shapes the unit's attitudes, actions and outputs.

² Brief 10 Thinking through the 11 key papers <https://www.nzier.org.nz/learn/central-government>

We have long believed such ‘cultural’ effects can be deliberately influenced to give an advice group a quality production bias. This comes from examining the history of many agencies we have worked with over the last fifteen years or so.

The successful policy groups have improved the quality of their advice and typically modified the culture. When this happens, key features of classy advice become part of the surrounding wallpaper: ‘the way things are done around here’. In these groups old hands relentlessly turn out good work, and new recruits absorb good habits quickly without realising there are options. These groups also attract great policy advisors, as they are seen as a good career experience. Their scores hover at high levels.

Other units struggle to create such a platform. Their assessments move up and down with no real pattern. The quality of individual papers seems random; the pieces are detached from one another rather than being products of the same team.

Policy advising is a craft...

You might have heard this before.

But ‘craft’ here has a specific meaning. It is a collection of practical skills that can be deployed to solve professional problems. And the key is that these skills are learnt on the job – they come from experience. A degree of what might loosely be called theory exists (see earlier Masterclasses³), but the key elements of the high-level policy advisor’s kitbag are based on personal experience.

...so skills need to be supplemented by suitable experience...

There are courses in public policy, of course, and these can be very helpful. So, acquiring advising ‘tools’ and knowing when and how they can be put into practice is about using as much learning as possible.

Luckily, that experience can be second-hand – based on others’ work, including their stories.

Good policy groups make this happen by using a range of methods. They will: celebrate the best papers and processes; create a library of best practice; use formal workshops, seminars and debriefs; and hold informal chats over morning coffee to build a strong culture. It will have ways to examine recent group experience and identify what went well⁴ and what went badly.

Moreover, it will look outside the agency: discussing techniques with other successful groups; and borrowing good ideas from everywhere.

...and great advising is a team game – drawing on wider strengths

Individuals can, on occasion, knock out high calibre work. But we have never seen a paper that could not be improved by further input. Extra eyes often see possibilities the originator doesn’t.

Good organisations make ways for team members to contribute to the improvement of all their output. After all, a typical policy group has a range of skills and backgrounds. These can be put to work to shed new light on challenging questions.

There is no one way to do this. It might be an open type of QA, a reference to selected colleagues or be part of a quality meeting. Wider consultations can be fruitful. So, for demanding issues, it may be apt to look at other types of views within the agency – say an operations/delivery focus – or to discuss things with selected users. Again, for some problems, experts are useful and typically bring their own point of view.

What matters is that the opportunity to push the advice to another level by bringing in more horsepower is recognised as a vital and natural part of the system.

It is not easy to set up and keep going. It involves public comments on people’s work. To be acceptable, this must be totally accepted as the way things happen. Establishing that is time-consuming and needs a supportive setting.

³ See for instance, Brief 1 Communication with Aliens or Brief 9 Introducing the 11 Key papers
<https://www.nzier.org.nz/learn/central-government>

⁴ See Brief 30 Learning from things that go well
<https://www.nzier.org.nz/learn/central-government>

And the atmosphere most conducive to quality work is consistency...

All groups of policy advisors take their style to greater or lesser extent from the standards used to approve the papers for sign out. This process creates the tone as all advisors are keen to have their workflow through the system to its goal.

When the whole shop is well informed about the way a good paper looks (or doesn't) it becomes easier and more regular for quality work to flow.

DPMC Policy Project

A source for useful guidance is the Policy Project website.⁵ This has valuable material on standards and capability in a quality improvement setting.

Building long term

Elements supporting the success⁶ of policy units include:

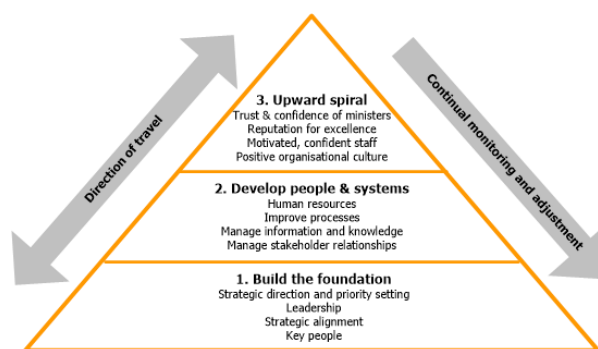
- *Chief Executive (CE) commitment* – CE understands policy role and provides resources, including active support for the policy manager.
- *Strategic Direction and Priority Setting* – Unit knows where it is going and has explicit priorities.
- *Policy Unit Leadership* – Strong leadership/'champion' drives strategy and support systems.
- *Strategic Alignment Within Organisation* – Policy unit directions aim at organisational goals.
- *Key People* – Quality analysts (plus 'stars') build capability, score policy 'wins' and create reputation.

...sustained and reinforced over time

It is a long job building a self-sustaining quality culture. But the good news is there are aspects of success that can create an upward spiral:

- *Trust and Confidence of Ministers* – Ministers look to the agency for advice so the unit has 'influence'.
- *Reputation for Excellence* – A reputation for excellence leads to conference presentations, publications and so on, further polishing the image.
- *Motivated and Confident Staff* – Staff stay on as part of a 'quality outfit' and others want to join.
- *Positive Organisational Culture* – Staff 'know what it takes', embrace quality ideas and need less oversight.

Figure 1 The virtuous circle



Source: NZIER Based on SSC 1999

Reinforcement – these are not natural behaviours

The aim of high-quality work every time is a stretch. Many of the actions that produce quality work are not regular practices (like having others publicly critique your work) or require individuals and groups to undertake stressful functions.

For this 'culture' to last it must be beyond self-consciousness – analysts should not have to prompt themselves by asking what a quality approach would require. The correct action should just be the way things are done.

⁵ See dpmc.govt.nz then Home>Our programmes>The Policy Project>Policy improvement frameworks.

⁶ The points in this section and the one that follows (including the diagram) draw on a useful (and still relevant) piece from 1999, the SSC Occasional Paper

No 22 High Fliers: Developing High Performing Policy Units. It is a stages development model and we are using stage 1 and stage 3.

There are probably as many ways of getting to the desired outcome as there are agencies. But the route we have seen succeed is the “relentless reinforcement” one. The whole of management is on the case at all times. They not only model the desired actions but seize opportunities to praise good work and suggest ways of improving poorer papers.

Constant reminders show that good work is a priority. It’s vital to show that it is the bedrock – not today’s management idea to be dropped if there is a ‘panic.’ Quality outputs are important in fair weather or foul.

Making it happen – practical ideas

We have offered general advice here as it allows each policy group to evolve according to its own background and environment. Turning to the more particular ‘how to do it’ side, some organisations have used a policy committee or panel to polish all outputs. These have often been built on the NZIER assessment reports or internal standards,⁷ which diagnose systemic weaknesses and highlight areas for improvement. A complementary diagnostic tool NZIER can provide is the ‘deep dive’ technique which examines the process as well as the outputs.

Another tack is to build a programme using Masterclasses on relevant topics, perhaps in workshops (see suggestions below⁸). These both hone individual and team skills and keep up a focus on improvement.

The important thing is to work on the business of providing policy advice and the actual provision of policy advice. Managers, and other key leaders, need to carve out time from their busy schedules to commit to this.

This can be supported by utilising ways of measuring the quality of policy advice by a team and across the group as a whole.

Other practical ideas we have seen that can be used to support a sustained push on quality:

- **Having standards** – including templates, a style guide, standard requirements on what expected in different types of briefings,⁹ etc. (these should be developed or launched as group exercises to engage analysts) as well as using the PQF, and other relevant tools.
- **Good commissioning...** as far as it can be used, given oft changing environments (see Masterclass 17¹⁰).
- **Robust peer review** systems.
- **Rigorous use of data and evidence** – including monitoring and evaluation results, views of important stakeholders, other experts and international practices.
- **Being future-focused** – thinking about the future, being strategic, and getting issues researched and thought about that will need to be advised about in future.
- **Capturing and celebrating good practice** – See Masterclass 30 on learning from things that go well.
- **A network of policy champions** – set this up to help others on particularly tricky issues. These could be the principal advisors or other experts. This role needs to be explicitly recognised in those people’s work programmes, so they have the time to commitment to supporting others.
- **Policy review panels** – to assess critical pieces of advice ex-ante; or ex-post as a general assessment of quality and identification of areas for improvement.
- **Putting quality improvement on the agenda** – in management, team and one-on-one meetings so that they go beyond the delivery of advice, to work on quality improvement.

⁷ The new PQF includes a number of tools to assist.

⁸ These have all been sent around our regular clients and are available on the NZIER website at <https://www.nzier.org.nz/learn/central-government>

⁹ See Brief 10 Thinking through the 11 key papers <https://www.nzier.org.nz/learn/central-government>

¹⁰ Brief 17 Commissioning <https://www.nzier.org.nz/learn/central-government>

This paper was written at NZIER, March 2021.

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