

## Commissioning – Getting off on the right foot

**“Commission: verb, order or authorise the production of something; bring (something newly produced) into working condition”** [en.oxforddictionaries.com]

### Policy advice is often ordered...

Ministers are the ultimate destination of most policy advice. Their priorities are therefore vital for the workplan of the policy shop. Eliciting their current interests and wants (ideally their full suite of preferences) is an important role for senior advisors (what we call the ‘mandarin’ task).

From such discussions, there’s frequently an order for a ‘paper’ or an investigation on a topic. This sits alongside the wider (long term) work programme that drives shops most of the time.

### ...but then must pass to the shop for action....

So, in these circumstances first step in meeting the request is to activate the delivery system. This is simple but it can still go wrong. The initial challenge for the shop is to communicate the request to the responsible advisor accurately and effectively. And often there is a high state of complexity to the request and typically confusion in the surrounding conditions.

The old joke, whereby, as the vital message is passed from mouth, to ear, to mouth, to ..., “send reinforcements we’re going to advance,” becomes, “send three and four pence we’re going to a dance,” is still a valid risk, despite the decimalisation of the currency.

So, however the process starts, and whatever the chain of communication/command involved, it is vital that the following steps are part of it:

1. The specification (including key aspects, such as what it is going to be used for) is WRITTEN DOWN.
2. This written output statement is approved by a process that gives it appropriate validity – a mandate.

Some shops we know have set up formal structures to establish and monitor/control policy projects. They seem to be based on engineering or IT project planning models and have their strengths. But like all systematic approaches, we see them as having to be applied carefully as they require a degree of thinking time to proceed through the formal steps. Many policy requests are urgent and lack the free time to go through formal stages – so a simplified process is needed.

### ...where the setting may change abruptly...

The problem analysts face is that in many policy settings not only do the (metaphorical) goalposts move, but often even the game changes. After all, the wider backdrop to Ministerial policy work is the fast-moving world of politics, where the priorities shift very quickly and with little warning.

What was ordered up as a backgrounder may turn overnight into an urgent decision piece, or, on the other hand, be dropped from the ‘front burner’ to be replaced by a newly salient issue previously out of scope. And the drivers for this ‘shock’ can be external to the work (as the wider scene shifts) or internal, as new information casts the project into a different light. This can be tough going for analysts and managers!

Conceptually this shift can involve significant variation of all, or any combination of:

- The problem definition.
- Whether there will be consultation, or how much.
- The feasible solution set.
- The budget or scale.
- The timetable.
- The path to implementation
- The way the decision is to be taken (it might be headed full speed for Cabinet and then suddenly it’s over to the CE using discretion).

The management/analyst team thus needs to stay on top of the drivers of such shifts and be sufficiently flexible to respond aptly in scale and scope. Typically, this aspect of the mandarin role of shop management – keeping on top of evolving Ministerial priorities – is demanding, but vital.

### ...and even force repeated mandates

In addition to the effects of changes in the environment, the process of working to a tight brief can involve iterating back to the commissioning Minister for discussion and decision. It may be that new information shows that core assumptions are false, or even that what was thought to be the problem isn’t. Whatever has changed, such ‘shocks’ mean the task is a ‘new beast’ now and needs a fresh mandate and direction.

(One of the drivers for such re-litigation is that the values in play in such urgently requested work are often even more political than usual and thus require close oversight by the Minister.<sup>1</sup>)

This manoeuvring may repeat several times, especially if the commissioning started with a limited knowledge of the issue. Managing the process becomes demanding.

And a vital part of (shop management) mandarins' priority list (and evolving skills) is to judge which/when the questions must go back to the Minister, and when they can be handled within the existing delegation.

### Handling the job – more governor than boss

Within the shop, the responsible manager, as (proxy) commissioner in the (tough) role of getting the Minister's wishes satisfied will face other challenges.

The type of final output sought by these policy commissions tends not to be well pre-specified – as hinted above, this sort of job is usually a response to what MacMillan<sup>2</sup> is reputed to have referred to as 'events': random shocks posing hard questions to the body politic. As these draw public attention they must be addressed and a political answer reached.

This means the advisor/analyst is often being set a question to which there is not a simple good answer. Thus, sound work nearly always demands flair, and a degree of lateral thinking. The analyst's craft skills need to be fully engaged.

This leads the best commissioning leaders to adopt a tight/loose approach involving a clear brief, including:

- Setting the scene – where does this fit into the Minister's strategy?
- Laying out the task – what is the aim here?
- Determining the specific attributes that make up *quality*:
  - Why *this* now, and how important is it?
  - What a *good one* would look like?
  - What a *bad one* would look like?

This part of the process requires the degree of formality as suggested above. The mandated written specification should be kept available for reference by the analysts as they work through the job, and changed where apt.

### Closing out – roles

While the specification is either stable or smoothly adjusted, the commissioner's role becomes twofold:

1. **Project management** – keeping the timetable on track, and handling reports to the Minister.
2. **Mandarin** – checking the content for conformity with Ministerial expectations and concerns.

The commissioner's time for the rest of the project is likely to focus on being a 'coaching manager' for the project aspects that are:

- Mission critical.
- New or relatively unknown to the analysts.

### Horses for courses – making it happen

These project type tasks can be described with the same broad wording, but they are varied in nature. Smart shops will vary their approach and the style brought to the commissioning role.

This means the process used will change with the scale, nature and complexity of the work. A large piece on an under-researched topic, due next week, means a team; while work in a well-trodden area with a longer time scale can comfortably be handled by a single responsible analyst.

Picking the right advisor is often critical. The commissioner often needs to work out whether subject knowledge and networks are more important than craft skill and general ability.

### Key success factors

As this work is being undertaken at the behest of the shop's main client, lines of communication with Minister, and Minister's Office staff must be clear and open for two-way traffic. Obviously, if a trust relationship has already been earned it will enhance the chances of success. This is because it supports a better exchange of views about how to best meet the request.

In the shop, the engagement of senior policy leaders is likely to be vital as the requests are usually demanding and, after all, come from the shop's principal client. This frequently means it's a job for the 'A' team.

<sup>1</sup> See earlier Masterclass 1 "Communicating with aliens."

<sup>2</sup> Harold MacMillan UK Prime Minister 1957- 1963, might have once responded to a question about what might blow governments off course with, "Events, dear boy, events."

## Practical tips

### Ideal approach

Tight/loose commissioning works best when a few simple rules are followed when briefing the analysts:

### Don't tell them how.

#### Do tell them what:

- Who the client is.
- What the writer is expected to do.
- What would be the best outcome.
- What's the minimum that would work.
- What basic worries are perturbing the client.
- What is the work trying to do – action or information.
- What's at stake – how big is it (impact, resources, risks).
- What's absolutely fixed in the timetable – so what could give.

In case of emergency – focus on eight key factors:

- What's broken?
- How big is it?
- What sort of solution – short term or long term?
- Options – close out or open up?
- What's the timing?
- How much risk is there? And how much can be tolerated?
- Ongoing Ministerial interaction allowed?
- What degree of consultation – who, and how wide?

## Longer term

This sort of capability is part of the bread and butter of a sound policy shop. To keep getting better demands a 'learning approach.' For commissioning as described here, it means working to improve the process as sketched.

And a critical factor in this is to include a feedback loop.

The proxy-commissioner must assess the process once it's over (including Ministerial views where possible), and then organise workshop sessions with the advisors involved. As always, the best outcomes come when these are carefully positive.

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