

Talking about talking points

Objective and scope

Ministers are often asked to explain particular issues to their colleagues or to stakeholders in informal settings. Having a set of short but effective talking points can help in these situations.

The aim of this note is to provide some ideas about when and how to use talking points to improve the tactical value of your advice.

We think talking points should be included in papers more often

It's normal practice in most policy shops to include talking points in meeting briefs, briefs for public events, speeches, international engagements, and aides-mémoire to support the Minister when taking papers to Cabinet Committees.

But we think they can should be included more often to assist Ministers to do their jobs; including as a way to mitigate the risks of the Minister being put on the spot when officials aren't around to provide support. The Ministers we've spoken to think this too!

We don't mean always having a physical sheet of paper or the digital equivalent that they need to have on hand (although in many circumstances this is clearly appropriate), but a set of key messages that stick in their minds that can be used when required, and in the most appropriate format: an 'elevator pitch', in other words.

Be clear about the objectives of the engagement

The objectives for a paper might range from a simple meet and greet, to explaining a particular policy position to stakeholders, trying to influence others around the Cabinet table, or getting others to act.

It's important to know the specific objectives and to design the talking points to assist in meeting those objectives. This should be part of the commissioning of any paper.

We often see talking points where the objective isn't clear. For example, they focus on explaining an issue, but don't get to the crunch about what decision needs to be made.

In general, however, your goal should be helping the Minister to shine, no matter the setting.

There are a number of different types of talking points

Talking points are used in different types of setting and for different purposes. Identify, which one applies.

We think there are six common types of situations:

1. **Formal (often international) events** – these are driven by protocol. Preparing briefings and material for Ministers attending international meetings and conferences is a common task for many agencies. In these situations, talking points need to be neatly organised under agenda items, appropriately formal, written to be spoken directly and contain detailed and clear guidance on protocol.
2. **Introducing Cabinet papers at a Cabinet Committee meeting** – Ministers are often asked to introduce their own paper (though sometimes this is delegated to senior officials). For this, talking points need to be a tight Executive summary that highlight the size and scale of the issue, the decision that needs to be taken and any risks. Write talking points in the Minister's voice (i.e. write them as they will be spoken). But remember this setting has slightly more formality than a working meeting, or an informal interaction. Think about likely questions from Cabinet colleagues, and prepare 'just in case' answers.
3. **Working meetings of Ministers (and officials/stakeholders)** – these can be relatively informal. It's often best to structure talking points as an annotated agenda so that they are clearly linked to particular agenda items. It's important in these situations to identify the role of the Minister – are they Chairing? Interested in all issues? Or only interested in a few selected issues relevant to their portfolio? Talking points should be clearly written in the Minister's voice.
4. **Formal engagements with stakeholders** – these may have some elements of formality and protocol. Often, it may be that speech notes are required, rather than talking points. But if there are talking points, then any matters of formal protocol need to be included too.

5. **Negotiations** – this is a whole sub-category of situations on its own. Negotiations can be highly formal events – for example at some international meetings, or much less formal e.g. one-on-one budget meetings with the Minister of Finance. Frame the talking points accordingly, and always outline the “win-win” outcomes from whatever is being proposed. Provide Plans B and C in case your initial strategy doesn’t fly.
6. **Informal engagement** with colleagues, stakeholders and members of the public – these will require informal talking points, based on clear messages and written in the Minister’s voice. They are often used to explain a particular policy position on the hoof. Think about what the Minister should say if accosted in the Koru lounge at the airport.

Media briefings are another thing again. Talking points for the media are usually prepared separately by communications staff, but may sit alongside a policy paper. However, consistency is needed between any communications strategy and the paper, so work closely with your communications team colleagues.

Ensure that talking points are appropriate for the audience

Check who the audience is, and the level of formality required.

The list above provides a guide to the type of situations when talking points may be required. Try not to be lazy by simply cutting and pasting talking points from one paper to another. The content may stay the same, but the delivery will often need to be tweaked.

In some cases, you might need a number of sets of talking points for different audiences on the same issue.

Know the Minister’s voice

Talking points need to be just that. They are designed to be spoken, and should be written accordingly. Again, simply cutting and pasting from your Executive summary won’t be effective here – each set of talking points has to be tailor made.

In order to sound natural, and be easily used, they need to be written in the Minister’s voice. Learn what sorts of phrases the Minister uses regularly. Avoid jargon and longwinded explanations – think about soundbites, not a novel.

Doing this well is a matter of practice. The more you craft talking points, the easier they become.

Try:

- Looking at recent media statements – they often have direct quotes from the Minister.
- Review any relevant video clips

- Take advice from your colleagues who meet with their Minister regularly, or the staff in the Minister’s Office
- Look at what’s been done before.

Your communications people are experts here. It’s worth seeking their help on tricky issues.

A key fact can be memorable

We often see talking points that are general statements or high-level policy-speak. These lack impact for most audiences.

Try using a key fact or piece of data instead. A number can trump a thousand words and can demonstrate a depth of knowledge of the issue.

Of course, as with all data, it needs to be carefully checked and double-checked. Incorrect data can trip people up, and tripping the Minister up in public can be a career-limiting move!

Include defensive talking points to help manage risks

By defensive talking points, we mean a few careful points on issues that are not central to the main topic, but might be raised as a priority matter by stakeholders.

This enables the Minister to be well prepared if unexpected or difficult issues emerge, rather than being caught on the hop.

MFAT and the Office of Treaty Settlements have mastered this art – but we see little use of it by other agencies.

Think about the stakeholder’s hobby horses or sensitivities. Then write: [If Person X asks about issue Y, then say the following:]

This is a similar contingency planning concept to FAQs often included in communications strategies. It shows that an agency is thinking carefully about the Minister’s needs and potential vulnerabilities, which will be appreciated.

Don’t be afraid to use questions

Open ended questions are a good way for a Minister to get a discussion going with stakeholders and can be usefully included in talking points.

They can prompt stakeholders into a fuller explanation of an issue. They can also be used by the Minister to hone the discussion to the risks and issues of most importance.

Provide advice on pronunciation if needed

Talking points are – obviously – designed to be spoken. So include advice on pronunciation if required. This applies to names, places, foreign languages and technical or scientific terms.

Make sure the format is manageable

We prefer to see talking points on a separate piece of paper (or electronic equivalent if your Minister is a technophile) which can be easily accessed in a meeting situation. It needs to be easy to find without having to go through a whole paper.

Equally, annotated agendas can be useful in meeting settings, with talking points in an easy to identify box under each agenda item.

It's well worth talking to the Minister's Office to determine preferences.

This paper was written at NZIER, May 2016.

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