Learning from things that go well: capturing good practice

Titiro whakamuri, kōkiri whakamua – look back and reflect, so you can move forward.

We often focus on learning from our mistakes

It's accepted good practice to have a systematic review of a policy process or paper when it doesn't go well. Most Councils seem to do this.

It's an important part of the process of improving quality and practice of any policy group.

Done well it becomes part of the culture, and the folklore. We can build up a range of stories about "what happened when….". These are extremely helpful in helping us not to fall into the same traps. We can recognise the situation and take steps to avoid any problems.

But we can also learn from what goes well

We don't though, always focus the same amount of attention on what went well. We should.

There are plenty of lessons to be learnt in those situations, too. You might have seen a problem on the horizon and neatly side-stepped it; found a way of presenting your analysis that worked extremely well; or come up with a creative and different way through a complex problem.

These lessons too, can be shared and so become embedded in the lasting culture of the policy group.

A library of best practice examples helps

Many Councils have a collection of good practice examples of papers on their intranet. These can be papers which gain favourable comment from Councillors or other bodies,[1] or those which scored highly in a review of your papers. It's handy to categorise these so you can easily search for the relevant best practice elements.

You might even want to save things you see from other Councils (either in New Zealand or internationally) or other bodies (e.g. government agencies) including appropriate international agencies), e.g. a creative way of looking at a related issue, great diagrams, particularly helpful data sources, etc.

These become a useful resource. Such a 'library' can save people from just drawing on the way an issue was dealt with last time and enable the author to bring in elements of best practice.

But this collection only goes so far. Firstly, it's passive – it relies on people managing it and using it. Secondly, it doesn't capture the complexity of the thinking process behind the final product.

So, try a systematic analysis of good papers: a paper 'autopsy'

We suggest a structured process led by the authors of the papers to identify best practice. This can be done at team meetings (including where other teams are a guest speaker), in a one-off workshop context, or lunchtime seminars.

We call this a 'paper autopsy' (although that's not strictly the correct use of the term, but people will get the idea).

It involves having the author/s doing a short presentation on their analysis and paper-writing process. This shouldn't just be about the issue at hand, but also the thinking process behind the analysis and choices that shaped the final product.

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[1] For example, others agencies you work with including other councils, government departments, CCOs, etc.

In particular, it should focus on the following:

Context – what were the challenges?

- Just briefly, what issue was the paper's author trying to address?

  What constraints did they face? And how did they tackle them? e.g. time, other priorities, set positions?

Analytical approach – what approach did you take to the issue? Including:

- What research, data analysis was done? Were there any special issues or challenges?

- What sort of engagement or consultation was done with community groups, stakeholders, government agencies, service users or the community as a whole? What went well? Were there any knotty issues and how did you deal with them?

- How were the results presented? And why? E.g. A3, slide pack, series of papers, a discussion paper?

Rationale – reflections

- How did they approach the work, and why did they take this approach?

- What feedback did they receive during the process that was particularly useful?

- What did they do that was different and innovative? And why?

- What were the main key turning points in the process? i.e. things that made a difference to how they thought about the issue, the solutions, and the final paper? These could be bright ideas, suggestions from others, things they'd seen others do – and copied.

- What did they learn from the process that they would apply to other projects?

This generally takes 20-30 minutes for a significant paper.

Leave enough time for questions and discussion afterwards – the aim is to add to the shop's culture by a shared experience.

Figure 1 Paper autopsy

Source: NZIER

The idea is to make best practice part of the culture

An in-depth discussion on the policy process in action will draw out the ideas and thinking behind what was done. This is a similar approach to that often seen with case-study based learning (pioneered at Harvard, and now widely used, including by ANZSOG[2]).
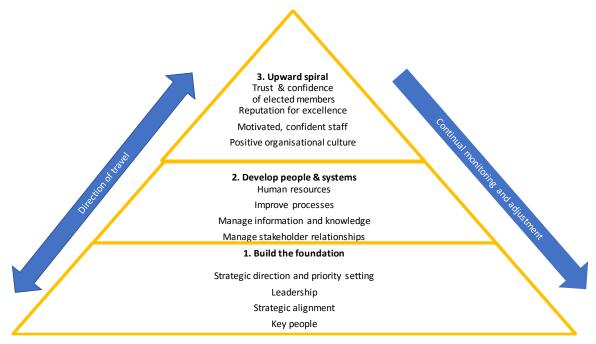
These events actively spread best practice ideas. They also get people thinking and talking about best practice. This helps best practice become "part of the way things are done round here – the culture".

It's one of the things to do to push you up the quality continuum.

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[2] Australia and New Zealand School of Government.

Figure 2 The policy quality continuum

3. Upward spiral
Trust & confidence
of elected members
Reputation for excellence

Motivated, confident staff

Positive organisational culture

2. Develop people & systems
Human resources

Improve processes

Manage information and knowledge

Manage stakeholder relationships

1. Build the foundation

Strategic direction and priority setting

Leadership

Strategic alignment

Key people

Direction of travel

Continual monitoring and adjustment

**Source: NZIER, adapted from SSC 1999 -
https://www.ssc.govt.nz/op22**

Back this up with peer review

This type of discussion also helps peer reviewers build up their repertoire. They become better placed to offer concrete practical suggestions on your papers, or throughout the policy analysis process.

If you want to do more, you could try a deep dive

The paper autopsy process we have described is a relatively quick and simple mechanism designed to capture and share good practice. It's something that can be used regularly.

However, occasionally you might want to dig deeper to look at a project from end to end.

This is more time intensive. It typically involves a person independent from the people working on the issue (a fresh pair of eyes) with a deep knowledge of policy processes and practice.

This type of review involves the consideration of all the project documentation, and structured interviews with those of the project team (and perhaps also those outside the project team who were less centrally involved, or who had to implement the policy).