

WHAT DO WE WANT? A STRATEGY!

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The National School of Government has been conducting research across government (national, devolved and local) on how strategy is made—finding out where and why it is made well and where it is absent or has failed.

Across the public sector, in board rooms, meeting rooms and corridors, the cry is heard: ‘we need to be more strategic!’ But what does this actually mean? Our research, shaped by interviews with around 80 strategists from across the public sector, as well as through an extensive literature review and work in the field, has given us some answers. It has also told us pretty emphatically what strategy is *not*:

- Strategy is not a glossy document
- Strategy is not simply about producing scenarios.
- Strategy is not a check list of tools, models and methods.
- Strategy is not an accumulation of plans for everything from procurement to knowledge management without a sense of what all that planning is for.
- Strategy is not an activity restricted to a strategy unit or to the board.
- Strategy is not an end in itself.

Strategy is...

When it comes to strategy it is the thinking, and the changes in behaviour that result from that thinking, that is the real product. Strategy is a frame of mind that is future-focused and that develops an understanding of plausible future operating environments for the organization and the world beyond it—an understanding that is based on evidence, not supposition. The best strategies in government are those that have resulted from an inclusive process, engaging people up and down an organization and its stakeholders.

Vision matters: it gives line of sight: The job of government at any level is not simply to survive the future—it is to shape that future. Strategy must frame policy and delivery by offering a vision of the future that government wishes to create. This vision, rich in outcomes, should frame policies—the devices governments have to steer a course away from a future that would otherwise come about and towards that future they wish to achieve.

Inclusion leads to involvement: A good strategy also provides a narrative for people working in an organization and for all those with whom it deals. This motivation is particularly important when working in the public sector because achieving outcomes in health, in education, in transport (in fact, in almost anything) depends on the attitudes and behaviour of citizens and only incidentally on the nature of the services government provides. Citizens are co-producers of virtually all the outcomes governments wish to achieve.

Public value means something: We have found the concept of public value—that ‘indivisible trinity’ of service, outcomes and trust—helpful. It provides a useful test of whether the building blocks in a strategic vision are the right ones, and should be a vital part of the discourse with political leaders - who are the people in the best position to make the judgement about what level of trust they themselves have and that the public will have in particular outcomes and services.

Prioritize to achieve your goals: Once we have a strategy that has these qualities we can then make judgements about our priorities and resource allocations that are based on evidence—not simply evidence of where we have come from

but, crucially, evidence of where we are going. In this way we can make a public sector that achieves outcomes that are right for their time and that are achieved effectively and efficiently. Strategy offers an escape route from the system that works ever harder to achieve ever more marginal improvement or no improvement at all.

The process matters as much as the product: The most important lesson from our research was that the product means nothing unless you have been through the process of creating it.

Strategy works

In Scotland, the minority government has focused hard on five national outcomes (‘wealthier and fairer’, ‘safer and stronger’, ‘smarter’, ‘greener’, ‘healthier’). These outcomes, which are easy for all to understand, sit atop a hierarchy of outcomes and objectives. Local government, too, is rich in examples of strategy processes which are involving residents and making a difference on the ground. Surrey, Camden and Bradford are three examples, but there are dozens more.

The benefits of the strategic approach are demonstrable and significant in terms of resilience in an uncertain future and in terms of a creating a powerful vision that puts public sector organizations on the front foot. We all want to be more strategic. The fact that we can’t have ‘instant strategy’ doesn’t mean we cannot become more strategic very quickly. Tomorrow is the place to be.

Sean Lusk heads the National School of Government’s programme of strategy training, consultancy and research. The National School will be launching a new web resource, Strategy Exchange, early in 2009: see www.nationalschool.gov.uk