

# **A Practical Guide for Policy Analysis (Eightfold Path)**

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## **Introduction**

Consumer as client (everything that that entails)

Policy analysts in multiple positions

More art than Science

## **Eightfold Path**

Define problem, assemble evidence, construct alternatives, select criteria, project outcomes, confront tradeoffs, decide, tell story

Iteration is continual

Way to get analysis “right”

## **Part I: Eightfold Path**

### **1. Define Problem**

Crucial step, reason to do work, sense of direction

Think in terms of deficits and excess; use to word “too”

What private trouble warrants definition as a public problem?

Market failure, breakdown of system, equity reasons

Quantify how big “too” is

Conditions that cause problems are also problems

Missing an opportunity is also a problem: Be proactive

Common Pitfalls: Do not define solution into problem, be skeptical about causal claims

## **2. Assemble Some Evidence**

More thinking, less hustling of data

Time pressure danger

Collect data that can be turned into information that can be used as evidence

Evidence affects the existing beliefs of important people

Think before collect (seldom do because easier to gather and look productive)

Is data useful? (1. Implication for understanding problem solution, 2. How much different than best guess, 3. How much is it worth to confirm hypothesis with data.)

Do literature review and survey other best practices

Use analogies of similar programs (newspaper, bottle recycling)

Get info requests out early (now)

Touch base often to gain credibility and broker consensus (you as partner/facilitator)

Do not ignore those who disagree

## **3. Construct Alternatives**

Start comprehensive, end up focused

Include politically considered, invent new alternatives, let present continue

Model the causal system in which problem is located

Reduce and simplify list of alternatives (catchy phrase)

Bounce new alternatives off interested stakeholders

Alternative term use ambiguously

## **4. Select the Criteria**

Evaluative plot to your story, previous was the analytical

Only use evaluative criteria to evaluate alternatives, not other criteria

## Criteria used

Efficiency: maximize net benefits, maximize sum of individual happiness  
Willingness to pay based upon current resources  
Cost effectiveness and B/C analyses

Equity: need to think hard about these and take your audience through  
Thinking

Weighting conflicting criteria: let client choose, let analyst choose  
(education process going both ways)

## Practical criteria used

Legality

Not political unacceptability: too much opposition and/or too little support

Robustness: great in theory, but what about practice

Do wish to maximize result according to a certain criteria, or is it more of a  
satisfying result we desire

## **5. Project Outcomes**

Hardest part, but need to do it

Be realistic (avoid temptation of optimism)

Projection as result of modeling and evidence

Specific magnitudes whenever possible

Break even estimates (we need 2 million tires a year in program to make it  
success)

Think about scenarios that can cause proposal to fail

Other guy's shoes (what could cause to fail)

Ethical cost as policy analysts with too much optimism

Carefully crafted outcomes matrix

## **6. Confront Trade-Offs**

Not likely that any alternative dominates

Marginal analysis (use the word "extra" often)

Need to project outcomes in order to confront tradeoffs

Eliminate alternatives that are clearly dominated by others

Compare alternatives to base status quo

## **7. Decide**

Pretend that you are the decision maker

Convince yourself of plausibility, before others

If such a great idea, why not in place (ways to overcome)

## **8. Tell Your Story**

Know your audience

Taxi driver test

Logical narrative flow

Pitfalls: following 8 path process exactly in write up, compulsive qualifying, showing too much work, listing without explaining, avoid pomposity or chatty style

# **Part II: Gathering Data for Policy Research**

## **Begin**

Start with what you know, gather facts

Write a memo to yourself, what you know, what you need to know (research strategy)

## **Locate Relevant Sources**

Documents and people (do not ignore either)

People lead to people, people to documents, documents to documents, documents to people

Secondhand information

Rely on "truth" from witnesses rather than on the defendant  
Credibility of source, self-interest

## **Gaining Access**

Search for knowledge

What ought to know and where can turn to learn it  
Canvas a variety of possible sources

Get an appointment

Appeal to political self-interest, develop reputation as competent (first impressions)

Cultivate access

Rapport, realize doing you favor, thank appropriately

## **Acquire and Use Leverage**

Be aware that many are highly sensitive to political implications

Your treatment by them may be a direct result of this

Energy + direction = information

Facilitate interviews: tell your side of story, do not fear provocative questions (energize the informant), steer directly away from useless conversations, never a gossip session

Defensive Informant

No comment as primary response, leverage is in order (nothing to gain from this stance, may hurt them), may benefit from cooperation

## **Protect Credibility**

Often subjects become critics of product

Researcher needs to protect work from political and intellectual attack

Primary goal

Not intellectual enlightenment (though byproduct)

To improve understanding of policy problem

Gross approximation of truth

Touch base with anyone who might try to later undermine

Seek experts to attribute views, data, opinions, estimates

Risk of premature exposure

Lay out timetable

Answers to crudest questions

## **Strategic Issues**

People to approach early

Info search facilitators, well connected people, knowledgeable persons, friendly experts

Approach relatively late

Hostile informants, busy informants, powerful opponents who may try to destroy access, administrators who know of trouble spots but will only point out if know proof

## **Part III: Smart (Best) Practices**

### **Realistic Expectations**

Never really “best”, perhaps better called “good”

Even if good outcomes, be certain that practices produced them

### **Look for “Smart” Practices**

What is clever about it

Free Lunches

Never really, but can be relatively inexpensive

Generate something of public value, relatively cheaply

P. 74 list some generic opportunities

Disrespect conventional boundaries

### **Characterize and Observe the Practice**

Essential, supportive, and optional elements

What function does each perform

Methods used to perform

Characterization should be generic

Not overly precise or prescriptive

Describe generic vulnerabilities

Will it work in this case?

Need for safeguarding and supportive elements

Be wary of pilot project results

## **Back to Eight-Fold Path**

Avoid excessive enthusiasm about new ideas, but at same time do not require more than “sufficient” evidence to implement

Weigh risks and uncertainties as discussed earlier

Remember if institutions are stuck in their ways, there may be benefits to change, not merely costs