



# Making reform stick: Political acumen as an element of political capacity for policy change and innovation

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## Abstract

Political acumen as an element of policy capacity involves feasibly and successfully steering policies through organizations and systems. “Normal” policy-making makes no great demands in this regard, and so this paper focuses instead on deep policy reforms that typically engender resistance among organizations and stakeholders. Our approach assumes that the nature of these types of changes is paradigmatic and non-Pareto optimal (imposing losses), and take place within policy systems having reasonable degrees of feedback that require policy reformers to negotiate and adjust their reform agenda. We offer a model of political acumen in dealing with deep policy reform that has 10 characteristics, collected under three sub-categories: (1) the nature of the policy problem, (2) the policy response, and (3) policy skills or capacity. Based on this model, we assess the advice on policy reform in the literature and from the OECD and the World Bank – organizations both deeply engaged in governance reform agendas. Basic tools for policy managers are compensating losers, spreading losses over time, grand parenting, and insulating decision-makers, while elected leaders need to develop mandates for change, build coalitions, and engage in heresthetics. At the highest level, political acumen involves the strategic capacity to manage and implement significant policy change.

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And it should be realised that taking the initiative in introducing a new form of government is very difficult and dangerous, and unlikely to succeed. The reason is that all those who profit from the old order will be opposed to the innovator, whereas all those who might benefit from the new order are, at best, tepid supporters of him. This lukewarmness arises partly from fear of their adversaries, who have the laws on their side, partly from the skeptical temper of men, who do not really believe in new things unless they have been seen to work well. The result is that whenever those who are opposed to change have the chance to attack the innovator, they do it with

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much vigour, whereas his supporters act only half-heartedly; so that the innovator and his supporters find themselves in great danger. (Machiavelli, 1988: 20–21)

This article focuses on policy capacity in terms of political acumen,<sup>1</sup> or what the capacity matrix defines as “understanding of the needs and positions of stakeholders; judgement of political feasibility; communication skills.” This is distinct from political competencies at the organizational or systemic level (described by Wu, Ramesh, and Howlett in their article), though they are obviously connected. The importance of political acumen in policy-making has been stressed in theoretical treatments of successful public policy management – see Head (2008), and Wu, Ramesh, Howlett, and Fritzen (2010: 9), who argue that “To be effective, public managers need to develop expertise and policy acumen in networking, advocating, and negotiation...” It is also recognized as a crucial skill by practitioners (HM Government, 2013a).

Managing day-to-day public policy requires, at best, only a relatively low level of political skill. This paper will focus on policy capacity for significant change and/or innovation at the system level (what we will call “deep policy reform” below), that is, at the level of the polity and not at the level of organizations. Business-as-usual, of course, remains important and draws on different skills within the policy toolkit, but the political capacity for deep policy reform is emerging as the key to successful contemporary governance (Kuipers et al., 2014). As well, in “deep policy reform” we are focusing on reforms that are, at least initially, unpopular because they upset the status quo and generate sufficient losses to mobilize significant opposition. Broadly popular policies that inflict little pain normally do not require much political skill to sell or to implement.

The article proceeds by briefly reviewing the conceptual terrain on policy capacity for change and innovation, and then assembles some advice on what constitutes an effective reform capacity – political acumen – drawing in part on academic observations on various experiments in policy reform and on advice from the OECD and the World Bank. We hold no particular brief for these organizations, but they are useful touchstones because they are among the leading international governmental organizations (IGOs) offering governance and policy advice (Berkman, 2008; Carin & Wood, 2005; Clegg, 2013; Gould, 2006; Jakobi & Martens, 2010; Mathiason, 2007; Peet, 2003; Rodrik, 2006; Williamson, 1993; Yi-Chong & Weller, 2009), and there is wide acknowledgement of the OECD’s important role in spreading public management ideas around the world (Armingeon & Beyeler, 2004; Kettl, 2006; Pal, 2012; Pollitt, 2006).

## 1. Policy capacity, policy change, and policy innovation: the conceptual terrain

From its early roots, the literature on policy capacity has generally focused on either analytic capacity or on execution capacity (Graham, 1960; Honadle, 1981). The stream focusing on execution fed work on implementation capacities and challenges (Bardach, 1977; Goggin, Bowman, Lester, & O’Toole, 1990; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973). The other broad stream emphasized “policy analytical capacity.” Painter and Pierre argued that policy capacity was the ability to “marshal the necessary resources to make intelligent collective choices, in particular to set strategic directions...” (Painter & Pierre, 2005: 2). Howlett echoes this in defining policy capacity as knowledge acquisition and utilization in policy processes (Howlett, 2013: 162). We will focus on this second stream.

It is clear that analytical capacity is principally the ability of people to think, and hence is primarily a matter of a trained policy workers. While there are organizational dimensions to this – the resources marshalled to hire this workforce, inter-departmental coordination of information and decision-making flows, and external resources (universities, think tanks) – the focus here is on ideas, information, data, and the techniques to process them into policy options (a similar distinction between analytical competencies and organizational resources is made in the matrix developed by Wu, Ramesh, Howlett for this special issue). A striking feature of this literature is its focus on business-as-usual or “normal” policy-making. In the management sense, it is the daily management of programs, collecting taxes and delivering services. In the analytical sense, it is having the resources and the time to think through issues within relatively narrow boundaries, making micro-adjustments among means but not ends – in short, the classic temporal pace of the policy cycle (Brewer & deLeon, 1983; deLeon, 2007; Howlett, Ramesh, & Perl, 2009).

<sup>1</sup> We use the term “political acumen” throughout this article, but it is an aspect of policy capacity, and operates in three dimensions – individual, organizational and system. Our focus is on the individual policy actor, and as we explain below that means both politicians and their advisors, so “political acumen” inevitably entails some component of “policy” acumen as well.

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