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