McKinnon INSTITUTE

THE STRATEGIC TRIANGLE

A tool for policy understanding and action

Delivering public impact involves not only identifying the right thing to do but also ensuring it can be successfully delivered. The Strategic Triangle is a simple tool that helps the policymaker to answer the three key questions that set a policy up for success: does it add to the public good (should we?); do we have support (may we?); and can we deliver (could we?). Touching the three corners of the triangle, at multiple points through the policy process, mitigates against common policy and political blind spots and increases the chance of success.



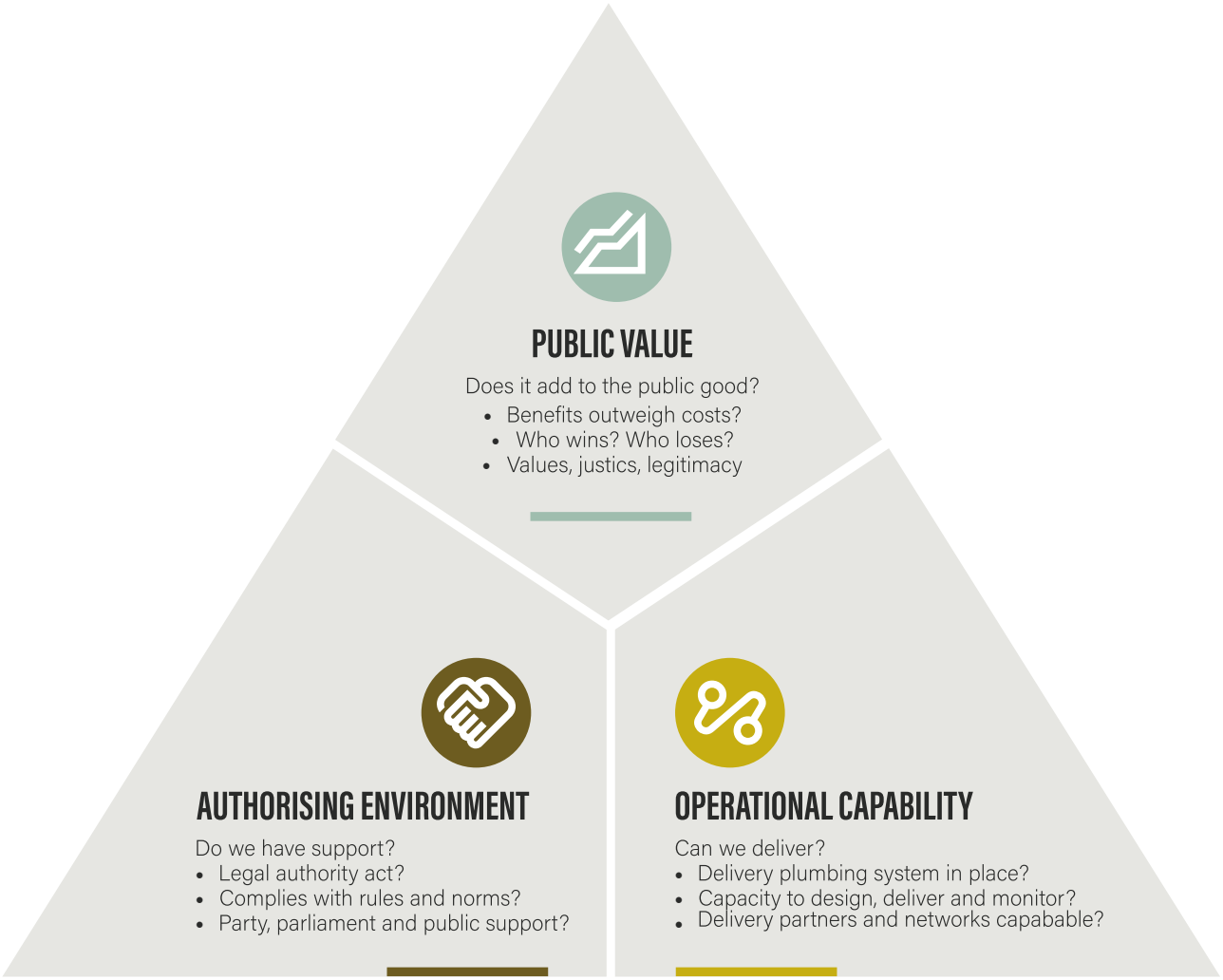
Key Idea

Mark Moore's Strategic Triangle is used globally to teach policy makers how to think and act in policy. It can be used to view a problem at any point of its journey, but it is particularly powerful when trying to understand what is happening or why progress might be blocked.

The Strategic Triangle calls out the three key elements required for effective policy reform: Public Value; Authorising Environment; and Operational Capability. Through visibility of each corner of the triangle, both in its own right (completeness) and in conjunction with the other two corners (coherence), policymakers can identify policy gaps or weaknesses and prioritise actions to drive successful reform.

The Strategic Triangle reminds us that there is more to policy-making than 'good ideas'. It asks us to interrogate not only the value of a proposal (its benefits, costs, risks and relative priority), but also the social and political support for it, and our ability to deliver it.

The three corners: Public Value, Authorising Environment, Operational Capability



At each corner of the triangle, we can pose stretch questions to better understand policy strengths and gaps:

1

Is this a better investment of our power and resources than alternatives? Government has limited authority, resources, delivery capability and bandwidth. You need to be confident that your proposal is not only worth doing but worth prioritising, based on its wider and longer benefits.

2

Do we have support to not only get this up, but also make it stick? While you may get a policy up without bipartisan support, it can undermine policy sustainability. Consider other mechanisms to lock-in what you want to be long-term commitments.

3

How do we plan to give the work back to those best placed to own it? Systems are more effective and more legitimate when they have the buy-in of those whose attitudes, behaviours and commitments need to change. Local ownership makes change more effective.

Applying the Strategic Triangle

A key question in applying the strategic triangle is 'where do I start'? You start by answering the questions posed at each corner of the triangle. The answers to these questions will show where there is work to be done – to build a clear understanding of the problem, to bring stakeholders on board and/or to develop implementation pathways in line with system capabilities.

Jorrit de Jong and colleagues from the Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative have observed the application of the strategic triangle in a range of circumstances. They recommend a sequence of steps to follow (outlined below) to forge a collaborative solution, where you are starting with a blank slate and you have some control over design.

Whatever your situation, be sure to consider the following basic elements:

1. Build a trusted team, thinking consciously about your team and your allies.
2. Articulate the public value, being clear about your problem or objective.
3. Have a workable plan for implementation, involving the relevant stakeholders.
4. Set up governance, roles and communications that can hold your coalition together.
5. Be adaptive – commit, act and learn.



What are the challenges in practice?

The strategic triangle is a powerful tool, but it raises some practical challenges that you should keep in mind:

- **Holding:** Different actors will bring their personal and organisational values (e.g., on who wins and who loses) to estimates of public value. Holding them in the same space is a challenge.
- **Mobilisation:** 'Where do we start?' The strategic triangle helps with this by forcing us to see the problem differently. This surfaces the opportunities to engage others, act and learn.
- **Hierarchy:** While all three corners are presented as equal, in politics your authorising environment is critical to getting anything done. Without authority and resources, it will be hard.



Additional Resources

Further readings on the Strategic Triangle

This Concept Note on Public Value provides a more detailed explanation and rationale for the strategic triangle. It explores different interpretations of public value, who determines it and the ways in which we measure it. This is useful background to explore the strategic triangle in more detail. For a balanced analysis of public value, also see Alford and O'Flynn (2008) and for a more recent assessment see O'Flynn (2021).

This 2021 article in the Stanford Social Innovation Review by Jorrit de Jong and colleagues, titled 'Building Cities' Collaborative Muscle', provides a discussion of how policy leaders and their teams have applied the strategic triangle in practice. The research is informed by work the authors had done with 30 policy teams through the Harvard City Leadership Initiative. The research surfaced the common barriers to collaboration to suggest a sequence of questions to work through and an approach to engaging your team in this process.

Further Policy development resources

Delivering Great Policy was developed by the Australian Public Service Commission to document how public servants can deliver policy advice that is clear, well informed, practical to implement and influential. It offers you useful guidance on what you should be asking for and expecting from your public servants.

The PDIA Toolkit offers a particular lens on solving public problems, valuing practice alongside policy. Pioneered in the development field, this bottom-up approach proposes iterative, problem-driven processes that engage stakeholders in tight feedback loops to steadily build understanding, capability and support.

Today's Problems, Yesterday's Toolkit offers a guide to solving public problems, building on a study of how Australian public servants are using new methods to solve public problems. Developed by policy and political practitioners, the report argues that new institutional forms may be needed to enable policy innovation.