

Strategy – the Master Key to driving change in the Public Sector

Insights from The Barton Partnership's roundtable discussion in June 2023



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On Tuesday 27th June 2023, The Barton Partnership hosted a roundtable event: Strategy – the Master Key to Driving Change in the Public Sector - bringing together Senior Leaders in the Public Sector to discuss the pivotal role of strategy in driving innovation and change.

The discussion focussed on the need for effective alignment between policy and implementation, the role of culture in strategy execution, and the challenges faced by leaders in driving focus and motivation. The participants also explored the importance of resource allocation, the limitations imposed by central controls and bureaucracy, and the potential for re-energising the civil service amidst political transitions.

What follows is a summary of the key points discussed during the session:



- #1 Challenges in strategy development and implementation**
Bridging the policy-implementation gap, addressing CEO knowledge deficiencies, overcoming central controls and bureaucracy, empowering managers, and advocating for operational experience in policy roles to improve implementation.



- #2 Resource allocation and trade-offs**
Overcoming central controls, power structure limitations, and aligning policy with implementation for successful strategy implementation.



- #3 Political changes and organisational impact**
Examining the influence on leadership, focus, motivation, and talent attraction, emphasising the significance of effective leadership during transitions.



- #4 The transformative power of AI**
Revolutionising the public sector by reimagining transactional services, streamlining processes, enhancing service delivery, and driving innovation.



- #5 Talent attraction and retention in the Public Sector**
Fostering an inclusive work environment, addressing retention challenges, investing in continuous learning and professional development, and leveraging research funding to retain top AI and digital skills talent.

#1 Challenges in strategy development and implementation

- Participants highlighted the challenge of bridging the gap between policy and implementation when developing new strategies, highlighting the need for more robust and actionable strategy.
- A deficiency in CEO knowledge around transformation, and the tendency to launch programs prematurely were identified as key hurdles.
- The conversation shifted to the healthcare sector, with comparisons drawn between the UK's consensus-driven approach and the EU's more centralised and mandate-based system. The participants shared frustrations around the central controls and bureaucracy hindering implementation in the UK, suggesting the need to let managers manage and empower talented individuals in positions of power. They emphasised the importance of appointing people with operational experience to policy roles and training them in policy-making to improve implementation.
- The lack of training around program delivery within the civil service was also raised as a concern. Participants expressed their observations that many policy-focused individuals were appointed to senior program roles without prior experience in program delivery. They called for a change in approach, suggesting that individuals with operational experience should be placed in policy roles and given the necessary training to improve implementation.

#2 Resource allocation and trade-offs

- Participants recognised the limitations imposed by central controls and bureaucracy in the UK government. They expressed frustrations about the existing power structures within Treasury and Cabinet Office that hinder effective implementation. While acknowledging the need for change, they also highlighted the challenges of addressing these limitations without disrupting the existing power dynamics.
- Participants explored the challenges of aligning policy and implementation. They discussed the impact of culture on strategy execution, citing, “culture eats strategy for breakfast.” Too many competing strategies within government departments and diverting attention to new strategies were also hindrances to effective implementation.
- The participants emphasised the importance of focusing on strategic priorities amid external pressures. They discussed the difficulty of resource reallocation in the public sector compared to the private sector, where decisions can be made more solely by the CEO. The challenge of prioritising strategies and allocating resources efficiently was a common theme, with participants sharing examples of prioritisation exercises in areas such as aid budgets and spending reviews. However, they acknowledged that resource allocation decisions often revolved around financial considerations rather than strategic priorities.
- The discussion further highlighted the need for clearer resource allocation decision-making processes and greater trade-off discussions. Participants expressed frustration with the lack of transparency and specificity when trade-offs were presented, emphasising the importance of framing problems and providing explicit trade-offs for effective decision-making. They also acknowledged the difficulties ministers and civil servants face in making choices and trade-offs, particularly in situations involving winners and losers and limited time within the political cycle.

- The challenges of strategy implementation were further examined at both the policy level and departmental operations level. Examples were given where ministers and civil servants faced difficulties in making choices across policy objectives such as Net Zero, economic growth, and levelling up. Similarly, at the departmental level, discussions on resource allocation and prioritisation often resulted in a lack of change due to previous unsuccessful attempts.
- The participants concluded that political clearance, managerial engagement, and transparent decision-making processes were vital for successful strategy implementation. They acknowledged the complexities and trade-offs inherent in the process, but stressed the importance of maintaining focus, clarifying objectives, and making resource allocation decisions based on strategic priorities.

#3 Political changes and organisational impact

- The impact of political changes - notably the upcoming election - on leadership, focus, and motivation within organisations was examined. The participants discussed how political uncertainty and changes in government can affect perceptions and priorities.
- The discussion highlighted the stability experienced in certain programs, allowing for a focus on strategy and implementation with minimal political interference. However, challenges were acknowledged in departments that underwent reorganisations without proper planning, resulting in uncertainty and difficulties in delivery.
- The participants shared experiences from both central government and autonomous regulatory bodies, noting the significant difference in the level of space and focus on strategy and delivery between the two. In the central government, there was often a sense of jumping to respond to political demands, whereas the autonomous bodies had more room to concentrate on strategic goals.
- The potential re-energisation of the civil service in the event of a change in government was discussed. It was suggested that a shift to a different political party could invigorate the civil service, bringing new energy and talent to the organisation.
- The challenging relationship between ministers and senior civil servants was mentioned as a factor affecting retention. The participants believed that a period of political stability, such as a full term with a new government, could attract individuals back to the civil service and inspire them to contribute to its progress.
- Overall, the participants recognised the potential impact of political changes on focus, motivation, and talent attraction within organisations. They emphasised the need for effective leadership to navigate such transitions and create an environment that fosters engagement and productivity.

#4 The transformative power of AI

- Participants recognised that AI has the potential to revolutionise the public sector. The discussion highlighted the need to reimagine transactional services. The potential benefits of AI in streamlining processes, improving response times, and enhancing service delivery across various public sector domains

were emphasised. AI has the capability to automate tasks, analyse data and provide actionable insights, leading to more efficient and effective operations, leading to more efficient and effective operations.

- Participants discussed the importance of strong leadership and effective communication in driving AI adoption. Leaders must clearly articulate the benefits of AI and engage a diverse range of stakeholders when shaping AI strategies and implementation plans.
- Overcoming resistance to change was recognised as a critical factor in successfully integrating AI in the public sector, creating a culture of innovation that encourages experimentation and risk-taking, which providing effective resources for employees.
- Collaboration between policy leader and program delivery leaders was highlighted as essential for successful AI integration. Both groups must work together to align strategies, address concerns and ensure a smooth transition to AI-powered solutions.

#5 Talent attraction and retention in the Public Sector

- Participants acknowledge the existing talent gap for AI and digital skills, emphasising the need to bridge this gap by actively attracting individuals with relevant expertise. Establishing partnerships with universities and college can facilitate graduate hiring for AI and digital skills.
- The discussion touched on the importance of creating an inclusive and diverse work environment that appeals to a wide range of talent, but prioritising diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives.
- Participants identified challenges associated with talent retention, such as limited growth opportunities and competition from the private sector. Bureaucratic processes and procedural barriers were identified as hurdles to innovation and talent retention.
- Organisation should invest in continuous learning and professional development programs to support talent retention. Providing opportunities for upskilling and career advancement can incentivise employees and boost retention.
- Leveraging research funding and opportunities was highlighted as a strategy to encourage talent retention. By providing resources for research and innovation, organisations can support the growth of AI and digital skills within the public sector and retain top talent.

About The Barton Partnership

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Our network represents talent across all disciplines and sectors associated with Strategy & M&A, Digital, Data & Analytics, ESG & Sustainability, and Transformation & Change.

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