

GovTalk

Get to the Point.

2.6 What the Listener/Reader is Thinking

Our normal perspective in GovTalk is that of the preparer and presenter of briefings and presentations. But this whole process is a two-way (at times multi-channel and multi-player) one. It is useful in preparing a briefing to keep in mind that the recipient of the briefing is an active participant, not just a passive black box. They will use filters and, yes, certain cognitive biases, in assessing the briefing.

Remember as well that creating briefings is a continuous business of government. The writer will be around for a while and so will the listener. While this focuses on the preoccupations of the listener, that person will also become familiar with the briefer. Getting to understand styles and concerns on both sides is valuable for the organization.

What You Need to Consider about your Briefing Recipient

Based on the scant research in this area and some talks at professional conferences by senior government officials (the most likely recipient of such briefings), here are some points that will either be on their mind:

1. **Why here? Why now?** The recipient will want to know the urgency or timeliness of the briefing. Is there an event that precipitated it? Is this for something? Do I need to do this now?
2. **Am I getting the right expertise here?** Is the material provided by the right people that I trust?
3. **Are we in catch-up or ahead of the curve?** This is not an evaluative question about the briefer, but rather where is this in what might be called the issue cycle. Are we reacting to something here? Is our Minister going to be surprised? Are I surprised? If so, why?
4. **Have we looked at the context?** What else do we need to understand to put this issue in context? Have circumstances, i.e., context, changed? If so, how and why?

5. **Am I hearing a situational response or is this about our outcomes?** Is this note about just responding in the moment or does it suggest there is an impact on our basic outcomes, goals and mission?
6. **Does this create a new risk landscape?** Linked to No. 4, is what being reported going to have an impact on our short and long term objectives in a way that we need to take on a new risk and start the mitigation process? This is a constant preoccupation of organizational leaders, be they bureaucratic or political.
7. **Is this taking into account other views?** Is this briefing or presentation only representative of the organization or does it take into account relevant and possibly contrary views?
8. **Does this have a whole-of-government impact or what else in government is affected?** The principal concern here be whether the issue might escalate from the unit or departmental level to either political or bureaucratic central office concerns. The other side of this question is whether central agencies or other departments are affected and have they been put in the loop.
9. **What's next?** Where do we go from here? Do I have to do anything? So we have to do anything? The range of possibilities is large, starting from "We just wanted you to know." to "Immediate action is required." Just have an answer or build it into the note.

The second aspect of this relationship is understanding the context in which the listener is working. While it is impossible to describe all elements of this context, here are a few that are common and need to guide the briefer:

- **Time Starved:** Senior officials have severe time conflicts, many of which they do not control. Brevity is not only a virtue of the good briefer, it is a way to actually get read. Further, the time constraints will create a distracted listener so attention has to be gotten quickly and, remember, it will not last.
- **One of Many:** Most recipients of one briefing are the recipients of many briefings. This means you are competing for attention. Creating a difference in presentation or making it easy to understand quickly the bottom line (Remember BLUF) helps make a difference.
- **BS Savvy:** Most seasoned briefing listener have developed a finely tune sense of the blatantly superfluous (That's BS in case you thought it was something else.) Respect that. Avoid flights of eloquence or reminding the listener/reader of the obvious. Avoid cliché.
- **Idea Hungry and Curious:** Senior officials are constantly looking for new ways to do things and new ways to think about a policy or implementation problem. They tend to turn problems over and over and often speak to many people about them to formulate a strategy.