

Ambition, Opportunity and Impact – how do we get lost along the way?

The world of reform is a complex interplay of factors that create both a platform for action and a series of obstacles to navigate along the way. Deep, enduring, positive change is part planning, part circumstance, and part luck – all mixed together with some pain and effort. In this note, I'll reflect on some things which support big and effective social service reforms yet can also get in the way of them having lasting impact. I'm looking at you, "Ambition" and "Opportunity."

Australia is blessed to have an active and energetic community which works in support of positive change. Be it self-determination for aboriginal communities, improving mental health supports or creating better lives for people with disabilities, there is always a community that stands behind a vision for a better world.

In the public policy sphere, we call this reform. From this context, what is needed to deliver successful reforms? And why do they often seem to get lost along the way?

Ambition

In all cases, *Ambition* is born of adversity. Injustice, harm or inequality can have deep impacts on a person, a community, their family and supporters. To their credit, many people stand-up after experiencing these challenges and voice a case for a better system.

Rarely, immediate action will follow. More commonly, a body of evidence will build, and continued work and determination will create a foundation for change. But this isn't enough.

Opportunity

Change does not come without *Opportunity*. And opportunity cannot be planned. You can be ready for your chance when it comes, though. And you can prime a system to be ready too.

Opportunity comes from circumstance – an event or a leader that makes important people notice. And important people can translate intent into action. Combine an opportunity with some ambition and the window is opened to major reform.

Impact

If ambition and opportunity are essential ingredients in reform, how do we get lost on the way to impact? In the section below, I'll describe how ambition and opportunity can turn against impact and get in the way of longer-lasting change.

What gets in the way?

The problem with big reforms is, umm, their size. Lots of moving parts, lots of actors, lots of processes, lots of vested interests or accepted ways of working. Making deep changes is, by necessity, messy and long-term. However, 'Ambition' will want faster change and early impacts and evidence of action. And 'Opportunity,' by its nature, is only around for a limited period. So, people get nervous that anything not completed now will be a missed opportunity.

The wrong story

These factors can start to get in the way of proper planning, participation and implementation. They can lead to an attachment to the wrong story. A

preference for the story - “we saw the problem and we fixed it” rather than “we saw a problem and understood it. We are working differently, and it will get better over time.”

The wrong approach

The sense that the opportunity is “now” so investment and activity must all occur while the window of opportunity is open. This can be made worse if large investments are offered to demonstrate how serious the response is.

Unfortunately, when expectations of stakeholders or expectations of ministers outpace the ability of the system to change, corners are cut. This approach favours a focus on expediency over complexity. And it risks repeating the patterns that generated the problems in the first place.

How can we do it differently?

While accountability for action and the spending of public money remains paramount, we must move away from the idea that success is measured by ticks in boxes.

Consider a reform opportunity as the start of something new, not as a closing window

We often talk about ten-year reforms, but we behave like they must be delivered in three. We need to think about what the reform opportunity represents in a different way.

Rather than being a closing window for a one-off chance at change, consider it as a resetting of relationships, and a commitment to a new way of managing a system, which is bolstered by additional investment and focus.

This can only occur if there is a mutual understanding, and a mutual commitment between government, providers and community. It needs to be based on trust and compromise.

Better compartmentalise what is needed for reforms to be effective.

Know that there will be a need to ration resources even if new investment is forthcoming. There is always a limit to what can be achieved.

Sometimes it comes with scope, sometimes funding, and sometimes time. But there is also a limit to the “headspace” of people working on the reforms. Limits on the number of decisions a minister can take, the number of forums a department can host, the number of workshops a stakeholder can attend.

Getting the scale, scope and pace of change is hard, but necessary. And this needs to be a collective decision.

Create streams of work with different time horizons. And here is the critical point, give each of these streams the space to work. Insulate work on current system and offer it attention and space. Empower work on new design and give it attention and space. And recognise work on vision, strategy, culture and mindsets and give it attention and space. Without this conscious effort and allocation, ideas will fight for space. And sequentially, and inefficiently, they will succeed in drawing attention away from each other, weakening the overall program.

Compartmentalisation is not about denying the interdependencies of work. It is about space-creation for thinking, learning and relationship building. The question can still be asked about how-much and when, but the answer should include ‘something’ and ‘ongoing.’

Focus on learning and adaptation

A final action is to think differently about what it is to manage a system, to operate a service or to support a client. There will never be enough money to do everything that is needed. So, it becomes imperative to make sure the money that is available, is spent well.

This cannot be achieved by centralised control, or by compliance-based reporting. It can only be achieved by adaptive systems suited to the level of the system with which they relate.

Local delivery needs local feedback loops and learning networks. Organisational or regional levels, the same. Accountability systems are not learning systems. And you need both. Build both. Run both. And offer space for both.