

The three hats of supporting major reforms

Big social service reforms go through phases as they grow from being a hot issue, to a big investment, to a major reform roll-out. Over this time, the roles that stakeholders play can vary. And in each stage, people can wear different hats as they work in support of positive change. This paper looks at what it means to wear each hat, and how these roles change over time.

THREE HATS

Hats are a useful metaphor because they can represent different characteristics yet be easily interchangeable. In this example we will assign three hats to the roles of advocates, allies, and partners. Peak bodies, service delivery agencies and government departments themselves can all wear these hats. Different hats for different purposes.

Let's look at each in turn and see how they link to different parts of the reform cycle.

The advocate's hat

The advocate is the voice for change. They speak on behalf of the person, client or group who are experiencing difficulty, trauma, burden, or injustice. The voice of the advocate speaks from this context and may bring emotions of anger, frustration, or indignation. The voice may also plea for, or demand action. Equally, the advocate can speak from a position of reason, experience, evidence, and intent. But there is no requirement for an advocate to speak for others outside those they represent. The advocate's goal is to create a platform for change and then to see that change through.

The ally's hat

The ally speaks in support of, rather than on behalf of, the group seeking change. They can be essential in offering a different perspective that validates the concerns an advocate has. And because reforms are

multi-dimensional – involving people, workers, funders, and managers – an advocate in one area, can be ally for someone else in a different area. A key characteristic is having shared and mutually supportive interests. And using this shared interest in forums which advance the case for change. Especially those where an advocate may struggle to gain access or be viewed as an overly biased voice.

The partner's hat

A partner differs from an ally or advocate by having a different level or power to influence make decisions or take actions. There is a substantial shift in the consequences of this role. Notably in the way that different perspectives need to be acknowledged and embedded in the work. And in how trade-offs are managed, and compromises made.

To be clear, the challenges in adjusting to a partner role apply equally to government departments as they do representative organisations. The shift to power-sharing roles can be dramatic on both sides.

To summarise, an advocate acts in passionate support of one view. An ally adds or incorporates an additional viewpoint. Whereas a partner needs to be open and mindful of multiple viewpoints. Hat-swapping is an advanced, but essential, engagement technique.

EVOLVING ROLES

Now we can step through how the role linked to wearing each of these hats can evolve over the stages of reform.

	Making a case for Reform	Planning the Reform	Delivering reform
<i>Advocate</i>	A loud and clear voice can make sure a message is heard and the problem believed	Make clear what has and hasn't worked and what must be considered essential for success this time	Be the conscience of the reforms, call out wayward actions, ensure return to traditional ways is avoided
<i>Ally</i>	Validate and support the advocate, add balance to the scope of required action	Advise on tensions and pitfalls, and cross-sector lessons as designs are taking place	Mediate on issues that arise and be a trusted friend to multiple sides
<i>Partner</i>	Navigate the authorising environment through strategic use of advocate and ally voices – focus on timing and opportunity	Bring best-practice knowledge and information to design and planning, including practical solutions to overall packaging choices	Consciously enter a new role of power-sharing and adopt curious and inclusive consideration of other people's experience, expertise, insights, and constraints

THE CHALLENGE OF BEING A PARTNER

The hardest hat to wear is the partner hat in the delivery phase of reforms.

In a delivery scenario, you can find yourself in a zero-sum game. Where more of one thing means less of another. This occurs because there is a limit to what can be done within the allotted time, or with the available people or funding. In this context, a singular focus on the needs of one viewpoint can weaken implementation.

The working environment is likely to take on features that may be unfamiliar to all involved. It needs to be safe, respectful and (re)solution focused. It may not always be easy, polite, or focused.

Tensions might emerge over how to do things, what to focus on, and what takes priority in the order of delivery. Of course, finding a mutually agreeable balance is always preferred. But in practice, a mix of *not-quite-enough* of what is really needed is the best that can be achieved.

For bureaucrats, there is comfort and familiarity with being the *director of change*. This preference stems from a commitment to accountability and ministerial

responsibility (which remain important). But efforts to control and manage risks can exclude the wisdom of lived experience and the benefits of new ways or working. The unfortunate result can be the perpetuation problems that are trying to be fixed.

For people committed to advocacy, the shift in thinking might relate to confronting the legal, risk, and technical requirements of reform. Some highly desirable changes may face genuine challenges in implementation. Some may be solved by thinking differently. While some may bump into hard barriers that aren't open to change in the short term.

So, what is the solution? The goal is to be sophisticated and ready and able to wear each hat as needed – and to know that you are doing so. A good hat-swapper is good at relationships and communication and builds trust and familiarity so hat-swapping can occur with grace and honesty.

Talk openly about which hat you are wearing. And maybe, once on a while, try on someone else's hat and see how it fits.