

Classic Format for Briefing Notes

A briefing note is a powerful tool of access to leaders and colleagues — to influence their decisions, their actions and their understanding of issues. In this regard, writers (and their managers) face a challenging task. They must deliver expert insight and strategic acumen with brevity, clarity and professionalism — all presented with an optimal organization, format and style.

Writing for Results Inc.'s mission is to deliver in-depth [training](#) that provides Government of Canada employees with the tools, techniques and knowledge they need to excel at writing clear, crisp and compelling briefing notes.

The following pages offer a summary of our guidance. You will find:

- the [classic format](#) of a briefing note, along with pointers on its content;
- tips on [how to write](#) efficiently and effectively (page 3);
- advice on [how to plan](#) the foundation of a briefing note to help avoid problems before they happen (page 5); and
- an outline of the [strategic thinking](#) that underlies a sound briefing note (page 13).

Note how the classic format economizes on space while still providing headings that encompass any possible content that might be needed.

We welcome feedback on this material. Please do not hesitate to [e-mail](#) us with any comments, suggestions or concerns that you may have.

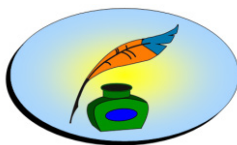
You can find this material on the Web at:

<http://WritingForResults.net.classic.pdf>

Classic Format of a Briefing Note

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Avancement Économique
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UNCLASSIFIED

FOR DECISION

N15-52018

or CONFIDENTIAL
or SECRET
or TOP SECRET
or PROTECTED A
or PROTECTED B
or PROTECTED C

or FOR ACTION
or FOR SIGNATURE
or FOR INFORMATION

1

BRIEFING NOTE FOR THE MINISTER

SUBJECT: The Subject should not exceed two lines,
and the bottom line should be longer than the top line

2

SUMMARY

- A well-crafted briefing note does not need a Summary.
- If used, the Summary should condense the key messages of the briefing note.
- Include a deadline for a decision, signature or action, if needed.
- Keep the Summary to three or four bullets.

3

ISSUE

The Issue entices the Minister to read on. It states what has happened, is happening, will happen or might happen that requires his or her attention. When appropriate, it states what strengths, weaknesses, opportunities or threats exist.

4

BACKGROUND

The Background section:

- provides history and other information to bring the Minister up to speed on the issue;
- should not be controversial or subject to dispute;
- sets the stage for the Considerations section; and
- may include the current status.

5

CONSIDERATIONS

Considerations provide the facts, arguments, opinions and options analysis needed to show that the Conclusion or Recommendation is a sound response to the Issue.

Annexes A and B provide guidance on writing the briefing note as a whole. Annex C outlines the strategic thinking that underlies a sound briefing note.

6

The Considerations section may address the following as needed:

- current status and relevance to strategic priorities (e.g., Speech From the Throne, the Budget, your department's Report on Plans and Priorities);
- implications for the portfolio (other agencies that report to the Minister);
- consultations conducted and horizontal management; and
- communications implications and plans.

1. Set the left margin at 1.5" and the right margin at 1".
2. For all headings, use a Times New Roman 12-point bold font in capitals.
3. For all body text, use a Times New Roman 12-point font.
4. Left-justify the text (ragged right margin).
5. Set the line spacing to 1.1 all through the briefing note.
6. Note how this paragraph saved space by referring to annexes, rather than going into details here.

7. Close with a Conclusion in briefing notes that are FOR INFORMATION

8. Close with Recommendation(s) in briefing notes that are FOR DECISION, FOR ACTION or FOR SIGNATURE.

9. Insert a ministerial signature box, if needed.

• Use the [Step-by-Step Model for Briefing Notes](#).

• Ensure that the briefing note complies with its [Frame of Reference](#).

• In choosing the content, keep the [strategic context](#) in mind. Be alert as well to the impact of using:
(1) [substance vs. froth](#);
(2) [positive vs. negative terms](#);
(3) [abstractions vs. concrete details](#); and
(4) [facts vs. opinions vs. arguments](#).

• Use the principles of [organization](#).

• Use a clear and crisp [style](#) with a neutral tone.

• Keep the briefing note to [two pages](#) (plus annexes).

The Considerations section addresses risk and SWOT matters as needed, i.e.:

- strengths (internal capabilities);
- weaknesses (internal vulnerabilities);
- opportunities (external circumstances that can be exploited); and
- threats (external circumstances that present a danger).

In addressing SWOT, the Considerations section will take account of PESTLE factors as needed, i.e.:

- political factors (e.g., public opinion, links to the Speech From the Throne);
- economic factors (e.g., budget considerations, financial impact on stakeholders);
- social factors (e.g., impact on education, culture, families, the elderly, employees);
- technological factors (e.g., technological capabilities and constraints);
- legal factors (e.g., statutory, regulatory, treaty or contractual requirements); and
- ecological factors (e.g., impact on wildlife, oceans, greenhouse gases).

CONCLUSION

7

The Conclusion:

- answers the question “So what?”; and/or
- states the department’s position; and/or
- tells the Minister what happens next and when he or she will be briefed again.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

8

The Recommendation(s) tell the Minister precisely what you would like him or her to do to bring about a desired outcome. This section should include a deadline, if needed. Do not state rationale in the Recommendation(s).

9

Jean-Pierre Marchand

Attachments: (3)

Contacts:

- John Doe, 613-990-0000
Technology Division, Industry Branch
- Jeanne Cartier, 819-991-1111
Economics Division, Industry Branch

I approve:

or

☐ I concur.

☐ Option 1

☐ I do not concur.

☐ Option 2

or

I approve:

☐ Option 3

☐ Recommendation 1

☐ Recommendation 2

Catherine R. Kathiria, P.C., M.P.

For ease of reference, this example uses one sequence of page numbers throughout. In practice, however, it is usually easiest for each annex to start back at page 1.

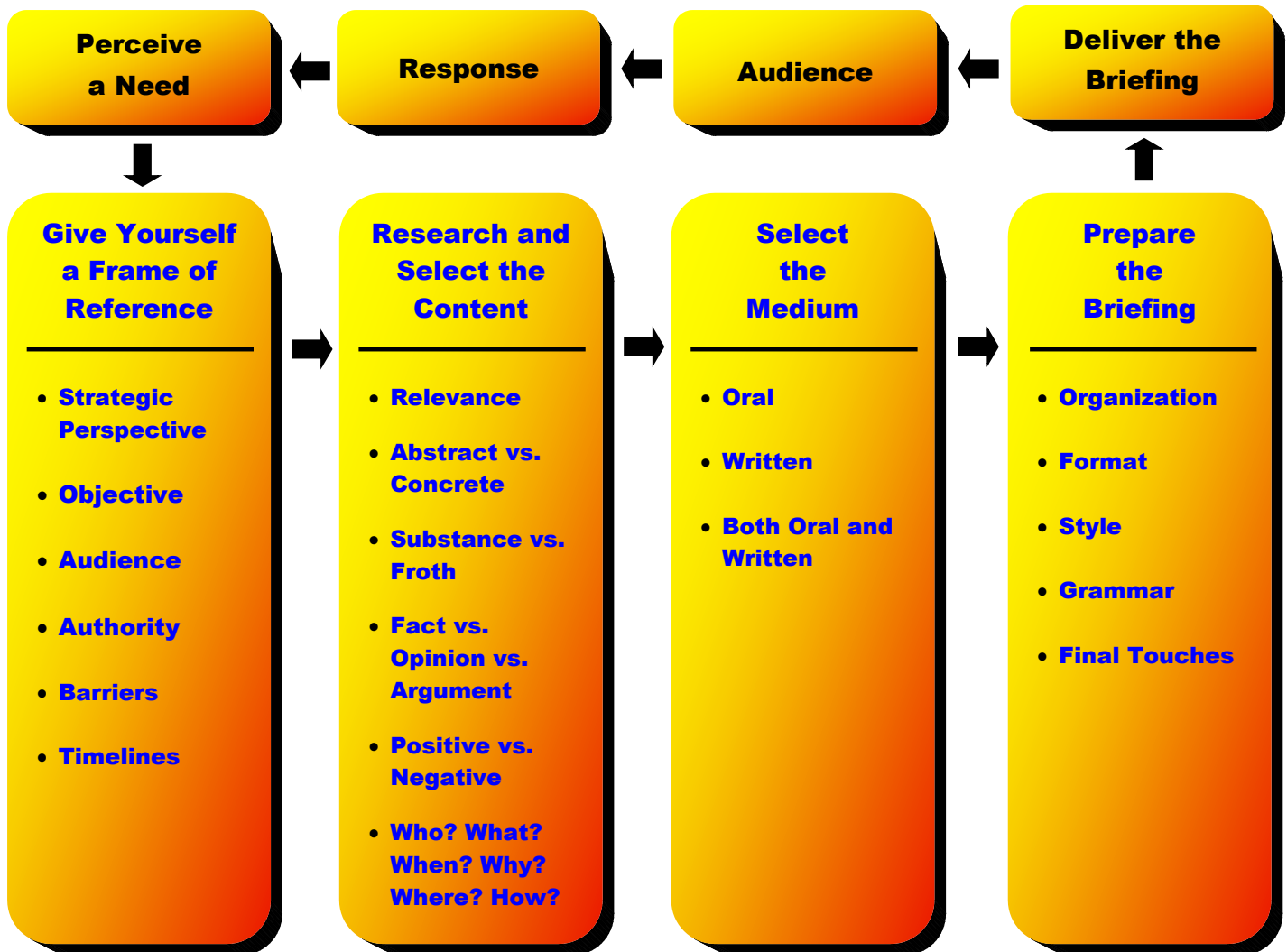
- 3 -

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Annex A

A Step-by-Step Model for Briefing Notes

Click on the links in the chart for details on each element of the model.




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Writing a briefing note can seem like a bewildering challenge at times. As Henry Ford said, however, “Nothing is particularly hard if you divide it into small jobs.” The model above does just that for briefing notes. It sets out the tasks that we all deal with — consciously or not — in writing any briefing note. The model helps us to address those tasks methodically and with sound reasoning.

The step-by-step model is just a tool, however, and not a rule. No two people will use it entirely alike. In theory, you should first write a frame of reference, then develop the content, next select the medium, and finally prepare the briefing note itself. In practice, you will probably find yourself jumping back and forth from one stage to another. Even so, the model provides important insights into what to think about, when to think about it and how to think about it.

For detailed guidance, visit [How to Use the Step-by-Step Model](#).

Note the use of a table of contents.
This is a lengthy annex. The table
of contents helps the reader to
grasp at a glance what is in it.



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Introduction

A frame of reference is the foundation of your briefing note. It gives you sound guidance as you do your research and writing. It will help you to keep your work focused, and will help you to avoid spending time pursuing avenues that are not relevant to the task at hand.

A frame of reference has six elements: (1) strategic perspective; (2) objective; (3) audience; (4) authority; (5) barriers; and (6) timelines.

These elements are linked to each other. Changing one can mean changing one or more of the others as well. In light of this, a frame of reference is a valuable tool for making sure that the foundation of your briefing is viable before you devote a lot of time to research and writing. You can also use it to get informal buy-in and guidance from your supervisor, partners or senior management at an early stage.

Won't This Take a Lot of Valuable Time?

Sometimes it is easy to write a frame of reference, and nothing is lost by taking the few minutes that it requires. Other times, it will be time-consuming and difficult to write a frame of reference. This can be an important sign that you need to clarify what you are setting out to do before you spend a lot of time doing it.

Sometimes, you will draw a complete blank when you try to write your frame of reference. This may be a time when writing is a process of discovering what your thoughts are, rather than simply putting your thoughts on paper. In such cases, go ahead and start writing. Before you finish up, however, do go back and write your frame of reference. If you still experience difficulty at this point, it is a sure sign that your briefing note is in trouble.

Downstream Consequences

In its journey to its audience, a ministerial briefing note must be read, understood and endorsed by at least five managers and executives, plus seven or more administrative assistants, executive assistants, policy advisors, briefings officers and chiefs of staff. If you are tempted to cut corners in preparing your briefing note, consider the impact it is rejected at any level, or if any of those people:

- misunderstand your briefing note;
- send it back to you for revision; or
- revise it themselves without checking with you.

Strategic Perspective

Strategic perspective is vital to a successful briefing note. It has three components:

- triggers (drivers);
- strategic goal; and
- corporate context.

Triggers (Drivers)

What triggered the need for a briefing note, and what triggered the trigger? Review the triggers closely to ensure that you clearly understand what is driving the task that you are about to pursue. It is important to know not only what is required but also why it is required.

Strategic Goal

What strategic goal will the briefing note further? This is not the same as the objective of the briefing note. The strategic goal is a bigger purpose that validates the objective. For example, a strategic goal of the Government of Canada might be: “To reduce greenhouse gas emissions in Canada.” That goal could serve to validate an objective such as this: “To persuade the Minister to sign a letter to Alberta’s Minister of the Environment, seeking a meeting to discuss greenhouse gas reduction targets for the oil sands industry.”

Corporate Context

Understanding the corporate context is the most challenging component of strategic perspective. This is where you try to foresee the big picture that will be on the minds of senior managers as they review your briefing note.

To this end, it can be helpful to do a SWOT scan, using PESTLE as a guide. SWOT stands for:

- **S**trengths (internal capabilities);
- **W**eaknesses (internal vulnerabilities);
- **O**pportunities (external circumstances that can be exploited); and
- **T**hreats (external circumstances that present a danger).

PESTLE stands for:

- **Political** factors (e.g., public opinion, relevance to the Speech From the Throne);
- **Economic** factors (e.g., budget considerations, financial impact on stakeholders);
- **Social** factors (e.g., impact on education, culture, the elderly, employees);
- **Technological** factors (e.g., technological capabilities and constraints);
- **Legal** factors (e.g., statutory, regulatory, treaty or contractual requirements); and
- **Ecological** factors (e.g., impact on wildlife habitat or greenhouse gases).

Sources

Here are some internally produced documents that you might use to gain strategic perspective:

- mission, vision and values statements;
- Report on Plans and Priorities;
- Performance Measurement Framework;
- Departmental Performance Report;
- departmental business plan/human resource plan;
- program alignment architecture;
- internal audit and evaluation reports;
- departmental risk profile; and
- previous briefing notes.

External sources that you might want to review include:

- acts, regulations, treaties and contracts;
- the Speech from the Throne;
- the Budget;
- the Clerk of the Privy Council's website;
- the Treasury Board Secretariat's website (e.g., Management Accountability Framework);
- the Auditor General's reports;
- the governing party's election platform (but you cannot refer to this in a briefing note, even though it can provide you with vital guidance);
- speeches by politicians (here again, though, you cannot cite them in a briefing note in most cases);
- news media reports; and
- public opinion surveys.

You may also need to go directly to people. You might contact any of the following (possibly requiring your manager's permission beforehand):

- internal technical specialists (legal counsel, finance, communications, human resources, or other subject-matter experts);
- counterparts or experts in other departments, other governments or other organizations;
- your director;
- your director general's staff;
- your assistant deputy minister's staff;
- your deputy minister's staff; and
- your minister's staff.

For Further Guidance

See [Annex C — Strategy and Execution](#) for guidance on the strategic thinking that underlies a successful briefing note.

Objective

State the objective in terms of something specific that you want the briefing note to accomplish, rather than in terms of a general process to go through. Here is an example of a process: "To brief the Minister on our cost-sharing program." That raises the question: What do you want the outcome of that briefing to be? Instead, you might say something like this: "To ensure that the Minister is aware of the progress that we have made in our cost-sharing program."

Here is a test of whether you have developed a sound objective: Is it **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**ttainable, **R**elevant and **T**ime-bound (SMART)?

For further details, visit [Objective](#).

Being Strategic

In setting your objective, you have an opportunity to be strategic. You don't want to overreach — but neither do you want to aim for less than what you could reasonably expect to achieve.

Your manager can be helpful at this early stage in assessing the objective. In some cases, you may also want to test the waters with partners or higher levels of management, feeling them out on how receptive they will be to your objective. If you encounter strong resistance, you may need to revise your objective. Alternatively, this may simply tell you that you are going to have to build a very strong case into the briefing note in order to achieve your objective.

Audience

The audience is the star of the show. Without an audience, you cannot achieve your objective. For further details, visit [Audience](#).

Being Strategic

Choosing your audience is another opportunity to be strategic. The first audience that comes to mind may not be the audience that is best-suited to furthering your strategic goal or achieving your objective.

Intermediaries

Bear in mind as well that the ultimate audience — say, your minister — is just one of many audiences that your briefing note will encounter as it makes its way up through your bureaucracy. As stated above, a ministerial briefing note must be read, understood and endorsed by at least 12 managers, executives and other officials.

The *Globe and Mail* Test

Finally, there is the *Globe and Mail* test. Briefing notes, and even drafts of briefing notes, are subject to the *Access to Information Act*. Thus, another audience could be the general public, and your briefing note could end up on the front page of *The Globe and Mail* one day. This should not deter you from offering frank advice. It should, however, be an incentive to ensure that everything in the briefing note will stand up under intense public scrutiny.

Authority

Authority is the flip side of the audience. Your audience has to be matched with the signing authority for the briefing note. For further details, visit [Authority](#).

Being Strategic

Do you or your upper managers have the authority to address the audience that is needed to achieve your objective? If not, you will need to rethink your endeavour to identify an alternative objective and an audience that you do have the authority to address.

Specialist Approvals

Another dimension of authority is approvals by specialists such as legal counsel, communications, finance, human resources and subject-matter experts. If you need OKs from people such as these, it will take time, and you will need to account for this when you write your timelines. You should also give those people an early heads-up on what is coming.

Barriers

Barriers are external factors that stand between you and achieving your objective with your chosen audience. Barriers could include:

- the audience's existing position on the issue (and if you don't know what it is, it can be worth your while to work through back channels to find out);
- competing views conveyed by other stakeholders;
- the audience's lack of understanding of a complex issue;
- time pressures that could prevent the audience from reading or even seeing your briefing note; and
- SWOT and PESTLE factors.

For further details, visit [Barriers](#).

Being Strategic

Do the barriers present too much of a challenge to overcome in a single briefing note? You may have to consider your options and develop a plan for overcoming those barriers. This might mean:

- developing a series of briefing notes, each designed to overcome one or more of the barriers; or
- seeking an opportunity to deliver an oral briefing on a complex issue.

Timelines

Finally, we come to timelines, which have three components:

- deadline — i.e., when the briefing note must be received by its ultimate audience in order for it to achieve its objective;
- schedule — e.g., when your research and consultations will be done, when your drafting and revising will be done, when the briefing note will be translated (if needed), when approvals will be received from specialists, and when approvals will be received from the formal line of authority; and
- personal time budget — i.e., the number of hours of your own time that the project will require.

For further details, visit [Timelines](#).

Being Strategic

Does your deadline permit you enough time to gather all the information that you want or need for the briefing note? If not, you must make a choice:

- You could plow ahead and hope for the best without the missing information.
- You could change other elements of your frame of reference as needed to match the available information.
- You could seek an extension on the deadline. If you need an extension, do not delay. Ask for it right away. If you wait until the last minute, you make yourself look incompetent. You also make it more difficult for others to adjust their plans accordingly.

Note the main headings used here.
This annex has been structured as a
briefing note within a briefing note.



Annex C

Strategy and Execution

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Issue

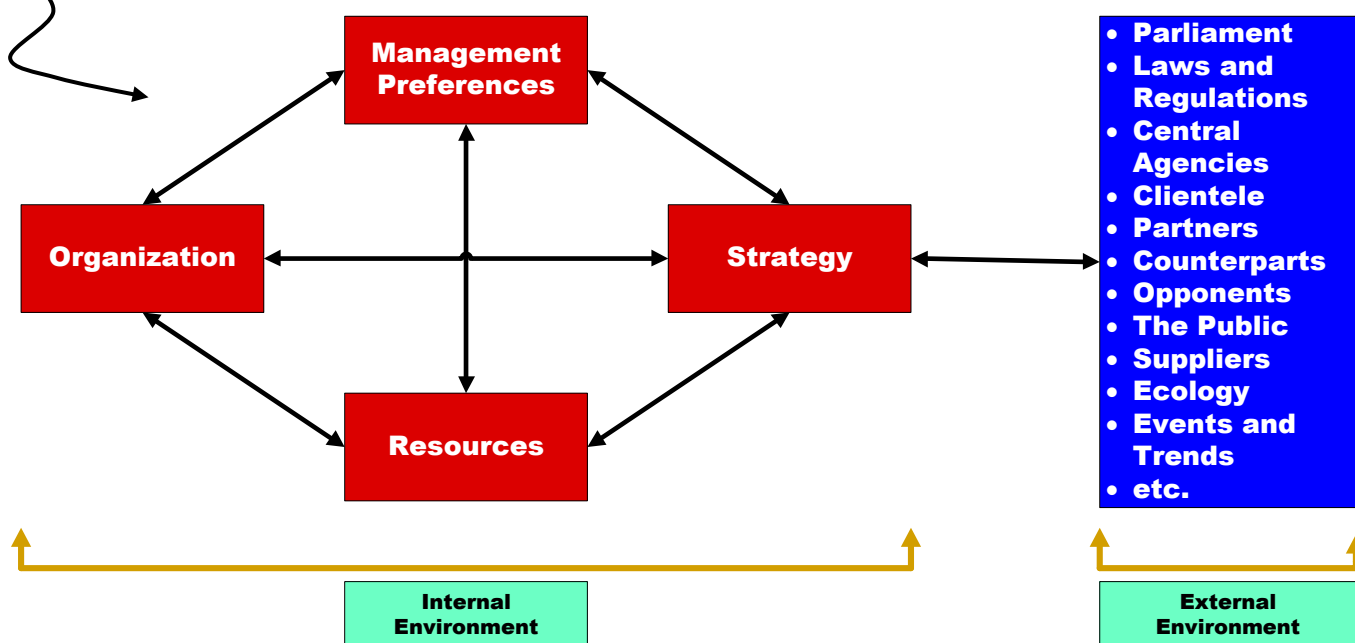
Briefing notes often have implications for strategy and its execution at one level or another. In drafting a briefing note, you need to foresee those implications and how they relate to each other. A failure to do so could lead management to reject your note, send it back for revision, or edit it without consulting you.

Background

Note the use of a graphic here. A picture can be worth a thousand words.

The Diamond-E Framework

Many tools exist for analyzing strategy and its execution. This annex draws on one such tool, the Diamond-E Framework.¹ The diagram below depicts the framework, adapted for purposes of Government of Canada establishments.



¹ Based upon *Strategic Analysis and Action* (6th Edition), by Mary M. Crossan, Joseph N. Fry, J. Peter Killing, Michael J. Rouse. Toronto: Prentice Hall/Pearson, 2005.

The framework comprises:

- the external environment — with countless possible elements; and
- the internal environment of your establishment — whose elements are strategy, management preferences, organization and resources.

External Environment

“External environment” means all that is external to your establishment. This is usually defined by the audience of the briefing note you are writing. For example, your establishment is the department (or the government) in the case of a briefing note for your minister. Your establishment is the division in the context of a briefing note for your divisional director.

“All that is external to your establishment” could include:

- Parliament;
- central agencies (Privy Council Office, Treasury Board Secretariat, Finance Canada);
- federal and provincial laws and regulations, treaties, municipal bylaws, and contracts;
- stakeholders — for example, current or potential:
 - users or purchasers of your establishment’s services, products or programs;
 - partners, counterparts, competitors or other entities that have an interest in enhancing, detracting from, contributing to or otherwise influencing the way your programs, services or products are delivered — such as:
 - other units within your organization;
 - other departments within the government;
 - other governments;
 - the news media;
 - industry;
 - academia;
 - non-government organizations;
 - other opinion leaders; or
 - the general public;
- suppliers, and the availability, cost and quality of assets that could be of value to your establishment;

- the ecology (wildlife, plants, the atmosphere and water bodies); and
- local, regional, national and international events and trends that could affect the internal environment, the ability of your establishment to deliver on its mandate, or possibly even the need for your establishment to do so — for example:
 - changes in demographics;
 - technological innovations;
 - climate change;
 - impending or recently completed elections; or
 - outbreak of a war or other conflict that involves key stakeholders.

Internal Environment

The other elements of the framework are internal to your establishment:

- “Management preferences” are decisions on your establishment’s programs, products and services, how they are to be delivered, how resources will be deployed, and how your establishment should operate — as expressed in:
 - your establishment’s governing authorities, such as:
 - charter;
 - articles of incorporation;
 - internal bylaws; or
 - statements of mission, mandate, vision and values;
 - directives such as policies, standing orders, procedures or resource allocations;
 - decisions reached in meetings and recorded in minutes; and
 - direct orders from a manager to one or more subordinates.
- “Resources” comprise the assets available to your establishment — human, financial, material, intellectual property, knowledge and goodwill.
- “Organization” comprises:
 - the formal organization structure;
 - the job descriptions of the positions in the establishment;
 - the way assets have been deployed;
 - the systems and processes that have been put in place; and
 - the corporate culture(s) that prevail.

- “Strategy” is the link that influences and is influenced by all the other elements in the framework. It sets out how your establishment is aligned to:
 - fulfill its value proposition, and pursue its goals and objectives;
 - foster and exploit opportunities in the external environment and strengths in the internal environment; and
 - eliminate, mitigate, prepare for, respond to, adapt to and/or recover from threats in the external environment and weaknesses in the internal environment.

Two Useful Acronyms: SWOT and PESTLE

The acronym “SWOT” can help guide strategic analysis. It stands for “strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats”. “Strengths and weaknesses” apply to the internal environment, while “opportunities and threats” pertain to the external environment.

The acronym “PESTLE” can help you to identify factors that influence the internal and external environments. PESTLE stands for “political, social, economic, technological, legal and ecological” influences.

Considerations

Value Proposition

The first step in understanding strategic issues is to be clear on what value your establishment offers the external environment. Is that value clear to all? Is it still relevant? Is it unique? Do others offer products, services or programs that detract from, compete with or complement yours?

SWOT Scans, Guided by PESTLE

SWOT scans are the next step in understanding strategic issues:

- An external SWOT scan will identify opportunities and threats that exist anywhere outside of your establishment, using PESTLE as a guide.
- An internal SWOT scan will identify strengths and weaknesses within your establishment (management preferences, resources, organization, strategy), again using PESTLE as a guide.

Strategic Response

As noted above, strategy links:

- the internal environment with the external environment; and
- the elements of the internal environment with each other.

Strategy is an instrument for changing elements of those environments in response to the findings of the SWOT scans and your assessment of the establishment's value proposition. Here are questions to address in dealing with your findings strategically.

Goals and Objectives

- What are your establishment's short-, medium- and long-term goals and objectives?
- Are the goals mutually compatible?
- Are all the objectives validated by a higher goal?
- Are the objectives mutually compatible?
- Are the objectives SMART — i.e., specific, measureable, attainable, relevant and time-bound?
- Do your findings on SWOT, SMART and mutual compatibility tell you that anything must be done with the goals and objectives?
 - Do you need to set priorities?
 - Do you need to change the goals or the objectives?
 - Do you need to change the way goals and objectives are pursued?

Options

- Given the goals and objectives that have been set:
 - What do you want to influence, what can you influence or what must you influence in the external environment?
 - What do you want to change, what can you change or what must you change in the internal environment in order to:
 - bring about change in the external environment; and
 - achieve other desired ends with respect to the internal environment?
 - How urgent are those wants and needs?
- What options could be pursued to bring about change internally and externally?
- Do you have the management preferences, resources, organization and strategy needed to pursue each option?

Risk Management

- What risks do each option present?
 - What positive outcomes could be achieved?
 - What negative outcomes could result?
 - What is the likelihood of each outcome?
 - How great would be the impact if each outcome occurred?
- What steps can be taken to enhance positive outcomes and increase their likelihood?
- What steps can be taken to eliminate, mitigate, prepare for, respond to, recover from and/or adapt to negative outcomes?

Stakeholder Engagement

- Have stakeholders been consulted, or merely informed?
- Do they support or oppose any of the options?
- Can they be engaged to advise on or contribute to any of the options?

Execution: W5 Plus How

To succeed, a strategy must have a sound execution plan. Here are questions to address:

- What must be done?
- Who must do it? Do those affected (internally and externally) have the management preferences, resources, organization and strategy required to do what you need them to do?
- When must it be done?
- Where must it be done?
- Why must it be done?
- How must it be done?
- How much of it must be done?
- How will this be communicated to those who will be responsible for execution at one level or another within your establishment?
- How will this be communicated to those affected or who are expected to act in the external environment?
- How will you monitor and evaluate progress — i.e., how will you know whether you have succeeded? What signs can you monitor that will warn that corrective action or a change of course may be needed?

Conclusion

This annex has outlined:

- elements of the internal environment and the external environment;
- factors to bear in mind in bringing about change in those environments; and
- how those elements and factors relate to each other.

For your briefing note to succeed, it is important to think through:

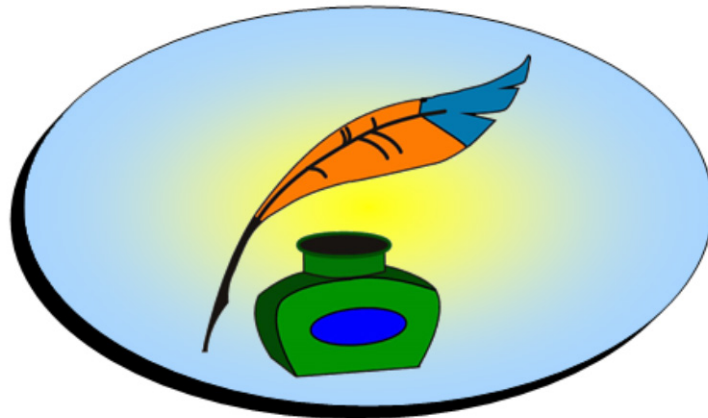
- which of those elements and factors will be the key focus of the briefing note;
- what impact the key focus will have on the other elements and factors; and
- what impact those other elements and factors will have on the key focus.

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*If you don't know where
you're going, you'll probably
end up somewhere else.*

– Yogi Berra