

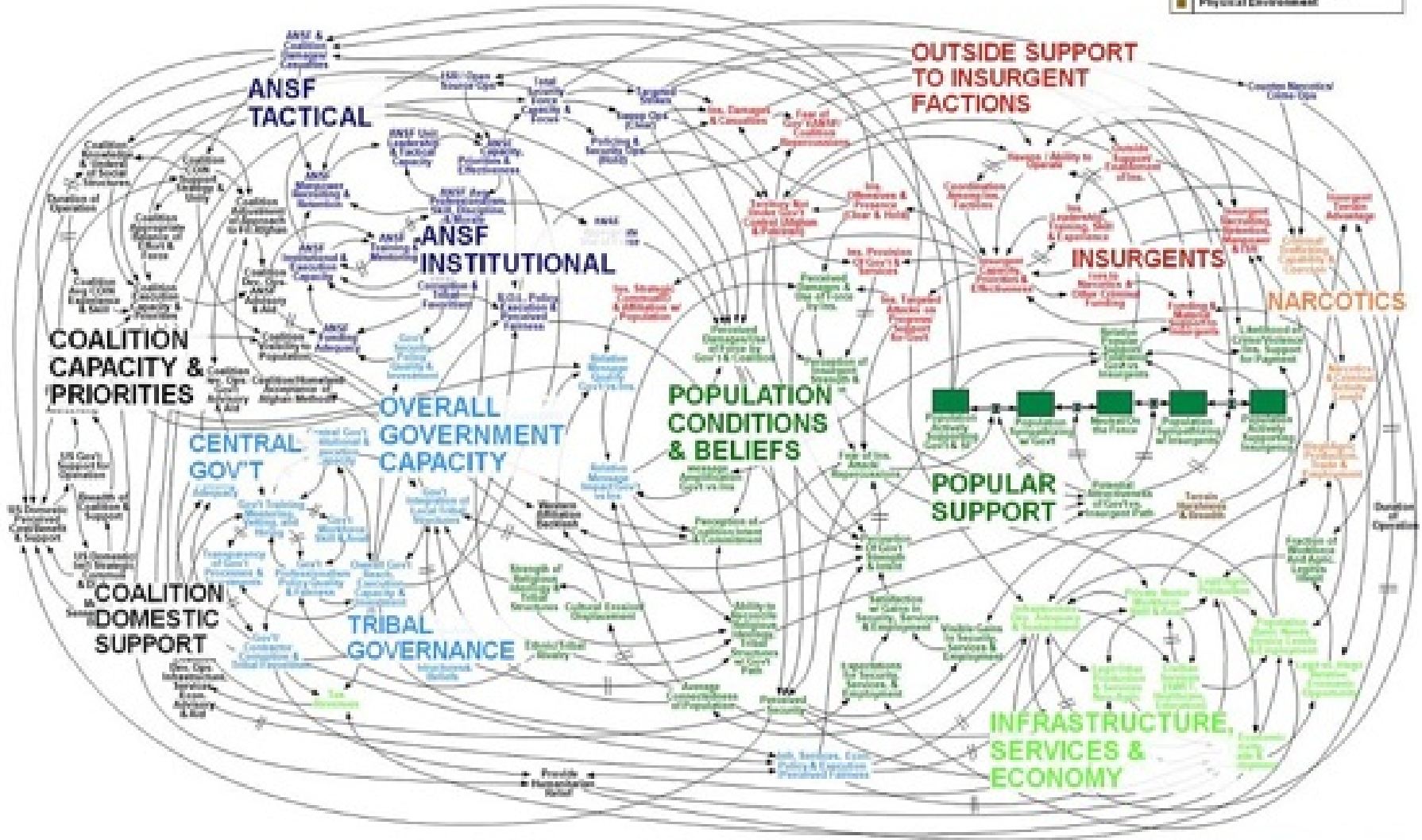
# The Policy Memo: A How-To Guide

# How Not to Make Decisions

# Afghanistan Stability / COIN Dynamics

 = Significant Delay

- Population/Popular Support
- Infrastructure, Economy, & Services
- Government
- Afghanistan Security Forces
- Insurgents
- Crime and Narcotics
- Coalition Forces & Actions
- Physical Environment



**WORKING DRAFT - V3**

# Power Point is

## **Good For --**

- Conveying simple information
- Spiced up with graphics

## **Bad For --**

- Conveying complex subtle information
- **MAKING DECISIONS!**

The right tool for decision making is ... the policy memo

Why?

# A Good Memo

Presents information arrayed for effective decision making

- Helpful Overall Organization
  - The Problem, Key Facts, Options, Options Analyzed, Recommendation
- “Layered” Presentation of information
  - The “onion”: Layer 1, Layer 2 & Layer 3
- A full range of logical options
- Honest Presentation of Pros and Cons for each
- A clear recommendation

# After you read a good memo --

- You understand what the problem is
- You see what the possible decision options are
- You understand the benefits, costs, and dangers of the options – what could work, and *what could go wrong*
  - *Policy-wise*
  - *Politically*
- You hear a clear & honest recommendation and you understand the logic behind it

# The Point

- Is NOT to persuade the Boss to your favorite position
- IS to help the Boss make an informed choice of the option that best serves HER interest



# Organization

- Distinct sections, clearly marked
- Upfront recommendation
- Forthright statement of the problem
- All the key facts, but no more
- Multiple Options
- Analyzed! Political cost/benefit analysis
- Recommendation

# Style

- Short, clear sentences with active verbs
  - Don't waste words
  - KISS: Keep It Short, Stupid!
- Brief tight paragraphs
  - No big blocks of impenetrable prose
- Key points highlighted, e.g, with **bold**, *italics*, underlining
  - ***But not too much!!!***

# The Elevator Test

The memo should be *so clearly organized* and its points *so well-packaged* that when you give it the Boss at ground level she understands the recommendation by the time she reaches the power floor.

# The Onion

Facts should be presented in clear layers like an onion: the “trees” in layer 1, the “shrubs” in layer 2, the “weeds” in layer 3.

- Read 1 gives the highlights
  - . The Principal’s time is precious, the onion economizes on it
- Read 2 supplies the essential logic
  - . If she decides to invest more time she needs the logic
- Read 3 buttresses with the needed facts
  - . The onion makes key facts easy to find if she wants them
    - . Supporting facts there but only if desired by the Principal

# 10 Common Mistakes

# 1. Cheerleading

## One-sided advocacy of the recommended option

- Glossing over the downsides, costs, or risks of the favored option
- Ignoring the advantages or strengths of other options

*Remember: Political analysis is not the same thing as political advocacy.*



## 2. Academic Writing

### **Turgid, stuffy, boring prose**

- Avoid footnotes, block quotes, or invocation of authority
- Use the active voice
- Avoid slang but make it snappy

*Remember: Effective communication demands effective writing*



# 3. Wasting Space

## Useless sentences that add nothing

- Repeating basic material from the case itself
- Adding platitudes or vague generalities

*Remember: Every sentence counts so be ruthless with cuts*





# 4. Poor Lay Out

## **Confused, jumbled, or overly intricate organization**

- Hidden recommendations
- No sign-posting
- No highlighting for key points

*Remember: The Principal should be able to read the memo in one fast gulp and grasp the essentials.*



# 5. Deadly Blocks of Prose

## Dense paragraphs requiring intense concentration

- Use short snappy paragraphs
- Cut words with telegraphic bullet points
- Provide helpful visual cues

*Remember: Your job is to make reading easier, not harder*



# 6. Dancing Baloney

## Over-use of highlighting

- Weird fonts
- Too much underlined, italicized, or bolded
- Buzzing distracting irritating page

*Remember: Don't overdo it, less can be more*



# 7. Errors of Fact

## Failing to read the prompt carefully

- Omits key facts
- Misrepresents key facts
- Messes up procedures or institutional details

*Remember: Get the details right.*

**BAD  
FACTS**

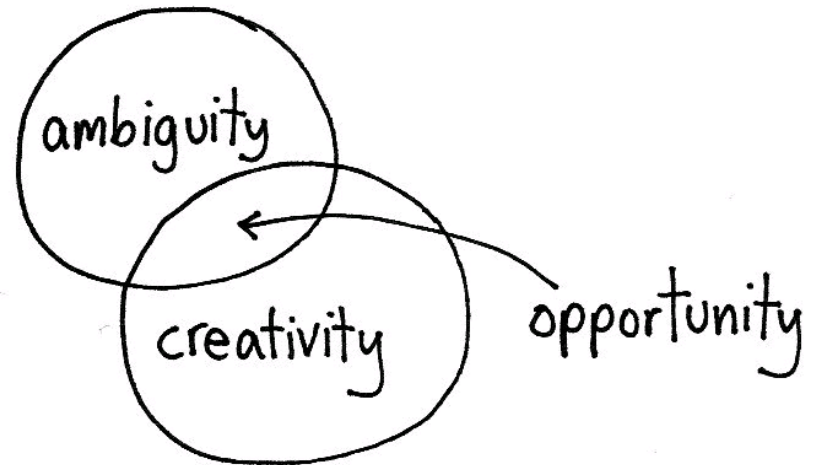
**BAD  
FACTS**

# 8. Loop Hole Chasing

## Looking for a magic bullet

- Exploiting a peculiarity in the assignment to avoid facing tradeoffs or confronting hard issues
- This is cheating, more or less.

*Remember: If there were a simple magic bullet, we wouldn't use the situation as a case.*



# 9. Lack of Specificity

## **Generalities are useless**

- Give concrete actionable recommendations
- Indicate: Who, What, When, Where, and How
- Name names

*Remember: The Principal should leaving knowing exactly what to do next.*



# 10. Wishful Thinking

**Political conflict is real, you must deal with it**

- Fails to find and address genuine interests
- Confuses conflict of interests with conflict of personalities
- Isn't realistic about BATNA (own and others)

*Remember: Politics ain't  
beanbag*



# Guide to Grading



<p><b>A</b></p> <p><b>A-</b></p>	<p>Solid policy analysis and truly acute political analysis. Firm grasp of political interests and motivations, insightful about institutions. Clear effective organization and presentation. Lean, hard-hitting prose. Honest about both up-sides and down-sides – no cheer-leading. Specific about what the principal should do and not do. Creative touches, clever out-of-the-box thinking. Would genuinely be helpful to the principal.</p> <p>A: Exemplary in every regard, a simply outstanding job. A-: Almost as good.</p>
<p><b>B+</b></p> <p><b>B</b></p> <p><b>B-</b></p>	<p>Solid policy analysis and generally credible political analysis. May show some weaknesses or omissions. Possibly limited insight into political interests or motivations, some flat-footedness about institutions. Slightly muddled organization. Some flabbiness in writing. Vagueness or lack of specificity in some recommendations or action plan. Muffled analysis of down-sides, some disingenuousness, weak fall-back options. Makes obvious points but misses subtleties. Somewhat helpful to principal but missed opportunities.</p> <p>B+: Very good memo with no critical weaknesses but not truly exceptional across the board. B: Gets most things right but not outstanding in any particular regard, may make some significant miss-steps or omissions. Average. B-: More glaring problems or omissions. Very incomplete or fragmentary political analysis.</p>
<p><b>C+</b></p> <p><b>C</b></p> <p><b>C-</b></p> <p><b>D</b></p>	<p>Misses the point of the exercise. Missing or deeply fundamentally flawed political analysis. Little or no insight into political interests or motivations, confusion about or serious misunderstanding of institutions. Flabby, diffuse writing. Confused or weak organization, puts burden on reader. Vague generalities rather than specific advice. Cheer-leading, little attention to risks or down-sides. Memo useless or a waste of time for principal, recommendation likely to fail or prove politically disastrous.</p>

# Resources on Memo Writing

- The Bob Behn memo/ the JFK School approach
- [http://shorensteincenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Behn-Craft-of-Memo-Writing-2013-3rev8\\_26\\_13.pdf](http://shorensteincenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Behn-Craft-of-Memo-Writing-2013-3rev8_26_13.pdf)
- Useful from the Harris School with links
- <http://harris.uchicago.edu/gateways/current-student/harris-school-writing-program/policy-memo-guides>



1. 'Cheer-leading.' One-sided advocacy of the recommended option. This may involve glossing over the down-sides, costs, or risks of the favored option. Or, it may arise from ignoring the advantages or strengths of the other options. Remember: political analysis is not the same thing as political advocacy.
2. Academic writing. Avoid unnecessary apparatus like footnotes, quotes, or invocation of authority. Stilted, stuffy, or pedantic writing hurts.
3. Wasting space, especially repeating basic material from the case itself. Every sentence must count.
4. Flunking the "elevator test." Confused or overly intricate organization, hidden recommendations, no sign-posting or highlighting key points. The Principal should be able to read the memo on an elevator or in a taxi in one fast gulp, and the logic should be perfectly clear.
5. Dancing baloney. The opposite problem: too many type faces, bullets, italics to be useful, so the memo is cluttered, irritating and confusing.
6. Errors of fact. Probably evidence of haste but still its bad.
7. Loophole chasing. Trying to exploit some little peculiarity in the assignment in order to avoid facing tradeoffs or confronting the hard issues. This is cheating, more or less. If there were a simple magic bullet, we wouldn't use the situation as a case.
8. Lack of specificity. Especially about political actions. The memo should give concrete actionable recommendations, name names, tell the Principal what he or she should do and how to do it.
9. Wishful thinking about political conflict. In high stakes, high conflict situations, people are not going to join hands and sing kumbaya. Deal with it.