4 Leadership

Leaders who engage with behavioural science evidence and promote its use can be influential in embedding a behavioural approach. **The principles in this section call for senior leaders to advocate for behavioural science, and for managers to actively build this support in their leaders.**

Why this matters

Looking across our free-text survey responses, interviews, and comments made at the OECD's Expert Meetings on Behavioural Insights, the issue that the community raises most commonly is the buy-in of senior leaders. Leadership support is seen as critical to secure the funding and structures needed to start and maintain the use of behavioural science in policy making. Similarly, buy-in from senior executives was commonly rated by survey respondents as one of the most important factors helping an in-house behavioural science team be successful over time. Relatedly, 41% of survey respondents reported struggles with getting approval to run their interventions (n=103), further emphasising the importance of having influential leaders who back the use and production of behavioural science evidence.

Survey respondents from teams of different ages generally agree that impact, buy-in, funding, and talent are the most important drivers of success in doing behavioural public policy. The oldest teams put a particular focus on impactful, scalable projects, and on recruiting and retaining talent, while the youngest teams also see value in efficiently using the comparative advantages of a behavioural science approach.

Good practice principles

1. Senior leaders request and advocate for behavioural science evidence.

Support from senior leaders and elected officials helps ensure the effective and wide-scale adoption of behavioural science, both within government organisations and across the policy system more broadly (Curtis, Fulton and Brown, 2018[1]). The OECD has noted that "strategic leadership is critical to drive the organisational change necessary for improved evidence-informed policy making" (OECD, 2020[2]). In some instances, this change process will be launched by a senior leader themselves, as was the case for most respondents to the OECD's 2016 survey (OECD, 2017[3]). But even if it begins with behavioural science enthusiasts within the organisation building momentum at the working level, at some point senior leaders' support will probably be necessary for the approach to be adopted everywhere it is relevant.

Senior leaders can create opportunities for behavioural science evidence, for example by asking policy makers how they adopted their perspective, or by requesting that behavioural science experts be involved in conversations about policy options. Senior leaders can vocalise their support for behavioural public policy in public speeches, internal communications, and forewords to reports, as well as by officially approving a strategy (see Principle 3 on defining a strategy). Coherent and consistent messaging would help drive adoption. Making these commitments publicly could help motivate follow-through at both political and administrative levels. Messaging from senior leaders also has an impact on how resources are allocated throughout organizations, and advocating for behavioural science can take the form of requesting dedicated funding for behavioural science in their organizations (See Principle 7 on resourcing).

Senior leaders have a norm-setting role. By explicitly supporting and calling for behavioural science evidence, senior leaders can tell policy makers that the approach is important to the organisation and an expected part of everyday practice: that it is 'how things are done around here'. The actions of individual leaders are influential in shaping cultural norms about the use of behavioural science and the incentives for managers to prioritise behavioural analysis, design, and testing (Kuipers et al., 2013[4]; Jakobsen et al., 2019[5]). Leaders' influence is not limited to what behaviours they role model and encourage; staff also react to what leaders attend to, how they allocate resources, and who they reward (Buick, 2023[6]; Mols, Bell and Head, 2020[7]).

Box 4.1. Leadership messages to set effective norms

Senior leaders should be careful to shape policy makers' expectations of behavioural science to ensure it is used effectively and appropriately. Senior leaders could consider the relevance of the following messages in their context.

- **Emphasise the benefits**. Behavioural science offers a lens that helps policy makers achieve their intended outcomes more efficiently and effectively. Taking an empirical, people-centred approach helps to de-risk policy making by understanding the drivers of a policy problem, and building evidence that a proposed solution works before implementing it at scale. A behavioural perspective can complement – and constructively challenge – the legal and economic perspectives that often dominate policy making. Examples relevant to the context can powerfully demonstrate these benefits.

- **Encourage humility and flexibility**. Not everything requires a behavioural perspective. And even when it is relevant, behavioural science can rarely solve a problem on its own: complex problems often require multifaceted responses, involving multiple disciplines and perspectives (Soman, Feng and Yu, 2023[8]). Behavioural science, like any approach to knowledge, has "epistemic bounds and explanatory limits"; leaders should avoid putting behavioural scientists in a situation where they may feel pressured to "transcend their knowledge domain or overstate the robustness of their knowledge" (Feitsma and Whitehead, 2021[9]).

- **Create room for failure**. Not everything will work as expected. Apparent failures are an expected and welcome part of innovation. A culture of experimentation and exploration enables the best solution to be found, even if it challenges or discredits existing beliefs or assumptions. Building evidence that a potential solution does not work is incredibly valuable, especially if the evidence generation process itself has co-benefits, such as upskilling policy makers in the use of data and research.

- **Note what is involved**. Behavioural science has a role throughout the policy cycle. Policy makers should identify when a policy issue involves human behaviour, look for or build evidence of what might work, assess the rigour and applicability of the evidence in this context, adapt the evidence to inform the design of potential policy interventions, test those behaviourally informed interventions through pilots or experiments, and then implement the selected policy at scale.

- **Recognise the time and effort required**. While existing behavioural science evidence often has something to say, it is often difficult to be confident that it applies in this new context. It takes work and time to understand a problem from a behavioural perspective, explore solutions, and test them. This means behavioural science can more effectively inform policy making if it is considered early in the policy design process.

Senior leaders also have a role as knowledge brokers and advocates when they are involved in policy decision-making forums (Jakobsen et al., 2019[5]). Policy conversations involve many actors and entail multiple overlapping or competing values, such as the pursuit of compromise between stakeholders with

different views. As with other forms of evidence, to produce good policy outcomes senior leaders should be comfortable engaging in these ambiguous and contentious political processes while advocating for behavioural science evidence with credibility and integrity. This balanced, open, and informed engagement with behavioural science evidence should arise from the broader leadership capabilities the OECD has observed among effective senior leaders (Gerson, 2020[10]):

- Values-based leadership: negotiating multiple and often competing values
- Open inclusion: searching for diverse perspectives and ensuring psychological safety
- Organisational stewardship: equipping their workforce with the right skills, tools, and working environments
- Networked collaboration: collaborating through internal and external networks.

It may be effective to appoint a behavioural science expert into a senior leadership position, to ensure a behavioural perspective is included in strategic-level conversations about government agendas and policy responses (Shaxson, 2019[11]). This senior advocate could also be responsible for mainstreaming behavioural science across the policy system (see Principle 6 on accountability).

Finally, senior leaders can drive the organisational activities – covered through the rest of this report – that are needed to change the organisation's policy making practices. Leaders' support and decisions are critical to implementing all of this report's good practice principles.

Support and promotion can also come from other leaders, in addition to those in formal positions of influence in the public sector hierarchy. For example:

- **Informal champions** can help mobilise institutional resources. Well-connected, high-level officials who are willing and able to generate awareness and enthusiasm for behavioural science can be very influential (Barrows et al., 2018[12]). These champions can, for example, bring a grassroots movement advocating for behavioural science to the attention of senior leaders or elected officials.
- **Elected officials** can also be influential in driving the uptake of new approaches to policy making. Like senior leaders, elected officials have opportunities to express expectations that policy makers adopt a people-centred, evidence-informed approach, and to advocate for this position in policy debates.

An over-reliance on individual leaders can, however, be a vulnerability. The departure of a vocal advocate (such as through a change in government) can deflate a movement (School of International Futures, 2021[13]). It is important for vocal leadership to be supported by other good practices to ensure an evidence-informed, people-centred mindset endures in policy makers' everyday practices regardless of leaders' priorities.

> **Box 4.2. Examples of explicit leadership encouragement**
>
> In the **United States**, a 2021 Presidential Memorandum for the heads of executive departments and agencies has driven the demand for evidence and experimentation within the policy making community, helping to promote an empirical culture and mindset. The memorandum calls for "evidence-based and iterative development and the equitable delivery of policies, programs, and agency operations" informed by research and analysis methods from "the social and behavioural sciences and data science" (Office of the President of the United States, 2021[14]). The President's 2021 Executive Order on Transforming Federal Customer Experience and Service Delivery to Rebuild Trust in Government adopted a behavioural lens to identify and tackle unjustified burdens (or "time taxes") in people's interactions with government services (Office of the President of the United States, 2021[15]). In addition to signalling a focus on this at the highest level, the order established a system to ensure implementation in practice, including support from experts in a central agency, a process to prioritise policy topics and allocate leadership responsibilities, and regular progress reporting.
>
> In the **Netherlands**, senior leaders, and occasionally ministers, explicitly ask for behavioural science to be applied to particular policy topics, although the extent of encouragement and active engagement differs between senior leaders.
>
> In **Türkiye**, a pilot behavioural science project was opened and closed at formal events that included speeches from the relevant minister, resulting in substantial media coverage. The minister extended an open invitation for collaboration that created space for interested government officials to engage with behavioural science. The minister personally participated in an introductory video produced for a website integral to the pilot project. Finally, the minister disseminated copies of a book authored by the internal behavioural science team to members of the cabinet.
>
> In **Australia**, an assistant minister has spoken in the federal parliament about the importance of basing policy on rigorous evidence and evaluations. The senior leaders of the independent Australian Securities and Investments Commission (ASIC) have referenced the application of behavioural science in regulation in public speeches.

2. Managers build and maintain senior leaders' support for behavioural science.

Managers can engage in persistent and sustained advocacy, repeatedly emphasising to senior leaders and elected officials the benefits of behavioural science evidence in crafting more efficient and effective policies. Over time, the individuals occupying leadership roles will change, bringing new perspectives and varying attitudes. Not all senior leaders will be equally open to a behavioural perspective. Some may be resistant to the approach or have concerns about its usefulness or relevance, impeding the adoption of behavioural public policy in their areas of policy responsibility.

Managers have a role in educating senior leaders about what behavioural science is and how it can contribute to policy making (United Nations, 2021[16]). This helps senior leaders have realistic expectations about the likely benefits of producing and applying behavioural science evidence and helps them appreciate the rigour of the evidence used to recommend one policy option over another. In addition to senior leaders in central and line agencies, it can also be beneficial to engage with advisors working directly for elected officials.

> **Box 4.3. Messages when engaging senior leaders**
>
> When speaking to senior leaders about behavioural science, managers could consider the following messages and approaches.
>
> - Emphasise how behavioural science evidence can help senior leaders achieve their objectives cost-effectively, by de-risking policy making and informing solutions. Focus on real policy outcomes, rather than immediate outputs.
> - Discuss behavioural science activities as an integral part of good policy work, rather than something additional to business-as-usual.
> - Focus on issues important to senior leaders using language that resonates with their agenda (such as delivering real impact, costs and efficiencies, or innovation). Avoid terms and jargon that might distract or confuse. For example, small-scale testing of policy options can produce dramatic savings in public resources by ruling out ineffective solutions and identifying implementation issues before scaling up.
> - Highlight previous success cases from within the country or organisation, or from similar contexts around the world (OECD, 2017[3]; Afif et al., 2018[17]). Use tangible, accessible examples.
> - Discuss how the use of behavioural science can be elevate the standing of a country or organisation among their peer institutions and the public by demonstrating a people-centred and innovative approach to policy making.
> - Link the use of behavioural science to existing initiatives, or to commitments the government has already made, including internationally (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2022[18]).
> - Expand senior leaders' understanding of behavioural science beyond nudges. Emphasise how a behavioural approach can help unpack problems, and augment and complement traditional policy tools.
> - Note that it takes time to build reliable evidence. Share interim findings and advice where possible (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2022[18]). Highlight how useful it is to find evidence that something does not work.
> - Explain that a systemic approach to mainstreaming behavioural public policy (through this report's good practice principles) is likely to have a bigger and more enduring effect than implementing one or two principles in isolation (such as an expert team that is unsupported by strategies and processes).

In the early stages of adopting behavioural science, managers could consider piloting a behavioural science team or cluster of projects. A pilot could help demonstrate the value of the approach with tangible examples in the organisation's unique operating context. It is worth noting, however, that the most effective and valuable behavioural science evidence can take a long time to develop (OECD, 2019[19]). A pilot of the approach could focus on cases that are likely to produce demonstrable effects quickly ('low hanging fruit'), but managers would need to recognise that a more embedded approach to behavioural public policy would have a broader but less tangible value, including by contributing valuable evidence and perspectives early in the policy prioritisation and definition process.

In the early stages of adopting behavioural science, it may also be effective to build a grassroots movement of behavioural science enthusiasts throughout the organisation who are passionate about the approach. Enthusiasts could be given a forum, such as an informal network, to explore potential use cases, begin applying simple behavioural science principles, and build the case for more systematic adoption (see

Principle 14 on building networks). With time this bottom-up approach can make it easier for senior leaders to understand and support a changed way of working.

Once behavioural science is more established, managers could consider encouraging a portfolio of behavioural science projects that includes topics of interest to leaders. Generating and translating timely and useful evidence on the government's priority policy topics can help maintain senior leaders' support and maximise the impact of behavioural science evidence (United Nations, 2021[16]). While behavioural science experts can try to suggest topics themselves, in a more mature organisation the managers and executives of policy areas will have the capability and motivation to identify and propose priority topics for the application of behavioural science methods and insights.

Undertaking a mix of behavioural science activities – from giving immediate policy advice to tackling long-term, complex challenges – could help engage senior leaders in different ways. Shorter engagements responding to emerging issues can help to sustain momentum, build champions, and demonstrate the added value of behavioural public policy; but slower, strategic work can deliver the biggest impacts on the government's policy outcomes ((World Health Organisation, 2024[20]); (Shapsa Heiman and Israel, 2022[21]; Barrows et al., 2018[12]; Soman, Feng and Yu, 2023[8]). To produce useful evidence in these different ways, behavioural science experts need to be flexible and versatile in their methods.

Box 4.4. Examples of building leadership support

In **Canada**, federal ministers receive mandate letters from the prime minister that outline their priorities. In-house behavioural scientists, in conjunction with colleagues across their federal departments and agencies, scope behavioural science projects that can support and advance those priorities, which contribute to building senior leadership support.

In the state of Victoria in **Australia**, government officials took the opportunity of a change of government in 2014 to propose a new focus on behavioural public policy, among other ideas for public sector reform (Jones, Head and Ferguson, 2021[22]).

When introducing the idea of behavioural public policy in **Israel**, behavioural scientists "identified an opportunity for change that was both a central governmental challenge with clear and significant behavioural elements". The team found that working on "topics of high priority to officials was beneficial in centralising the use of the behavioural insights tools and making them visible" (Shapsa Heiman and Israel, 2022[21]).

In **Singapore**'s Ministry of Manpower's first behavioural science team focused on quick wins to produce tangible results quickly. They identified interventions found to be successful in other countries, contextualised them for their operating environment, and moved quickly to implementation and evaluation (Soon, 2017[23]).

Assessing Leadership principles

Governments may be interested in how they, or an external reviewer, could assess their implementation of these principles. The table below outlines questions to ask to understand the extent to which a government or public organisation is making best use of its leadership to help mainstream behavioural public policy.

### Table 4.1. Questions to assess Leadership principles

How do senior leaders talk about behavioural science publicly and internally?
Do senior leaders mention the importance of people-centred, evidence-informed policy making in public speeches, publications, and external communications?
Do senior leaders mention the importance of people-centred, evidence-informed policy making in internal communications to staff?
Do senior leaders promote specific behavioural science projects, such as attending launch events or distributing final reports?
Do senior leaders appropriately advocate for behavioural science evidence in policy conversations and forums?
Are senior leaders using their influence and authority to institute the systemic changes necessary to embed behavioural science methods and insights into business-as-usual policy making practice?
Are senior leaders consulting with or including behavioural science experts during the policy making process?
How do managers talk to their leaders about behavioural science?
What strategies are in place to build and maintain the support of senior leaders?
Are managers raising the use of behavioural science with senior leaders, such as through standalone briefings or in the context of particular policy challenges?
How aligned are the behavioural science activities underway with senior leaders' mandates or government priorities?

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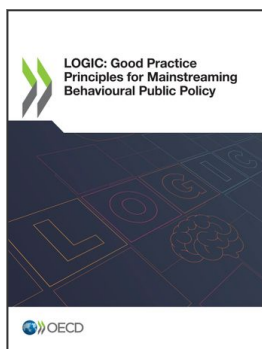
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