

Navigate complexity

Ponder helps people to understand and think strategically about complex things, to achieve outcomes more efficiently and effectively

Contemporary thinking for contemporary challenges

Ponder.

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Achieving outcomes for
21st century challenges requires
strategic, critical, creative and analytical
thinking skills

Avoid wasted time, money, and effort,
unmet goals and unintended consequences

Navigate complexity.
Contemporary thinking for
contemporary challenges.

Many of the challenges we face are complex. Yet with limited time and resources, we need to develop strategies and policies that work. To do this we need a range of skills – the ability to think strategically, analytically, critically and creatively. Until now there hasn't been much specific guidance on how to do this in practice, and that's the gap we're aiming to fill

There is a pattern to the questions we should ask ourselves when problem-solving is complex and difficult to navigate. We've captured that pattern into an essential collection of problem-solving skills and techniques – **20 questions for policy and strategy design (and practical techniques to help answer them)**. The 20 Questions don't give you the answers or do the thinking for you, but they remind you of what you need to think about. They prompt your thinking, and they prompt the discussions that need to be had. The practical techniques help answer the questions and inform the conversations. Together the questions and techniques form a systematic approach for deepening our understanding of complex issues and for thinking strategically about them

We share the questions and techniques in our seminar series and workshops. We can also help you to apply the techniques to the specific issues you are grappling with, through our consulting and facilitation services, and commissioned reports.

SEMINARS & WORKSHOPS

Our seminars and workshops share practical techniques for navigating the complexity of contemporary policy and strategy design challenges

They are delivered in two main arrangements:

- 1. Series 1: 20 Questions for Policy & Strategy design (and practical techniques to help answer them) –**
Twenty essential questions we should ask when developing a strategy or policy. Embedding strategic, critical, creative and analytical techniques drawing on both proven, and emerging and influential ways of thinking. Appropriate for everybody who is involved in policy design, from the most junior analyst to the most senior decision-maker. See the following page for an overview of the 20 Questions. This series can be delivered in a range of ways:
 - ↳ Two-day workshop
 - ↳ 5 seminars over time
 - ↳ Executive overviews (ranging from 2 hours to one day), for senior executives who can't leave the office for long and who need to become familiar with the core ideas quickly in order to guide teams, 'speak the same language' as their teams and use the techniques to evaluate policy and strategy proposals
- 2. Series 2: Thinking Styles and Capabilities –** separate seminars (approx. 3 hours each) on particular thinking types that are especially relevant in our complex, interconnected world. They are delivered one at a time, or as a series of one or more, depending on your training needs:
 - ↳ Strategic Thinking
 - ↳ Design Thinking
 - ↳ Creative Thinking
 - ↳ Critical Thinking
 - ↳ Systems Thinking
 - ↳ Analytical Thinking
 - ↳ Futures Thinking
 - ↳ Behavioural Insights
 - ↳ Engaging Others

More information is given on the following pages.

Short seminars include many examples, interactive exercises and a handbook on the topics delivered

Workshops include many examples, interactive exercises, case studies, a Quick Reference Guide and a Handbook

Contact us for further information on detailed seminar content, pricing and group discounts, and for ideas about how to structure seminars and workshops for your organisation

CONSULTING & FACILITATION

We can help you build a deeper understanding of the complex challenge you are grappling with, and to think more strategically about it

We can:

- Guide you through the *20 Questions for policy and strategy design*, in the context of your project to help you:
 - ↳ Build a deeper understanding of the situation you are grappling with
 - ↳ Use different techniques to find clever courses of action to achieve the outcomes you want
 - ↳ Rigorously think through ideas
 - ↳ Understand and explain to others how and why you think the strategy will work
 - ↳ Adapt the strategy to things that change, and to what you learn along the way
- Run a 'kick-off' day for your project
- Facilitate meetings or workshops with a range of stakeholders
- Run workshops on any or all of the *20 Questions for policy and strategy design*
- Review and make suggestions about strategies, documents or other deliverables at relevant points throughout your project
- or, whatever is most useful for your team.

Contact us for more information

COMMISSIONED REPORTS

Know more about what matters most to you

Commissioning a Ponder report gives you an in-depth, thought-through explanation and exploration of an issue that's important to you.

We apply Ponder's ***20 Questions for Policy & Strategy Design (and practical techniques to help answer them)*** to provide a balanced and comprehensive account of the subject with ideas and insights that can help you to:

- ↳ build a deeper understanding of the issue
- ↳ consider the 'problem' and 'solution' from different angles to find evidence-based and creative ways to achieve outcomes
- ↳ understand the range of stakeholder perspectives and the reasons for them
- ↳ think-through potential changes to identify possible implications and trade-offs
- ↳ design a policy logic and evidence-based policy approach for understanding how and why a course of action might work
- ↳ build-in resilience and readiness for uncertain futures

Contact us for further information

NAVIGATE COMPLEXITY

BUILD A DEEP UNDERSTANDING OF THE SITUATION

*so we can be informed
about what to do rather
than guess*

FIND CLEVER LEVERS & COURSES OF ACTION

*so we can achieve the
desired outcomes
effectively and efficiently*

RIGOROUSLY THINK IDEAS THROUGH

*so we maximise the
intended effects and
minimise the unintended
consequences*

UNDERSTAND AND EXPLAIN HOW AND WHY YOU THINK THE STRATEGY WILL WORK

*so the strategy can be
discussed constructively and
improved*

DESIGN THE STRATEGY ITERATIVELY

*so the strategy can cope
with uncertainty by
adapting to things that
change and to what is
learnt along the way*

20 questions for policy & strategy design and practical techniques to help answer them

Introduction – understanding ‘complexity’, ‘strategy’ and ‘policy’

- 1 **Problem clarity & Desired outcomes**
What is the issue? And what is the the change you want to see as a result of what you do? What is the question you are answering?
- 2 **A comprehensive approach**
What do you know and what do you need to find out?
- 3 **Context and Constraints**
What are the policy & political context and constraints?
- 4 **Understanding the problem**
Why is the situation occurring, and what is the background? What is the system structure and behaviour?
- 5 **Analytical techniques**
What potential levers and courses of action do data analysis and system re-design techniques reveal?
- 6 **Techniques for thinking creatively**
What new insights are revealed if we think about the problem and solution from different angles?
- 7 **People and behavioural insights**
What factors influence what people think and do in this context? Are sufficient conditions for behavioural change in place?
- 8 **Leverage and Goal design**
Has the strategy been designed to be effective, efficient and to work in your context?
- 9 **Consequences, Trade-offs and Assessing option(s)**
What are the consequences and trade-offs likely to be? How do the options compare?
- 10 **Detailed Design, Integration & implementation**
What needs to be considered to transition the strategy from ideas to the real world?
- 11 **Assumptions**
What assumptions have been made? How will they be tracked and tested?
- 12 **Policy Logic**
How will the things you plan to do lead to the changes you want?
- 13 **Policy rationale (Evidence-based policy Part I)**
What are the reasons for thinking the policy will work? Is the reasoning sound?
- 14 **Information & data (Evidence-based policy Part II)**
What information supports the reasons for thinking the policy will work? Is the information valid?
- 15 **Compelling communication**
How will we explain the strategy so that it is understood and has support?
- 16 **Learning & adaptive design**
How will the strategy design process be flexible so that the strategy can adapt to things that change & to what we learn along the way?
- 17 **Resilience & Readiness**
How will the strategy and the organisation manage risk, and be agile, innovative, and futures-focused?
- 18 **Evaluation and Measurement**
What works and what doesn't?
- 19 **Stakeholder perspectives and contested ideas**
What do (all) stakeholders think (about everything)?
- 20 **Really?, Why?, What's the 'so what'?**

20 QUESTIONS FOR POLICY & STRATEGY DESIGN

(and practical techniques to help answer them)

This collection of techniques is essential for analysts and advisers who work in complex areas of public policy, and, senior executives who are responsible for guiding teams and who are accountable for public strategy or policy

The techniques make it easier to make progress by helping you to:

- Design effective, efficient and innovative plans and policies
- Have a plan and make progress from day 1, instead of wasting time and money while you figure out where to start
- Contribute constructive feedback and insight to others
- Provide strategic direction and guidance to teams
- Build confidence that the strategy has been rigorously thought-through
- Understand, communicate and defend the business case for the strategy
- Critique and influence strategies by providing a valuable source of ideas and questions to ask

These techniques are distinctive because they bring together techniques from a range of industries and disciplines used across the private and public sectors, including:

- strategic policy methods used in the strategy unit of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
- corporate strategy development and management consulting techniques
- rapid prototyping (fast, focused, practical problem-solving) for accelerated capability development in the Defence sector
- emerging and influential disciplines such as behavioural economics, system thinking, design thinking and complexity science
- established and proven disciplines such as engineering and logical reasoning

Grapple with complex challenges more effectively

Develop and implement more effective, efficient and innovative plans and policies that are strategic and thought-through

Contribute more constructive feedback and insight to others, guide teams, and ask the right questions to make progress

Thinking styles and capabilities

STRATEGIC THINKING

Outcomes-focused policy

'Strategic thinking' is a fairly ambiguous term and there are plenty of good, but somewhat abstract and discursive, guides around on 'strategy'. But this seminar aims to provide very practical guidance on what thinking strategically, and designing strategic policy actually means, and what it entails.

The ability to think strategically is at the heart of just about everything we do – it's about using the available resources to move from a current situation or 'state', to a future or desired 'state'. The knowledge and skills for thinking strategically should be a core capability for anyone involved in policy and strategy design.

This seminar discusses some core ideas associated with strategy and some techniques and tools for thinking strategically in practice

DESIGN THINKING

Designing strategy to be effective in the real world

Design Thinking has been a buzz-word in recent years, but it has its roots firmly grounded in technical disciplines such as engineering, dating back hundreds of years.

Design Thinking, at its core, is the pragmatic side of policy and strategy design. It is concerned with problem-solving, or bringing about a desired outcome in a way that will actually work in practice. It therefore focuses on finding creative and clever ideas for doing that, on talking to people throughout the entire process to ensure the design is on track to do what it is supposed to, testing ideas and iterating the design, and dealing with the uncertainty of the future.

This seminar discusses Design Thinking and its core elements in the context of public policy and strategy

BEHAVIOURAL INSIGHTS

Understanding the factors that influence what people think and do

This relatively new area of knowledge is proving to be highly influential for public policy and strategy. Grounded in behavioural economics, behavioural insights is an understanding of the things that influence what people think and do. Since people (and their behaviour, and what they think) are at the heart of most public policy and strategy, these insights show us what conditions need to be in place for the people side of strategy to be effective.

This seminar pulls together the core insights of behavioural insights into a model for behaviour. It delves into four of the components that are most relevant to public policy – intuition, cognitive biases, incentives and sensitivity to context

CRITICAL THINKING

Inquiry to form objective and informed judgements

If someone said to you – "If the government increased spending on healthcare by 40% over five years, mortality rates would halve", most of us would feel flooded with questions – What data is that based on? What spending figure is being increased by 40%? What's the spending profile? What would they need to spend the money on? What definition of mortality are you using? Which cohorts of people would it affect? Is this data accurate? What is the rationale and is the reasoning sound? Why does this sound fishy?

That barrage of questions is an example of critical thinking. Often confused with 'creative thinking' critical thinking is actually quite a different thing. Very generally, critical thinking is a process of inquiry to form objective and informed judgements. It's a process of asking questions, gathering information, checking the information's validity, then thinking in reasoned and deliberative ways to ensure that the opinions or decisions we make are informed and based on sound rationale and supporting information (or evidence). Critical thinking is not believing everything you read or hear, not taking things at face value, instead, suspending judgement until we've thought about the information we have, and how valid it is, as well as considering what other information we might need, to inform our judgements.

In practice, critical thinking should permeate every part of policy and strategy development (assuming a rational approach is a good thing). At a high level, critical thinking should seek to ask and answer questions to build a deep understanding of the situation, identify, evaluate and think options through, clearly understand how and why the strategy might work and ensure the strategy maintains its relevance in the future.

At a lower level of detail, critical thinking determines if the information we use to inform our strategy (or opinions, decisions, judgements) is relevant, accurate, timely, complete, consistent, fair and balanced, of sufficient breadth and depth, and supported with sound reasons and evidence.

Critical thinking is often cited as being as important as literacy and numeracy, for the future.

This seminar provides some simple techniques for thinking critically – they are lifelong tools that can be applied to almost anything

FUTURES THINKING

Being aware of the possibility of, and being ready for alternative futures

The future is uncertain, so by definition we can never design a perfect strategy. But there are tools and techniques that can help us be more aware of alternative futures and, importantly, to help us to do things now, that can position us well to cope with things that change.

This seminar discusses the concepts of agility, resilience, risk, readiness, scenarios, and, techniques to cope with uncertainty

Thinking styles and capabilities

CREATIVE THINKING

Coming up with new and useful ideas and insights

The ability to think creatively is also often cited as one of the most important skills we can have for the future. Unfortunately creativity can't be taught explicitly, and while there are helpful things we can do to encourage sparks of creative thinking (setting aside time in the morning, for example), these types of tips still leave a significant 'hope for the best' factor.

This seminar on creative thinking aims to provide very practical techniques for thinking about problems and solutions from a range of different angles – to help unstifle creativity.

These techniques are not drawn from any text book. They have been collated by Ponder over 25 years, having seen or heard about them working across a wide range of issues, sectors and disciplines. The techniques are transferrable to other types of issues and therefore form a handy toolkit of ideas for thinking differently about things

This seminar discusses the importance of creative thinking for grappling with complex problems and presents 11 techniques for thinking about issues from different angles

SYSTEMS THINKING

Finding effective options to achieve outcomes and thinking them through

Of all our seminar topics, this is possibly the least familiar to most people, yet it is possibly also the one that is most powerful for fuelling our thinking about complex issues.

Systems thinking is based around the quite simple idea that the world is made up of things that interact with each other to do something – just like a car is made up of many parts that interact with each other in certain ways to do something (transport people and things from one place to another).

This simple idea applies to complex systems as well – health systems, population, water management, education, financial systems and so on.

Understanding the parts, how they interact, and the behaviour they produce when they interact is the core of systems thinking. It allows you to understand why a problem is occurring, and to find ways to re-design the system so that it's behaviour (the outcome) is what we want.

This seminar discusses core systems thinking concepts and some useful techniques that are fundamental for effective policy and strategy design

ENGAGING OTHERS

Communicating with and listening to others

We hear all the time the importance of 'stakeholder engagement' and it's true. But not just for looks, not just because we should, not because it's politically correct, but because an understanding of stakeholder views, and just as importantly, why they hold those views, is critical for building a deep understanding of a complex issue and for thinking strategically about it.

We need to engage others – internal stakeholders, experts across all relevant sectors and disciplines, citizens, end-users, governance stakeholders and others, for a range of reasons.

Engaging others helps us to:

1. build a deep and comprehensive understanding of an issue, drawn from different perspectives
2. test our ideas and incorporate what we learn from testing them into our work
3. build understanding and support for our ideas so that they have sufficient buy-in to get approved and implemented

This seminar discusses various approaches and techniques for stakeholder engagement, how to communicate effectively, and how to listen to others

ANALYTICAL THINKING

Generating insight from scrutiny of information

Data and information have enormous potential to both enlighten us and mislead us. Given that scrutinising information for insight is something that is central to most policy and strategy development, it's important that policy makers have a solid capability in analytical thinking.

Analytical thinking encompasses a range of skills from good research practice, through to ability to use a range of quantitative and qualitative analytical techniques, being aware of how data can be manipulated to mislead and reveal insight, and, how measurement needs to be done well to be useful.

This seminar discusses some useful analytical techniques, the benefits and pitfalls of a reductionist approach to problem-solving, research skills and it looks in detail at some surprising examples of how data can be used in different ways

Ponder's **20 Questions for Policy & Strategy Design (and practical techniques to help answer them)** have all these thinking styles embedded, so if you attend that seminar series, you'll cover all these thinking types. However, if you have a particular need to develop certain thinking capabilities, we run seminar series 2 - seminars dedicated to these thinking styles. These seminars can be delivered on their own, or, as a series of two or more, depending on your needs and priorities

Contact us for seminar outlines

".. In recent years the themes and results of complexity science have touched almost every scientific field, and some areas of study, such as ... social sciences, are being profoundly transformed by these ideas."

*Complexity: A Guided Tour,
Melanie Mitchell, p.300*

"Economists had found an almost one-to-one match between [a population's higher-level thinking capability] and a nation's long-term economic growth. Many other things influenced economic growth, of course, but **the ability of a workforce to learn, think, and adapt was the ultimate stimulus package.**"

Note: emphasis added. PISA is the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment that tests 15 year old students from around the world, not on competency against school curriculums, but how well they can apply their knowledge to real-life situations and be equipped for full participation in society. See <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/aboutpisa/>

The Smartest Kids in the World and How They got That Way, Amanda Ripley, p.24

"To [find effective policies] you have to think, to deliberate. To deliberate [well] requires a rich list of intellectual and practical virtues... Deliberation [and] thinking is not second best... it is what you have to do".

Evidence-based Policy: A Practical Guide to Doing it Better, Nancy Cartwright and Jeremy Hardie, 2012, p.158, 170

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Ponder helps people and organisations to build a deeper understanding of complex issues and to think strategically about them. I started Ponder after working in a range of sectors and disciplines - most recently as a senior adviser in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, and prior to that as an aerospace systems design engineer and as a management consultant. As an engineer I learnt how to design things that work. In public policy I learnt what true complexity is, and where our highest priorities lie. I also realised that different disciplines often use very different and effective techniques to grapple with complexity, and there is a lot that different sectors can learn from one another. Ponder shares many of these ideas and techniques and applies them to real-world challenges.

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