

The Limits of Success

How political tradecraft can help business leaders to drive change.

Article summary

What's the idea? Using a 'limit', 'cap', or 'ceiling' as a device to set up a new dividing line in an issue.

How does it work? Choose a big number on a previously unused scale and limit it.

What are the benefits? It's cost effective, it gives you first mover advantage, it obliges your opponents to take a view and it can be a lever to drive performance.

How do you use this in your job? Take it to your colleagues as a new communications tool to help drive change or performance or both.

Introduction. There's nothing new under the sun but there are infinite ways of arranging what's already here. Every now and again, a clear-thinking politician strikes on a new way of arranging old things. In so doing, another skill in the tradecraft of politics is brought into being. Oftentimes, these skills trickle out of politics and into the commercial world.

What is this skill? It is, wait for it, drum roll please: 'limits', sometimes also called a 'cap' or a 'ceiling'. US politicians are particularly fond of this device as a way of setting up the dividing line of a debate, see the budget arguments between Obama and Congress.

How does it work? Say you want to make a big political impact without spending any money. The way you do it is not to outline lots of little tactical policies in detail – a process that requires painstaking negotiation, calculations, drafting and then multiple announcements – but to set a limit, ceiling or cap on a big number, preferably on a scale that has not been used before.

Worked Example.

Step 1. State your objective. Let's say your objective is to show that your party is tough on crime and that you want to communicate this to the public by cutting the bureaucracy that gets in the way of police officers doing their work.

Step 2. Choose a new scale. Identify all of the spending on bureaucracy across lots of different parts of policing. You will get to a big number, say £500m per year. The key here is to choose a scale that isn't currently in use and that you have designed.

Step 3. Pick the limit. Choose a limit that shows you are going to control spending, say £450m. Your message then becomes: 'We are tough on crime. We are cutting police bureaucracy by £50m this year and capping it from there'.

What are the benefits?

1. It rarely costs material amounts of taxpayers' money to implement a limit.
2. Where 'limits' really shine is when they help to answer one of the basic, big questions of politics – in this case it's 'how do I make my point without spending (or promising to spend) anything?' This question bedevils some governments and oppositions more than others, in austere times, it matters more than most others.

3. It makes a strategic statement of your political intent without having to do the colouring in, allowing the limit-setter to have a view on a policy area without getting stuck in the micro-details of policy consequence.
4. A limit can be a useful way of binding colleagues in other departments to a strategy, e.g. Treasury sets the limit, department has to implement.
5. It happens in the future so you can pick when the risk occurs and the limit can be changed in the future to adjust for altered priorities or circumstances.
6. It gives you, the policy advocate, first mover advantage. By injecting a limit into the policy debate you oblige your opponents to take a stance – ‘are you for this or are you against it?’ is a time honoured political question.
7. It is not a target - this changes the role of the policy advocate from engine to brake - fitting in neatly with a period where government needs to do more with less, as the saying goes.
8. It creates a pole (in the north/south sense rather than the tent) around which all of the smaller, more detailed arguments have to be organised. This is particularly helpful when it’s a statistically complicated area of policy.

Case study. This technique has been used by the coalition more than most governments, see the cap the Chancellor in the UK has placed on most of the welfare budget as a textbook example of a limit at work.

Can you use this in your job? Many of the communications tools that begin in politics then make their way out into the commercial world. For large, distributed organisations whose central leadership function needs levers to pull, limits can work. The great advantage of a limit is that it can be set centrally but apply locally, cutting across the boundaries of each sub-business. In this way it can help to foster team-work and break down the silos which can build up in organisations. If you, the reader, have the time, then you should read down the benefits list (1-8) and translate them into the way that your organisation works.

How do you use this in your job? It is good practice for communications professionals to take new tools to the rest of your organisation - ‘limits’ is just such a tool. Think through the problems your organisation has and see where ‘limits’ might be a way of addressing them. Listed below are some typical business inputs and outputs that might be subject to a limit as a way of both signalling leadership intent and driving performance:

1. Specific areas of spending that the company wants to discourage.
2. Energy consumption.
3. Sickness absence caused by workplace practices.
4. Stock levels.
5. Downtime from IT problems.
6. Meetings culture.

If you are going to use ‘limits’ as a lever then make sure to choose them carefully – remember that a limit differs from a target. This is also a great opportunity to make the most of the internal comms team – they can help you publicise the limit inside the organisation.

Conclusion. ‘Limits’ are a crossover idea that has worked in politics and might help leaders at all levels to deliver performance and change in their organisations. If you are a communications professional and you want to take this idea forward, drop us an email and we will be happy to send you a workshop toolkit to help you take the next steps in using limits in your organisation.