GovTalk

Get to the Point.

This material was prepared by Andrew Graham, School of Policy Studies, Queen's University, Kingston, Canada. Use it freely and share it with my full permission. If you have any comments or questions, contact me at andrew.graham@queensu.ca

1.3 Briefing Note to Obtain a Decision

Why Write a Briefing Note to Get a Decision?

It would be fair to say that a lot of decisions get made in government, at all levels. Each one does not need a briefing note. Some of the ways that decisions get made are:

- Memoranda or e-mails recommending an action or seeking permission,
- Minutes of meetings,
- Detailed project proposals for capital investments or policy changes,
- Minutes of meetings,
- Cabinet and Treasury Board documents.

A briefing note is just one tool to obtain a decision. Its utility in the decision making process for an organization is that it is short and can serve as a

- Cover summary for a more detailed proposal that the reader may not have time to fully read.
- Means to get a decision made about a specific event ("Yes, we will speak at that conference.") or concur on an administrative move ("Yes, ADM Joyce Fillion will be our representative.")
- Approval sheet for a grant application, usually with supporting information.

General Format

The general format of a decision-focused briefing note can be:

Title

Issue
Be clear that this is a matter for decision. Often, as the example shows, that will be highlights. That addresses the question "Why am I reading this?" that is so important for an effective briefing note.

Background
Refer here to whatever elements that frame the need for a decision. That will mean referencing the legal and policy framework that requires a decision or previous history on this issue relevant to the decision. For example, "All grants over $100,00 under the Community Improvement Act require your approval."

Current Status
This section answers the question "Why now?" and "What's currently relevant to this decision." For example, "This grant is a renewal of the previous one to this group and approval would permit continuity of the program."

Discussion/Analysis (not always included)
Add here only what may affect the decision. That could include any number of areas, but be concise and do not introduce new policy or decision items here. Some of the discussion items may be:
- Risks involved, e.g. "Timely approval will avoid the risk of this group criticizing the government for its late approvals as they have done in the past."
- Costs and sources of funds: if this is within a regular program, very little has to be said except to state that funds have been approved for the program. If not, then the source would have to identified. For example, "This grant is not in the current funding plan, but due to its special nature, we believe that it can be accommodated from contingency funding for one year."

Options
The basic rule here is to present real options. If there are none, say so.

Recommendation
The recommendation is made by the person signing the Briefing Note. This in all probability is someone reporting directly to the reader of the note, e.g., a Deputy Minister recommends to a Minister, unless there is a formal delegation. The writer of the note is not the person approving the recommendation.

Decision Box
See the sample note.

Briefing Note

For Decision

Approval of Grant to the Wild Rose Women's Institute

Summary

The Department is recommending the renewal of the $55,000 grant under ***The Community Development Fund*** for the Wild Rose Women's Institute to continue its various programs as outlined in its submission (See attached). Funds are available under the program and all conditions for eligibility have been met.

Background

This application will permit the Institute to continue the various, well-received community development programs in various communities in southern Alberta. The Institute's programs include:

- Development of programs for families to settle in smaller communities in southern Alberta,
- Information resources for women in communities on resources for their self-development, building connectivity with other families and accessing community resources,
- Conducting community-centered research to develop rural and small community capacity to support family and economic development.

This program has been in place for 8 years. Its renewal, based on program criteria, has been reviewed every year. Further, there have two formal evaluations of the program, one conducted jointly with the Province, all affirming the quality of the program and the results.

Considerations

There is wide local and provincial support for this proposal. The Premier of Alberta has written you expressing her hope to see the program continue and Alberta's readiness to continue its funding of $35,000. Three M.P.s from the area have written you in support. The President of the University of Lethbridge, which works with the Institute in developing community resources, has also written in support, indicating a continuation of in-kind support. Finally, the Mellrose Foundation, which supports many community programs, is committed to $25,000 in funding.

All the criteria outlined in the program have been met. Your Advisory Committee has reviewed the application and supports its approval.

A risk involved with this application is that it continues annualized support for a community program will be interpreted as a permanent program support. This is a challenge common to such successful community programs. Given the various sources of funding, it is clear that this group knows how to make applications and gather support. It would not be the moment to consider this issue, but it is one that we as a Department need to bring forward ideas for resolving.

Conclusion

Aside from being a sound application with extensive partner support, this application is an opportunity for the Minister to show her support to a strong community partner in Alberta. The renewal announcement is a positive way for the Minister to show her support for this program in this part of the country.

Recommendation

The Department and the Advisory Committee recommend approval of the application. The Department will work with the Minister's staff on an announcement strategy if the Minister wishes.

Prepared by the Community Development Program Branch, Contact: Mildred Drew, 613-899-0787 or mildred.drew@canada.gc.ca .

Approved by the Deputy Minister

Ministerial Decision

Approved: ☐

Not Approved: ☐

Review Further and Return: ☐

Development an Announcement Strategy: Yes/No

Comments:

Janet P. Milne, Minister

The following is taken, with permission, from *the Classic Form of a Briefing Note* by Richard B. Parkinson.

Economic Advancement Canada	Avancement Économique Canada	UNCLASSIFIED

or PROTECTED B
or SECRET
or TOP SECRET etc.

Deputy Minister   Sous-ministre

FOR DECISION

Ottawa, Canada
K1A 0Z0

CCM #: N17-52018

RDIMS #: 8340762

Date:

(1)

BRIEFING NOTE FOR THE MINISTER

or FOR SIGNATURE
or FOR INFORMATION
or FOR ACTION

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

Summary

- A well-crafted briefing note does not need a Summary. The Issue and the Conclusion or Recommendation(s) should be sufficient to summarize the briefing note.
- 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.

(2)   **(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 considerations; and
- may include current status.

Considerations

ANNEX A and **ANNEX B** provide guidance on writing the briefing note as a whole. **ANNEX C** outlines the strategic thinking that underlies a sound briefing note and that may form a key element of the Considerations section.

(5)

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

The Considerations section may address the following as needed:
- current status and relevance to needs, desires and strategic priorities (e.g., Speech From the Throne, the Budget, your department's Report on Plans and Priorities);
- pros and cons of options, including feasibility, costs, benefits and risk;

1. Use an Arial Black 11-point font for all headings.
2. Use a Times New Roman 12-point font for all body text.
3. Left-justify the text (ragged right margin).
4. Set the line spacing to 1.1 all through the briefing note.
5. Note how this paragraph saved space by referring to annexes, rather than going into details here.

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- implications for the portfolio (other agencies that report to the Minister);
- consultations conducted and horizontal management; and
- communications implications and plans.

Considerations will deal with 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., requirements of law, regulations, treaties or contracts); and
- ecological factors (e.g., impact on wildlife, oceans, greenhouse gases).

Conclusion ⬅ 6

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) ⬅ 7

The Recommendation(s) must do more than state a desired outcome. This section tells the Minister precisely what you would like him or her to do to bring about the desired outcome. Include a deadline, if needed (e.g., "A decision from you by March 21, 2017 would enable the project to remain on schedule."). Beyond this, do not introduce or restate rationale in the Recommendation(s).

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

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| ☐ I approve. | ☐ Please discuss |
| ☐ I do not approve. | with my staff. |

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