



Breaking the Law of Triviality

How to architect a budget process that focuses on the truly important things

BY SHAYNE KAVANAGH AND DR. MARIA CHURCH

Many budget officers have had an experience like the following during budget deliberations with the governing board: the governing board spends what seems like (or may be) hours discussing the line item for office supplies (“Can we reduce it by sending more emails and using printers less?”) and then afterward passes a multimillion-dollar capital project budget with little discussion.

This phenomenon is not limited to local government budgets. It is so common across time and disciplines that it has a name: **Parkinson’s Law of Triviality**. The originator, Cyril Parkinson, said that Parkinson illustrated it with an example of a committee responsible for approving the plans of a nuclear power plant. The committee spends little time on weighty issues like the design of the nuclear reactor and more time on issues like the design for a bike shed that will be on the property (“How big will it be?” “What materials will it be made of?”). Parkinson’s Law is also known as “bike-shedding.”

Bike-shedding wastes the precious resource of time, leaving less time to discuss what really matters. The result is lower quality decision making.

Budget officers have a responsibility to design the budget process to increase the chances of producing savvy and wise decisions. The design must, therefore, find a way to break Parkinson’s Law of Triviality.

Why does bike-shedding occur?

The first step is to understand why the phenomenon of bike-shedding occurs. Solutions can then be designed accordingly. There are several reasons:

- **It is easier to grasp simpler topics than more complex ones.** Decision makers do not want to appear uninformed, so they gravitate toward topics that are easier to understand.
- **Decision makers want to make an impact.** This is related to our point above. Decision makers feel they must make a substantive contribution during budget deliberations, even if it is on a minor point.
- **Some topics might be more engaging.** Topics that are small in dollar amount might have other features that make people eager to talk about them. For example, perhaps the issue is novel or inherently interesting; or it has emotional appeal beyond its dollar value.
- **Discussing small topics could be a way to avoid the hard issues.** Perhaps the bigger dollar items are challenging, contentious, or uncomfortable. Discussing trivialities could be a way to put off the hard conversations.

What can we do about it?

Let's move on to the solutions, starting with the most basic, which can help with any source of bike-shedding: agenda and meeting design. We begin with two design principles to help counteract the Law of Triviality:¹

- **Put important items at or near the front of the agenda.** This way, the group can tackle the items when energy is high and before the meeting time runs out. It is OK and even advisable to have short “warmup” agenda items to get a meeting going, but don't leave too much opportunity to veer into the trivial before getting to the important stuff.
- **Timebox discussion items.** Allocate specific amounts of time to discuss different items. When time runs out, it is time to move on. Allocate less time to the less important items and more time to those high-value/high-dollar items.

Exploring advanced strategies

We may also need to consider *advanced* meeting design strategies. For example, some decision makers may not adhere to time limits on discussion in the typical meeting format. Recently,

a council that one of the authors, Dr. Maria Church, worked with had a tough time getting through their council meetings efficiently and effectively (minimum four-hour meetings). Dr. Church and her team pulled the council together into a retreat to decide how to be more effective with the meetings. Dr. Church had the decision makers agree on time limits as well as the rules of engagement. Your decision makers may agree to rules that limit discussion on items below a certain dollar amount. Ideally, this can be done when the board members are onboarded or at their annual retreat. Include a discussion on the Law of Triviality (your decision makers may not be conscious of this phenomenon). A reminder of these rules of engagement should be included with each council packet. Review meeting effectiveness regularly.

Advanced meeting designs might be important if bike-shedding arises from a desire to avoid challenging or contentious issues. Consider preparation—which is a critical but often underappreciated aspect of meeting design. If elected officials feel ill-equipped to discuss controversial issues, might they prefer to discuss trivial issues instead? So, for big-dollar and more complex budget items, a work session or two with staff/budget officers could be held. Materials that are shared before the work session and board/council meeting should have a one-page summary that states the crucial key facts about this big-dollar item, breaking down the complexities. It is said in the world of sales, “A confused mind never buys.” Translated to bike-shedding, “A confused mind never buys into understanding.” Eliminating the confusion on the front end and helping elected officials increase their fiscal fluency² gives everyone involved, especially the decision makers, a chance to save face and make a smart, well-informed decision with true understanding.

As we saw, though, some agenda items might have special appeal beyond their dollar value. Since these





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items do not have a big impact on the budget, perhaps put them in a meeting “parking lot” for later discussion, or delegate them to a subcommittee, or hold a special meeting for that topic. The idea is to provide the time and space to talk about these issues at some point, while preserving focus in the here and now on the most consequential decisions for the budget.

Be clear about each budget item’s relationship to the strategic priorities. If an item is not aligned with the priorities, indicate so. When the priorities are well-defined (and reminded), it is easier to distinguish between the important and minor matters.

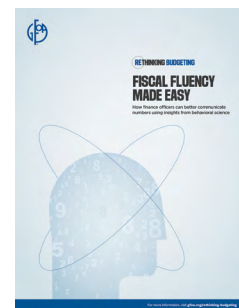
On the topic of strategic priorities, a desire to make an impact might be a source of bike-shedding. Make it easier for elected officials to make an impact on the substantive issues. For example, staff can provide a menu of high-quality options for elected officials, where choosing any of the options will have a meaningful impact on the issue at hand. Imagine a budget deficit needs to be closed. Staff could provide three to five packages of revenue enhancements/expenditure cuts for elected officials to pick from.

Finally, the finance officer should consider how people understand numbers. For most people, large

numbers, like those found in a budget, are abstract concepts. So, they may not appreciate the scale differences between the trivial and consequential. The finance officer can help by translating these dollars into some other quantity people can easily appreciate. For example, at one city with a \$250-million operating budget, the council would spend an excessive amount of their (and staff’s) time each year debating a \$10,000 contribution to a local nonprofit. In cases like this, the finance officer has cause to redirect the conversation to something more important. This would be a good opportunity to translate money to time: “The amount we are discussing is equivalent to two months of a single patrol officer’s time. In the meantime, we have another issue on the agenda that is equivalent to the time of six patrol officers...for an entire year each.”

We don’t know what we don’t know. Making decision makers aware of the Law of Triviality and the agreed-upon strategies to avoid it can help to curb this phenomenon with your board. 🗝️

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LEARN MORE

Large numbers are abstract concepts. GFOA’s research report, “Fiscal Fluency Made Easy” (Shayne Kavanagh, May 2023) helps finance officers better communicate numbers to decision-makers, generating a better understanding of and enthusiasm for savvy financial decision-making.

➔ gfoa.org/materials/fiscal-fluency

¹ Weinberg, G. & McCann, L. (2019). *Super Thinking: The Big Book of Mental Models*. Penguin Random House, LLC.

² Kavanagh, S.C. (2023). *Rethinking Budgeting: Fiscal Fluency Made Easy*. Government Finance Officers Association.