

BREAKING THE LAW OF TRIVIALITY

How to Architect a Budget Process that Focuses on the Truly Important Things*

PARKINSON'S LAW OF TRIVIALITY

The time spent on any item of the agenda is inverse of its importance or dollar value.

Parkinson's Law is not limited to local government budgets. Many people have been frustrated across time and disciplines.

However, we can break this law!

Cyril Parkinson first illustrated the Law of Triviality with a committee responsible for approving the plans for a nuclear power plant. The committee spends little time on weighty issues like the design of the reactor and more time on the design for the property's bike shed. Parkinson's Law of Triviality is also known as "bike-shedding".

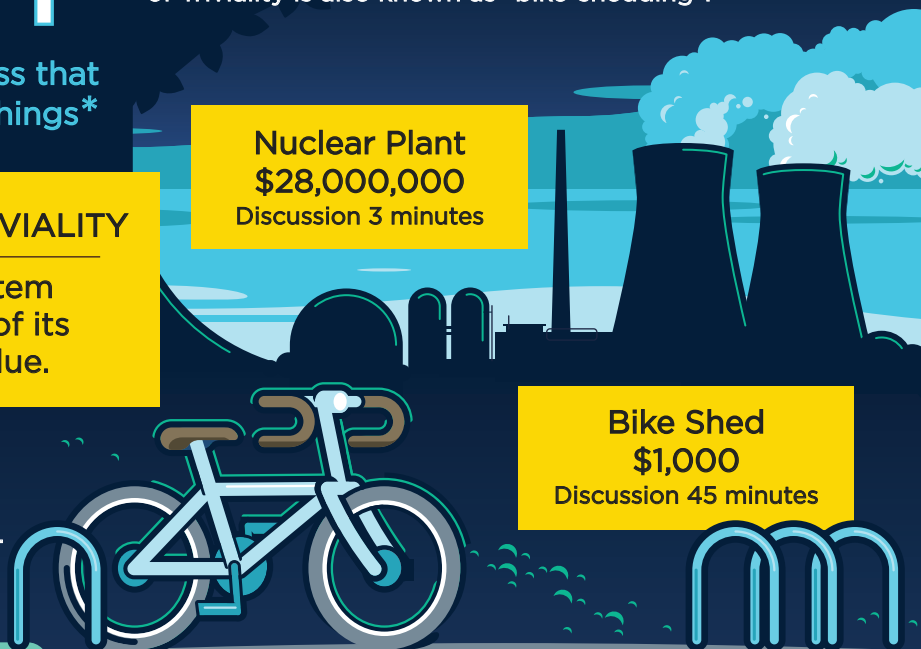


Nuclear Plant
\$28,000,000

Discussion 3 minutes

Bike Shed
\$1,000

Discussion 45 minutes



Agenda & Meeting Design



Place important items near the front of the agenda. The group can tackle important items when energy is high and before time runs out.



Timebox discussion items. Allocate specific time to discuss different items. When time runs out, it is time to move on. Allocate less time to less important items and more time to high-value items.



Staff can provide a menu of high-quality options for elected officials to choose from. This provides a basis for discussing important items.



Agree to rules that limit discussion on items below a certain dollar amount. It may be possible to put less important items in a meeting "parking lot" for later discussion, delegate them to a subcommittee, or hold another meeting for those topics.



Consider preparation. Anyone who is feeling ill-equipped to discuss controversial issues might prefer to discuss other issues instead. Materials that are distributed before the meetings should have a one-page summary that states the crucial and important facts, breaking down the complexities.



Large numbers are abstract concepts. It may be difficult to appreciate the scale differences between the trivial and consequential. Help people appreciate the difference in scale by translating large amounts to scale people can appreciate.

For more on this topic:

<https://www.gfoa.org/materials/fiscalfuency>

*From *Breaking the Law of Triviality in Local Government*.

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