

Stock Issues

Overview:

Argument – the purposeful collision of opposing reasons – can be strengthened when advocates utilize the “Stock Issues” framework. It yields analysis as well as inferences for tactical employment of reason. Rational argument is a process. It provides a thoughtful approach for comparison, assessment, and decision-making. Within this framework, the existing policy “on the table” reflects the “status quo.” It assumes that the existing policy is in place because it has been identified as best practice. This suggests that displacement of the existing policy must be a “better” practice.

Change must be a net benefit in order to earn support. Within stock issue analysis, five simple tests provide an advocate with the means to showcase how an alternative policy is “better” than the status quo. These include: significance, harm, inherency, solvency, and an evaluation of advantages/disadvantages. When (and only when) these tests have been successfully answered, may a proposal be rationally considered as a better alternative. At that point, reason dictates a replacement.

Stock issues analysis is a powerful tool because it demands advocates argue upon common grounds; grounds that will dictate a best and less than best solution. In simplest terms, it is a formula that allows for a procedural assessment of viability. Outcomes are not the result of chance: the status quo is either the best solution, or the proposed alternative is the best answer and all/any ethical advocates must accept the outcome – or risk being proven less than rational actors.

Significance:

Too often advocates assume significance of a problem; it is not self-evident. A proposal for change must be targeted toward improving a policy issue worthy of talent, time, and treasure. “Significance” of a problem must be proven – it is the first test. Not all “problems” are challenges for the majority of the public – or even a large minority. Therefore, serious proposals are objectively significant.

Harm (Ills):

Change based upon reason must be implemented to lessen harmful impact; the status quo must be “harming” an individual, a community, a society, even the planet – harm that is objectively proven. Harm is the second test. Remember, within the structure of reasoned argument, the status quo exists because it has been deemed worthy – deemed healthy – over time. Therefore, a proposal for change must be less harmful, more “healthy,” than current circumstances.

Inherency:

When an advocate can identify a problem – a significant problem that causes harm – it is required that s/he prove that the problem exists inherently within the fabric of the current circumstances. “Inherency” is the third test. Proposals must be focused upon improving the situation because of a flawed system that cannot control its promulgation of significant harm/s.

Solvency:

Identification of a problem – proving its significant and systemic harmful impact upon society is insufficient to proving the merits of an alternative proposal. The advocate must “solve” the problem/s identified. Improving the situation is not the same as “solvency” – the fourth test. Anything that improves the current circumstances would likely be favored over continuation of a flawed situation; however, solvency is required for a mandatory change based upon reason.

Costs (Advantages/Disadvantages):

The fifth test of a reasonable proposal is “Costs.” Any reasonable proposal solves a significant harm that is inherent to the current circumstances: it must also provide more advantages than alternatives – more advantages than either the status quo or competing proposals. This analysis is more involved than it appears: there are many different kinds of cost – economic, emotional, environmental, health, political, and others. When an advocate dares to challenge the status quo, the burdens of proof rest squarely upon the shoulders of the agent seeking change. The costs can be, must be, put into context – but in the end, the “net” advantages of a proposed alternative to the status quo must be demonstrably greater than existing policy.

Summary:

Problems are in many ways constructed; words chosen construct a rhetorical situation. Problems are seldom self-evident; the status quo exists. However, identification of a problem is merely the preliminary step: it must be significant, harmful, and inherent to the circumstances. To replace the status quo with an alternative proposal, it must both solve the identified problems as well as cost less than any viable alternatives. This framework “Stock Issues” is a helpful tool to employ any/all times considering policy options.