

The background is a gradient of blue shades. It features several large, semi-transparent geometric shapes: a blue circle in the upper left, a green circle in the center, and a blue circle in the lower right. A white dotted line runs horizontally across the lower third of the page. The title text is centered and overlaid on these shapes.

TRANSITIONS: LEARNING ON THE JOB

Confucius said: "I hear I forget, I see I remember, I do I understand."

Benjamin Franklin attributed it as:

"Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn."

TRANSITIONS: LEARNING ON THE JOB

THE COUNCIL FOR PUBLIC

ADMINISTRATION (*Raad voor het Openbaar Bestuur; ROB*) is an independent advisory body to the government and parliament. The ROB advises – when asked or on its own initiative – on the organisation and functioning of the public administration and the policy-related aspects of financial relationships between the central government, municipalities and provinces. Particular attention is paid to the principles of democracy and the rule of law.

STATUTORY BASIS

The ROB was established under the Act of 12 December 1996 (Public Administration Act, Bulletin of Acts and Decrees 1996, No 623). As from 1 July 2017, the advisory function of the Financial Relations Council (*Raad voor de financiële verhoudingen; Rfv*) was transferred to the Council for Public Administration. The Rfv was established under the Act of 21 February 1997.

The history of the Council for Public Administration (ROB) dates to 1960 when the Council for Municipal Finance (*Raad voor de gemeentefinanciën; Rgf*) was established.

The Council for Territorial Decentralisation (*Raad voor de Territoriale Decentralisatie; RTD*) was established in 1965. Both are forerunners of the current Council for Public Administration.

PROCEDURE

Requests for advisory reports can come from all ministries and from both Houses of the States General. The ROB bases its advisory reports on administrative knowledge and experience, state-of-the-art scientific insights and awareness of opinions and insights from society. The ROB also contributes towards the political, administrative and social debate on how the public administration and democracy functions through other activities (lectures, roundtable discussions, conferences, and introductions).

COMPOSITION

The Council consists of a chairperson and eight members appointed by Royal Decree and selected for their expertise and social experience. The Council may also appoint temporary councillors for projects.

STAFF

A compact team supports the ROB. The Secretary and their staff account to the Council for their work.

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Preface

The (former) State Secretary of Economic Affairs and Climate (EZK – Climate and Energy) requested the Council for Public Administration (the Council) to provide advice on learning from incidents in the energy transition. The Council expanded the scope of the question: this advice also contains lessons for other transitions - agriculture, circular economy - that challenge public administration.

Because transitions have implications for housing, work, traffic and transportation, economy, nature, environment, and spatial planning, the involvement of the government is never far away. Transitions are complex. In other words, technical innovations, scientific insights, societal opinions, economic prosperity and adversity, and incidents interact with each other. Transitions are a process of fundamental and irreversible changes in culture, (institutional) structure, and approach at the systemic level. It takes decades to realize a transition, so it requires long-term commitment.

Transitions are accompanied by uncertainty and risks, including unknown risks. The path forward is full of challenges, which means that a learning approach is necessary. In this advice, the Council seeks to answer the question of what the government needs in order to learn during transitions.

The Council answers the question based on the principles of good public administration: the rule of law, democracy, and administrative capacity. In transitions, unintended things happen, so the key is to create space for learning, which places demands on public administration. Space to make mistakes, to try, and to learn, transitions mean learning on the job.

This advice was prepared by a working group consisting of Council members Huri Sahin, Peter Verheij, and Kees Jan de Vet, with contributions from Katrien Termeer. The staff was supported by the project group including Michael Mekel and Manon Braber, trainee from the Association of Netherlands Municipalities.



Han Polman,
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Gerber van Nijendaal,
Deputy Secretary-director

Advice: Falling, getting up and going on again. Space for learning in transitions

Many tasks such as the energy transition, that the government¹ takes on, are complex. At the start it is often unclear how the intended outcomes can be achieved and how problems arising along the way will be addressed. Space and time are needed for analysis, thinking, assessment, and accountability.

The problem is that public administration often lacks the time and space for these. As the government is under pressure to meet elevated expectations, risks are not widely accepted, and uncertainties barely tolerated. The political administration calls for accountability while the level of acceptance of mistakes is low and the fear of making mistakes high.

This has a paralysing effect and sometimes causes the government to get stuck. And this while transitions are associated with uncertainty, improbability, and risk, including unknown risks. These were reasons for the former Undersecretary of Economic Affairs and Climate Policy to request the Council for Public Administration (the Council) to issue advice on *learning from incidents in the energy transition*.

Risk-regulation reflex

The request for advice to the Council expresses the concern that the risk-regulation reflex will delay the energy transition. Should an incident occur, such as when using new technologies, the government will take measures (such as passing new regulations or higher standards, greater monitoring, or other provisions) without exactly knowing what happened, the causes, or if the measures are effective and proportionate.

In other words, an administrative overreaction to a risk that may lead to expensive measures with limited effect. In its advice – *De belichaming van de kundige overheid* (2012) (the embodiment of the skilled government) – the Council suggests general principles for risks and incidents: competence and empathy, open and honest, legitimacy, learning and accountability, and a clear division of responsibilities. The Council also issued a set of prospects for action.

1 In this advisory report, 'government' refers to public administration at the level of the national government, provinces and municipalities, as well as water authorities, non-departmental public body's and executive agencies. It includes parliament, administration and civil service.

The energy transition involves new technologies about which there may be little knowledge and/or experience. This calls for finding a balance between dealing with new security risks and creating space for innovation and progress. The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate is designing a risk policy for the energy transition based on a generic risk policy and incorporating the following building blocks: adapt legislation for new activities with known risks; adopt the precautionary principle that applies to unknown risks and/or missing legislation; apply policies for transition periods; monitor pilots; openly and actively communicate about risks; and, have an open mind towards developments. The premise for managing the energy transition's safety and health risks responsibly (in policymaking, extending permits, communications, and monitoring) is further explained in a letter from the Minister to the House of Representatives on 11 November 2022.

With support from the Ministry, the BOVEN (*Bestuurlijk Omgaan met Veiligheidsrisico's van de Energietransitie*, managing the safety risks of the energy transition administratively) administrative working group issued a guideline for the administrative handling of the safety risks involved in the energy transition.

Learning in transitions from the perspective of good public administration: learning on the job.

The question to the Council is how to learn well without the risk-regulation reflex hampering the energy transition. The Council understands both the concern about the risk-regulation reflex delaying the energy transition and the efforts to find the right balance between risks and innovations.

The outcome of a transition cannot be figured out in advance. One feature of transitions is that you do not know either the outcome or the phase you are in. Boundaries must be set within which learning and experimentation can occur. The message is thus: figure out what is acceptable within what boundaries. Learning in transition transcends sectors. Unexpected things happen while in transition, so the trick is to create space for learning. In short, learning is part of transition processes, and this puts pressure on public administration. Space must be created to make mistakes, try new things, and learn: *learning on the job*.

This advice from the Council prioritises the ability of the government to learn while working in transitions. The Council answers the question of what is needed in this stage by referring to the principles of good public administration. In its advice, the Council believes that following these principles would create the necessary conditions for learning in transition. The advice is for the Minister of Climate and Energy, but naturally extends much further to every layer of government (central government, province, municipality, water

authority, partnerships); every section (political, administrative, official body); and every domain (legislation, policy, implementation, surveillance, and enforcement). All these entities experience transitions in one form or another.

Good public administration

Good public administration means that the government respects the principles of the rule of law and that democratic principles are adhered to. In transitions, this means that legislation and policy are equipped to manage complex and uncertain processes, and to collaborate with many different actors and factors. Further, good public administration means that democratic accountability processes are effective and suitable for, in this case, the context of transitions. They are transparent and include space to learn from mistakes. Good public administration also means that the government has adequate administrative ability. It is a strong, stable, and learning government.

Aside from good public administration, the government must act with authority. This is essential to manage urgent issues and long-term policy needs such as transitions. However, this authority is under pressure. The Council suggests investing in the expertise, reliability, and involvement of the government.

Authoritative public administration

Governing does not only work better if citizens support the power of a government but governing with authority is also more legitimate. Without accepted authority, the only forms of power that remain will be forms that are not willingly accepted such as force. Legitimate authority is the degree to which an administration earns or should earn its authority. This should not only be in the eyes of citizens, but also be based on the achievements of a government.

ADVICE – legislation and policy are equipped to manage complex and uncertain processes, and for many different actors and factors

For government policy to be binding for citizens and companies, and be enforceable, it needs to be reflected in legislation and regulation. To achieve the goals of the energy transition, effective climate and energy legislation is essential. The Cabinet says that the climate policy needs an ambitious legislative programme.

To safeguard the progress and consistency of legislation, a high-level Interdepartmental Legal committee was set up under the aegis of the Ministerial Committee for Climate and Energy. This body will use a coherent legislative programme to watch and check the progress and planning of all legislation and regulations in climate.

Transitions have special characteristics.

1. Doing things differently than before.
2. Speeding up doing things differently.
3. The understanding that once the transition is achieved, decisions taken previously need to be reviewed.

The Council believes that the government and legislation should take these special characteristics into account. It is thus conceivable that the Government plays a greater role in the transition, particularly in the first phase, than when markets have emerged and are functioning. For example, it is defensible that as part of its involvement, the Government initially takes on certain activities and passes them on later and concentrates on regulating economic activities, surveillance, and enforcement.

Current legislation does not cover transition goals and new legislation is needed to avoid developments and investments from lagging behind the intended goals. The existing legislation is fragmented and compartmentalised and is viewed as an obstacle in current practice. Looking to 2030 and beyond, the question is also whether future legislation creates a firm enough basis to achieve the necessary climate and energy projects in a prompt fashion. The Council thus argues for a coherent legislative vision for transitions that is multiyear and at a sufficient level of abstraction that it goes beyond the operational. To achieve this, principles are conceivable in countless areas including the following.

- The relationship between public and private, in other words: what should be organised publicly and what privately?
- Market regulation, in other words: a fair energy transition that has a level playing field for new suppliers and innovations.
- The relationship between public entities, in other words: coordination of decision-making processes.
- Legal organic anchoring, in other words: giving authority and responsibilities.
- The division of scarcity and, by extension, the division of damages, in other words: what is allowed where and where not, and who takes part in gains and costs?
- Space for customisation, in other words: test and experiment with legally binding tailored agreements to learn about new legislation.

Legislation is perceived to be a hindering factor in transitions. The Council sees this differently. The legislator is the only body that can prescribe general accepted norms and in doing so offer legal certainty and thus help transitions progress. Good legislation supports the mobilisation of actors, the relevance of learning and evaluation, and the importance of experimentation.

In short, good legislation is a precondition for governance in transitions. An important consideration is that when thinking about interdisciplinary policy and legislation, the legislation is considered right from the start of the process. Legislation must be targeted on the final scenario which may mean that earlier starting points in the process need to be reconsidered.

Recommendation: define a coherent legislative vision for transitions that:

- Adopts a long-term view
- Does justice to uncompartimentalised work
- Thinks about legislation in transition goals from the start
- Encourages the setting of a learning curve in legislation by setting open standards about learning, evaluating, and experimenting that continually raise the bar
- Dares to push for legislation that encourages rethinking about existing systems.

ADVICE – democratic accountability processes are effective and suitable for the context of transitions. They are transparent and include space to learn from mistakes

The constitutional principles of accountability and trust need to be applied fairly. A government needs to be held accountable, but only if the administration has authority. There is no responsibility without authority. In accountability processes, the priority is to find the facts. In practice, this fact-finding phase is sometimes not sufficiently viewed as a separate phase. This phase all too often overlaps the judgement and assessment phase. There is a strong desire to quickly form judgements and an increasing trend towards an incident driven accountability culture. This is counterproductive to the ability of the government to learn. While a transparent and effective accountability process is desired, the opposite is achieved.

Genuine accountability is firstly looking back and answering the question of why that particular action was taken as accurately as possible. However, in the context of transitions, accountability also involves looking forward towards recovery or improvement. Learning from mistakes is part of this while a culture of judgement (with the predetermined goal of judging politics or officials instead of learning) is not.

Recommendation: in the context of transitions, design accountability processes for recovery or improvement instead of on judgement.

ADVICE – an open and just governance culture and a culture of healthy accountability

A learning government: open and just governance culture

The concept of governance culture is vague. It involves both values and ideas as well as factual behaviour at the level of the individual, groups, and organisations. We uphold governance culture as one aspect of each part of public administration. It covers norms and values that determine the organisational structure, decision-making process, and policy instruments. The governance culture here is pluralistic: one government has several concurrent governance cultures that complement each other or work against each other.

An open and just governance culture in which divergent views are encouraged is needed to become a learning government. It allows a culture of making mistakes, where there is a level of mutual respect, trust in the organisation, and where stakeholders are involved. A culture where there is healthy accountability, where facts take precedence, information is fully shared, people are not automatically held liable, and blame does not come first.

A culture like this allows diverse viewpoints – political and otherwise – and is useful to explicitly tell up front how much space there is to learn and is founded on values such as reasonableness and proportionality. Further, it is not only about good or bad, but the goal is also to get a picture of applications which will in turn create the space for the needed modifications or better applications. This is certainly different to a firm judgement about a result.

A governance culture where reflection on one's own and others' contributions occurs openly and honestly in a safe official and managerial environment is not a matter of course. However, everyone can co-create this kind of governance culture, whatever their role or responsibility.

It calls for certain attitudes and behaviours from politicians, administrators, and civil servants from all administrative levels. An excessive policy response, the risk-regulation reflex, does not fit in an open and just governance culture.

Recommendation: build an open and just accountability culture which gives public administration enough space to learn and improve instead of a policy-driven overreaction (the risk-regulation reflex).

ADVICE – adequate administrative ability: a strong, stable government and a learning government

Many things merge in transitions: knowledge, resources, capacity, and high expectations. To make this happen, it is important that the public administration has access to adequate administrative ability that is robust, resilient, innovative, and sustainable. Robust means that it can properly deal with setbacks and is resilient to crises. Robust also includes stable financial relationships that do justice to shared transition tasks across government layers. Resilience makes the public administration sufficiently able to recover from pressure or setbacks. One aspect of being innovative is being open to new things and reflection. It is essential that the public administration runs sustainably and takes future interests, such as future generations, into account when acting in transitions. Above all, administrative ability means having the capacity to learn from its own mistakes.

Recommendation: balance knowledge, resources, and ability with the ability to run robustly, resiliently, innovatively, and sustainably as a public administration body in transitions.

ADVICE – systems that encourage learning: receive critical feedback, really understand information and having the ability to discuss it, roll out measures for improvement, and remember lessons learned

A learning government: doing better today than yesterday

The Council believes that a learning government is a government that continuously – and with a degree of success – strives for improvement: doing better today than yesterday. A learning government continuously learns from its successes and failures, and continuously revises its systems, processes, and policies with new knowledge and understanding.

Learning from a problematic past ('failing') is necessary to avoid repeating it and to carefully examine the reason for failure. The point of looking back at successes is to learn from positive lessons about design and practices: good examples. In this context learning is about seeing and valuing existing elements while thinking about the future – the transition – with new opportunities for behaviour and organisation. An ability to learn is needed for this, as is the ability to process and use details and information to view the current situation critically and, if necessary, improve it.

This should be done at various levels, through policies and administration: at causal, reflective and value levels (single, double, and triple loop). A government should take learning seriously and ensure that critical feedback is perceived, information is genuinely understood and discussed, improvements are made, and lessons learned are not forgotten. A learning government thus creates the necessary feedback loops. The feedback loops also affect the organisation itself and means that a knowledge infrastructure needs to be created in the right places with knowledge brokers in the right place. It is simple: you improve through learning.

Example: *small wins*

In-depth change rarely appears in big compelling ways, but instead through a collection of small meaningful steps, in other words, through small wins. The 'small wins' approach was designed in recognition of this, and it offers actors working on transitions the potential for concrete action. The approach assesses what is going well, what interventions would strengthen, speed up and deepen these, and how persistent taboos can be broken. It needs a particular governance structure that emphasises various networks and a modest but enthusiastic leadership.

Example: *action research*

Action research is a method of research in which the people involved in an organisation or network jointly examine specified complex issues in their organisation and try to understand them while bringing about change. Action research may be called research, but it differs from more traditional forms of research because its aim is to bring about change. The usefulness and applicability of results in practice are thus prioritised.

Complex and uncertain processes that are coupled to transitions benefit from an environment that is open for learning evaluation. The learning evaluation method revolves around cooperation among researchers and those involved in the policy. The evaluation is done during the design and implementation of the policy instead of afterwards. The people involved can thus at once use any knowledge and understanding they get to adjust the policy. This method is particularly relevant in evaluating the efficacy and impact of the policy on complex tasks such as transitions.

Example: *learning evaluation*

The Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (PBL) and the Free University of Amsterdam's Athena Institute are conducting a learning evaluation of the *Interbestuurlijk Programma Vitaal Platteland* (intergovernmental programme for a vital countryside, IBP VP). The aim is to learn about the way in which IBP VP's mission can be designed in practice with stakeholders from the region and the programme. The learning evaluation research track is designed to get knowledge and experience about both the substantive tasks as well as about working differently.

'Evaluation' and 'learning' come together in learning evaluation. It is about mapping the contribution of policy interventions to the aims and stimulating policy-directed learning about these. In this sense, 'learning' means reflecting on the method, the thoughts, and ideas about problems, solutions, and one's own role in addressing these. Learning evaluation calls for a separate way of working from all those involved: more coordination, joint involvement and ownership, and a clear role division.

Recommendation: design processes of improvement according to the principles of feedback loops and learning evaluation.

ADVICE – jump walls: break down silos and learn from others

A learning government: jumping walls

The government is organised in subsystems, each with their own tasks and authorities and in which everyone does what is needed. However, a learning government looks over the walls of subsystems. Its people work toward getting experience, knowledge and normative understanding that can throw light on 'untamed' issues and to critically evaluate them. Research, field

experiments, systematic comparisons of what has been thought, developed, or designed elsewhere, can be instrumental in learning processes. Learning processes can be positively influenced through integrated cooperation with diverse groups, enlarging the ability to adapt, and developing good decision-making processes under uncertain conditions.

Example: *DuurzaamDoor*

The DuurzaamDoor programme is part of the Netherlands Enterprise Agency and brings governments and societal initiatives together. It is centred around learning and collaboration. It involves building networks, making connections, and sharing learning experiences to speed up sustainable developments.

In some cases, existing constitutional contexts create enough space to learn. But institutions themselves need to adapt and move with the tide, especially in transitions. What until recently was seen as legitimate ideas (such as scaling up) in agriculture and the institutions behind them (agricultural subsidies, bank loans, sector interests), are now viewed as part of the problem. The Government is also part of this and policymakers working on transitions need to look at themselves. This calls for self-reflective learning, not to acquire new knowledge, but to reflect on the whys of their actions.

Recommendation: organise learning processes and learning networks in which different parties work together and reflect on their actions as an integral part of the processes.

ADVICE – encourage employees to adopt a critical and curious attitude and behave as such

Learning government: attitude and behaviour

Really learning in transitions involves more than just calling oneself a ‘learning organisation.’ It is also about the attitude and behaviour of the staff. Only an organisation that has critical and curious staff members will become a learning organisation. Learning allows for better action, different behaviour, or different policies. Staff learning must be related to the goals and tasks of the government. It involves enhancing the ability to give meaning to facts. Staff learn if they gather knowledge about a problem on which they are currently working. Anyone that is critical about their work, curious, always asks what lies behind the thinking, looks for new knowledge to answer this, and creates

greater understanding of the context is someone who learns. Learning is thus a way of working, an attitude, and a behaviour.

Other factors that stimulate government learning include more moral reflection, systems thinking training, improving exchanges between science and policy, training for decision-making under conditions of uncertainty, facilitating group consultation, and creating a just culture.

Example: *just culture*

Just culture is a term taken from aviation. It involves a culture in which learning from mistakes arises from people reporting safety incidents. Accident prevention is crucial in aviation, so it is better to learn before the same mistake is made twice. Making mistakes is human. Not because people want to make them, but because people are people and not machines that can have built-in safety measures. A just culture never revolves around who makes a mistake, but around three other questions.

1. What went wrong?
2. Why did it go wrong?
3. How can we make sure that it does not happen again?

The question who made a mistake is not relevant. It is about everyone daring to report that something went wrong or that an unsafe situation occurred in which something could go wrong. It is also about the organisation using the reports to learn and improve safety. Learning from accidents is good. Learning in advance of behaviour that could lead to accidents is even better.

Recommendation: encourage attitudes and behaviours that are critical and curious and supply a range of activities that encourage learning.

