



Punctuated Equilibrium

Long periods of stability punctuated by short bursts of consequential change

The concept

Punctuated equilibrium, developed in policy studies by Baumgartner and Jones, holds that policy systems tend to oscillate between long periods of relative stability and short bursts of substantial change. The implication for those working on performance and reform is significant. The honest question is rarely how to plan a smooth trajectory across five years; it is usually how to identify the next phase of performance improvement, what that next lift looks like, and what the small number of consequential things are that must happen for it to land. Plans still matter. The discipline of recognising the punctuation, and of preparing for it, tends to matter more.

In practice

This frame underwrites the assurance work and the capability mapping we bring to performance reviews, including the training of gateway reviewers across Australia and New Zealand and the templates the practice has developed. It is the reason a five-year plan is, in our experience, worth rather less than a clear-eyed view of the next big lift, the conditions that will permit it, and the small number of moves required to secure it. We also use the frame in our public policy thinking, where it offers a grammar for change that smooth-trajectory planning often lacks.

Questions we ask in performance improvement conversations

- Where, on this organisation's trajectory, is the next consequential lift likely to come?
- What are the small number of things, properly done, that would create the conditions for that lift?
- Which apparent commitments in the current plan are in fact filling time until the next punctuation?
- What are the early signals that the punctuation is approaching, and are we attending to them?

Questions to ask yourselves

- Are we managing for a smooth five-year trajectory that the world has never delivered?
- When the last big lift happened, did we recognise it in advance, or only afterwards?
- Have we built the capacity to act decisively in the brief window when change is possible?
- Do our assurance and reporting systems flatten the punctuation, or surface it?

Red flags we look for

- Strategic plans that promise even progress across multi-year horizons in fields where progress has historically been uneven.
- Performance frameworks that reward incremental movement in periods when transformative movement is the only thing that will count.
- An institutional preference for stability narratives that obscures the imminence of a punctuation.
- An assurance regime that mistakes the absence of disturbance for evidence of progress.