

Think Tank Mentoring at NORC: Fostering Independent Think Tanks

- **What is Think Tank Mentoring?**
 - **What Makes a Good Think Tank?**
 - **Think Tank Mentoring – NORC Staff’s Experience at Work**
 - **Think Tank Mentoring Experts at NORC**
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What is Think Tank Mentoring?

Think Tank Mentoring requires sustained cooperation between a mature partner (institution) and an evolving think tank. The mentor must bring the ability to identify the priority needs of the think tank and the commitment to improving the think tank’s *effectiveness*, *efficiency*, and *sustainability*. A key goal of the NORC program is to create mentoring capacity at the regional level across the world.

- **Effectiveness** is measured by the institution’s impact on the policy development and implementation process, as well as by how successfully it informs the country’s citizens on the key issues of the day. Beyond the quality of its analysis, the organization’s communications strategy and execution are very important as well.
- **Efficiency** – the ability to employ resources well – is illustrated by such diverse actions as motivating staff and improving their capabilities; effectively supporting analysis with IT and other services; carefully tracking the use of funds, and managing projects to produce high quality analysis on time and within the budget.
- **Sustainability** begins with the diligent control of research product quality (and therefore the maintenance of the organization’s reputation); with the identifications of emerging policy issues in a timely manner to insure the relevance of its work; and with successful fundraising.

RESEARCHER OF RECORD	
	Senior Fellow Raymond Struyk spearheads the think tank mentoring program at NORC. Dr. Struyk’s groundbreaking research and consultations in this arena have contributed to many nascent policy organizations’ abilities to understand and participate in the policy process.

What Makes a Good Think Tank?

The attributes of a strong think tank would certainly include:

- The production of research and analysis that meets international standards;
- The implementation of an effective quality control system;
- The effective communication of findings to each relevant audience through a variety of tools and media;

- The motivation of staff to consistently produce high quality and innovative work. Staff's performance is explicitly evaluated and they have the opportunity to enhance their skills;
- Inventiveness – the institution's agenda shifts with the country's policy priorities but it also independently identifies latent policy issues, addresses them and moves them into the policy dialogue;
- Financial well-being – the institution is managed well; its overhead rate is rationally constructed, defensible, and adequate; its project costs are appropriately controlled; its discretionary funds are wisely invested. Results of its financial annual audit are readily shared with clients;
- The entrepreneurial instincts of the institution's leadership and how well the institution competes for work; and
- The effective employment of the institution's board to broaden its policy reach and stimulate thinking about possible new directions.

Think Tank Mentoring – NORC Staff Experience at Work

When those who are now NORC senior staff began working in Eastern Europe in 1990, it found nascent think tanks with whom it could partner. Some were nonprofit and others for profit, but all had one thing in common – the strong desire to improve the public policies of their countries and to actively participate in the process of economic restructuring.

These managers saw working with these think tanks as both an opportunity and a challenge – an opportunity to employ the local think tank staff's knowledge of the local situation, their language skills and their contacts and a challenge to introduce the local researchers to a new analytical paradigm and their firms to market-based business practices. Raymond Struyk's experience with the Institute for Urban Economics, Moscow, is exemplar.

INSTITUTE FOR URBAN ECONOMICS (IUE)

Perhaps our staff's most successful partner so far is located in a country that has experienced one of the most difficult transitions from the socialist model – Russia. Six professionals who had been working with the Raymond Struyk for several years, created the Institute for Urban Economics (IUE) in 1995. In 2007, IUE has 80 professionals on staff and has both expanded and deepened its expertise.

IUE's research staff, which originally constituted exclusively of housing policy experts, now works on a broad range of problems related to poverty and social assistance, municipal economic development and transportation, and social infrastructure (health and education).

Equally important, IUE's management systems have matured with its growth, making it in many ways a model for other think tanks in the region. Raymond Struyk, while at The Urban Institute, partnered with IUE on a number of projects over the years, with IUE often having the lead in the past five years.

See [www. Urbaneconomics.ru](http://www.Urbaneconomics.ru)

Think Tank Mentoring Projects, Publications, and Tools

Below are examples of the NORC staff's major initiatives in the field of think tank mentoring. The majority of them have resulted in publications, whose contributions to the think tank mentoring process are significant.

PRACTICAL MANAGEMENT GUIDANCE FOR THINK TANKS

A number of experts working with think tanks around the world have noted the high frequency of weak management practices and systems. These often result in an organization being less effective than it could otherwise be.

Raymond Struyk's book, *Managing Think Tanks*, now in its second edition, is unique in providing think tank leaders and sponsors with practical, immediately useful information on strong management practices. The book, which is based on in-depth experience with numerous think tanks with both strong and weak practices, contains chapters on: motivating staff for higher productivity, quality control, identifying new directions for the work program, creating team leaders, working successfully with the Board of Trustees, structuring the research staff, raising funds from government agencies, training program for think tank staff, and determining an overhead rate. Two additional chapters cover defining the information that senior managers need to be successful and a training program for think tank staff.

TRAINING FOR THINK TANK STAFF

NORC has a suite of workshops and courses available that have been taught to Policy Research Organization (PRO) leaders and staff in a half dozen countries. There are four courses to strengthen research skills and four to improvement management.

Analytic and Research Skills

In the Policy Fellows course, usually taught in cooperation with Institute for Urban Economics (Moscow) staff, participants build skills in policy analysis—something not often taught at universities in transition and developing economies. The eight-day interactive course relies heavily on practical examples and in-class exercises. Participants representing government, advocacy NGOs, and think tanks learn together and simultaneously build professional networks across institutions. Students have to pass tests to receive the certificate of completion. The course has been taught in seven countries.

Others courses in this group are on program evaluation (4 days), statistics for policy analysis (5 days), and regression for policy analysis (5 days), and preparing analysis plans (1 day). All are characterized by a focus on real world policy problems of the kind students are likely to encounter at their institutes. The statistics and regressions courses are held in computer labs where students learn to use SPSS in the analysis as they learn the analytic tools. The program evaluation course stresses correctly defining the evaluation task and getting stakeholder buy-in before turning to implementation and impact evaluation.

Institution Management Workshops

The four workshops taught to date are

- Setting a defensible overhead rate (2 days)
- Maintaining quality control at a think tank (half day)
- Efficient staff management (2-3 days)
- Strategies for communicating research results to policy makers (2 days).

Each of these has been taught multiple times.

MENTORING POLICY RESEARCH ORGANIZATIONS IN AZERBAIJAN AND BOSNIA

From 2003-2006 Raymond Struyk directed a three-year program to build the capacity of think tanks in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and during 2005-2006 a similar program in Azerbaijan. The projects' strategy for developing the policymaking institution had five related components:

- Improving the quality of analytic work produced and the understanding of such work through training courses with mixed classes of government officials and Policy Research Organization (PRO) staff and through international monitors advising PROs on research projects funded by the project,
- Strengthening PRO institutional management through a combination of workshops on key topics, e.g., how to establish a defensible overhead rate, and on-site management diagnostics that resulted in action plans for improvements,
- Developing management and stakeholder communications capacities in PROs, including issue-specific coalition building with NGOs, through training courses and in-house diagnostics and management mentoring
- Creating the view by decision makers that the products offered by PROs contain badly needed information by supplying quality analysis on a just-in-time basis and in accessible formats, and
- Establishing working relations between policy analysts and decision makers through formal (e.g., roundtables) and informal events.

An impact evaluation of the Bosnia program, published in *Public Administration and Development* in 2007, documented positive and substantial program impact.

NORC's Think Tank Mentoring Experts

Raymond Struyk, Senior Fellow

- In 2007 he led the assessment of the National Council for Family Affairs, a Jordanian think tank, covering its record in the policy development process, building effective coalitions, and institutional development. Comprehensive recommendations for improvements were provided to the Council.
- During 2003-2006 he directed think tank mentoring projects in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Azerbaijan. The tasks involve a broad program of workshops on management and research topics for the think tank and NGO communities and a focus on a small number of the most promising think tanks for strengthening both the quality of research produced and their management practices.
- He designed and implemented an impact evaluation of the effectiveness of the Bosnian technical assistance project (previous bullet) using a reflexive design and gathering information through interviews with senior policymakers and think tanks. Results suggested a strong, positive impact of the assistance program.
- He has conducted management diagnoses and prepared follow-on improvement programs for a dozen think tanks in Eastern Europe and the CIS.
- From December 1997 to September 2000, Mr. Struyk was the founding director of the Transition Policy Network, an Urban Institute-led consortium of public policy firms in the former Soviet bloc which is executing projects in the region. He established the new entity's permanent representative office in Budapest and recruited the first eight members.

- In 2002 the Open Society Institute and the Urban Institute Press published his *Managing Think Tanks*, the only comprehensive guide for think tank managers on eight key management tasks. An expanded 2nd edition was published in 2006. The book is widely considered the “industry bible” on the topic.
- In 1999 the Urban Institute published his, *Reconstructive Critics: Think Tanks in Former Soviet Bloc Democracies*, a comprehensive examination of the strengths and weaknesses of think tanks in the region.
- During the 1990s he was instrumental in the creation of think tanks in Hungary and Russia, and he has continued to work with and advise them since then.

Jeffrey Telgarsky, Senior Vice President, International Projects

- Prior to joining NORC in 2005, he was Director of the International Activities Center at the Urban Institute, Washington, DC for 12 years. In these roles, he works closely with foreign organizations collaborating on its research projects, providing assistance to ensure conformity with sponsor contractual requirements.
- In 1996, he and Makiko Ueno edited *Think Tanks in a Democratic Society: An Alternative Voice* (published by the Urban Institute Press), a volume that looked at the experience and effectiveness of think tanks in Europe, Asia, and Latin America.
- During 2001-2005, he managed a USAID-funded project Indonesia to establish the Foundation for Local Government Innovation, which became an independent Indonesian foundation in 2004 and has since carried out work funded by the World Bank, CIDA, GTZ, and other international sponsors.
- Struyk authored a chapter in *Managing Think Tanks* on financial management and sustainability of think tanks, focusing on the necessity of financial control and effective cost recovery to ensure the long-run financial health of the organization.
- Conducted training courses in Uzbekistan (2003) and Bosnia (2004) for local think tank managers on principles of financial management (including the development of overhead rates), research management, and business development in the contract research field.

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