

The Think Tank Primer
Strategies for Advancing Freedom Around the World

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Celebrating 25 Years
1981-2006

Introduction

The Atlas Economic Research Foundation was founded to promote classical liberal ideas, known more widely, as the ideas of liberty. Its founder, Antony Fisher, believed that free markets, limited government, rule of law, and private property rights offer the best ways to foster opportunity and prosperity.

Fisher further believed that independent think tanks are the vehicles of choice for teaching about free markets. He envisioned a network of think tanks working across the globe -- conducting workshops, publishing books, sponsoring debates, hosting student programs and essay contests, to illustrate the power of classical liberal ideas. By reaching the opinion leaders throughout society, think tank leaders cultivate a climate of understanding and opinion about free-market ideas that eventually leads to free-market policy reform.

In 2006, Atlas's celebrated its 25th anniversary. Its network consists of more than 200 organizations, spanning the continents across the world. Atlas annual Liberty Forum, along with its International Workshops, comprise the largest, international gatherings of free-market think tank leaders. The energy level at the workshops is tremendous, as participants eagerly share ideas, opinions, and strategies for "winning the battle" of ideas.

The battle centers around our shared belief that people should be free. They should be free to engage in trade, to travel where they want, to think what they want, to live where they want. They should be free to choose who to associate with and how they want to associate. They should be free to pursue the education they want, the profession they want, and the businesses they want.

Atlas friends believe that freedom leads to wealth and prosperity. When people have the freedom to dream, and act on their dreams, remarkable things result. New products are developed, new businesses come on line, new ideas become reality. Every day ways of doing things are uprooted, sometimes in positive ways, sometimes in negative ways. But in the process of pursuing dreams and ideas, the positive developments rise to the top and serve as the keystone for even more changes. Through this constant human action, change leads to development. From this development, flows wealth and prosperity, but most of all, hope and the belief that each of us can make our mark on the world.

Collectively, the think tanks in the Atlas network have amassed a wealth of information about "doing battle" and promoting our ideas. The purpose of this "Think Tank Primer" is to share some of that wisdom.

The free market think tank industry is relatively young so there is much that we have to learn. Yet, a handful of individuals, operating often on a shoestring budget, have achieved remarkable reforms. Think tanks in Eastern Europe, such as the Hayek Foundation in Slovakia, are largely responsible for improving the tax structure in that country through its flat tax. In Chile, the International Center for Pension Reform helped create private retirement accounts in 25 countries. In the US, state-based think tanks like the Independence Institute in Colorado lead the way in achieving a “Taxpayer Bill of Rights” as a way of limiting politicians’ abilities to raise taxes, or keep budget surpluses.

How have they achieved these reforms? What were the biggest challenges? What pitfalls can we avoid by learning from other’s mistakes? Most think tank founders do not hail from business school. They don’t come equipped with an understanding of fund raising, strategic planning, or communications. Instead, they are masters of ideas –or, as we call them at Atlas, “ideas entrepreneurs.”

Consequently, Atlas, in conjunction with organizations such as the Heritage Foundation and the State Policy Network, conducts seminars and workshops for ideas entrepreneurs to learn from each other. Our workshop speakers discuss their successes and their challenges, as well as offer specific practical advice.

As part of our 25th anniversary celebration, this volume shares some of the teachings from our many programs.

The chapters in this “Think Tank Primer” touch upon a wide range of topics that organizations in the Atlas network deal with on a daily basis. To the extent possible, Atlas works to leverage existing knowledge by minimizing the extent to which each new institute “reinvents the wheel.” We play a connector role, linking new think tank leaders to the people, ideas, and resources that can help them hit the ground running.

Atlas’s network partners operate across widely diverse cultures. Some of the chapters may be more relevant to your work than others. The thing they share is a common dedication to securing greater freedom in their homelands, and across the globe.

Atlas promotes freedom around the world by advancing a thriving think tank network. I hope the kernels of wisdom in this collection help you elevate your efforts. For additional tools, please consult that Atlas website at www.atlasusa.org. If you haven’t already done so, be sure you attend one of our international workshops. If you are new to this, welcome!

- Jo Kwong

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Contributors