



The First 100 Days in Government

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Your First 100 Days: Starting Strong as a New Leader in Government

As a new leader in government, you face an exciting yet daunting set of challenges: taking charge of a new organization; norming and forming your team; developing a substantive agenda and generating momentum behind it; figuring out how to get things done in government; and managing the tyranny of your inbox.

Getting off to a strong start in your first 100 days is crucial. It can make or break your success in office. First impressions do matter, and you will be in the spotlight the moment you walk through the door. Your first months in office will establish your credibility and reputation for getting things done – or not. If you get off to a rocky start, it can make achieving successes later much more difficult. During this period, it is important to establish priorities and develop key relationships with other leaders in the White House, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), other agencies, and on Capitol Hill. This time also offers a unique and invaluable opportunity to mobilize your organization around a common vision and journey. You need to capitalize on your "honeymoon" period when the organization is particularly open to your ideas and direction. Meanwhile, time is of the essence: the average tenure of a political appointee is only 18 months.

Key Insights from Top Public Sector Leaders and CEOs

While there is no guaranteed recipe for success, you can learn a lot from the most successful leaders in the public and private sectors. The following insights reflect the collective wisdom of dozens of former senior officials, CEOs and top military leaders. They offer a compass for finding your way on this new, challenging, and sometimes risky adventure.

1. Know and prepare yourself. In reality, the clock starts ticking before you take office. As soon as you are tapped for a position, take stock of your strengths, weaknesses, and leadership style. Be thoughtful about how you intend to fulfill this new role, what you will need to be successful, and how you will define and measure success. Learn as much as you can from the outside about your prospective organization, its challenges and opportunities. Begin to develop your objectives and priorities, and a sense of what you want to accomplish during your tenure.

In addition, take time to get the rest and perspective you will need to perform in your new role. Identify a few trusted advisers that you can reach out to for perspective, advice, and support. Choose people who will tell you what you need to hear, not just what you want to hear. They will keep you from living in "the bubble" that too often forms around senior appointees.

2. Know your organization and its "ecosystem." Once in office, avoid the temptation to immediately dive into the daily fray. Take some time to get to know your organization: Listen, ask questions, learn and reflect.

"Connect to your organization by asking questions. Listening is the highest form of respect. Ask questions that dig deeper...When I took command in Afghanistan, I would ask soldiers, 'If you could not go home until we win, what would you do differently?' You have to find way to unlock their hesitation to tell you what you need to know."

– Stanley McChrystal,
US Army (Ret.), Former NATO
Commander in Afghanistan

Understand the mission, roles, work and people in your organization and what makes it tick. Research the organization's recent history and reputation. How is it perceived externally? What problems and challenges does it face? Also be aware of important cycles within your organization such as the school year at the Department of Education, the budget process and the Congressional calendar. Study the transition materials prepared for you. Be sure to switch altitudes between the

"balcony" and "dance floor" to gain different perspectives on the organization. Engage not only your direct reports but also frontline staff. Conduct focus groups, get out of your office and visit people where they work. Sit down with a program manager and ask what she would do if she couldn't go home until a particular problem was fixed. Ask an administrative assistant what one thing would make him more efficient. Understand your resources and how they are allocated. Ask hard questions and identify trusted information sources at various levels of the organization. And be mindful of the fact that some members of staff may try to co-opt or pressure you to sign up to their agenda early on.

Don't be afraid to rethink and reframe your organization. But don't assume you are taking charge of a broken organization or that your predecessor was an idiot – most are not (even if they came from a different political party!). In fact, one of the smartest first moves you can make is to talk with your predecessors. They can provide a great deal of information, history and perspective on your organization (even if you may not agree with all of it).

Early on, map your larger "ecosystem" to identify who your customer is as well as your most important external stakeholders, particularly those whose buy-in is essential to advancing your agenda. These could include White House staff, OMB, counterparts in other agencies and key members of Congress or their staff. Reach out to them early to get an "outside-in view" of your organization. Ask them for their candid assessment of the organization and its performance, and listen carefully to their insights and advice. Over time, invest in building these relationships to provide you with valuable feedback and to get things done.

"The number one thing to do is to listen and understand the culture. If you come in only transmitting, you will encounter real resistance... And don't throw out everything just because you didn't invent it."

– Dov Zakheim,
former Comptroller,
Department of Defense

3. "It's a team sport, stupid!" Building a strong, cohesive and effective leadership team should be your highest priority. Nothing is more important than getting a capable team in place ASAP. As a new appointee, you will face one of two very different scenarios.

In the first scenario, as part of a brand new administration, you may find yourself "home alone" as the first confirmed official in your department or component organization. In this instance, you will need to spend lots of time reviewing resumes, interviewing candidates, checking references, and negotiating with the White House to get your choice of political appointees. This can be a full-time job! So appoint a trusted staff member with superb diplomatic skills to bird dog your priority personnel actions to ensure members of your team keep moving forward through the byzantine appointment process. Act early and be assertive to get the pick of the litter. The faster you fill your team, the sooner you can begin having real impact.

Surviving and thriving before your team is fully in place can be incredibly challenging. During this period, when you are waiting for your full team to be confirmed, you will need to rely on the mid-level political appointees whose positions do not require Senate confirmation (such as Deputy Assistant Secretaries) as well as your organization's senior career civil servants. Seek to harness the energy and initiative of the former and the subject matter expertise and deep institutional knowledge and experience of the latter. In addition, you may want to ask a few individuals from the previous administration who occupy mission critical positions to stay on as "holdovers" until their successors are confirmed. If they agree, treat them as the patriotic public servants that they are.

Under the second scenario, where you take office in the middle of an administration or in a second term, you may find yourself a relative latecomer "joining the party," and inherit a team you did not choose. In this case, spend time getting to know your team and assessing whether you need to make any changes to the roster.

"Winning over the bureaucracy is hard. They will wait you out if you don't win them over. You have to figure out how to reach down into the system and engage them, find people you trust. Hold town halls and cadre meetings. Host 'no fault' discussions to enable more creative and open discussions of key issues."

– Madeleine Albright,
former Secretary of State

In either scenario, the number of political appointees is likely to be quite limited so develop key relationships with career staff and ask your predecessor about the best leaders within the organization. It is absolutely critical to include senior career civil servants in your leadership circle. Don't treat them as hostile just because they faithfully served the previous administration – that's their job! Build trust and engage them and you will benefit enormously from their institutional knowledge and experience. You will also signal to the workforce at large that they are "inside the tent" and part of your team.

Take care on two fronts. First, you may naturally come to identify a small "inner circle" that you fully trust and rely on. Make sure that they do not become a barrier that prevents you from accessing others with valuable insights or insulates you too much from your own organization, as that would only create resentment and competition among those on the outside – and sap morale. Second, avoid supporting the wrong subordinates (i.e., those who are ineffective or, worse, abusive). The organization will take cues from who you choose to empower early. Get 360 degree perspectives on leaders before you empower them.

As your leadership team takes shape, be crystal clear about your expectations of them: how you see their roles and responsibilities; how decisions will be made; how you expect them to support you and to work together; and how they can expect you to hold them accountable. Then empower them to the maximum extent possible within that framework.

Make clear to your team the things that really matter to you: the issues you are determined to move down the field; the ones to keep on the back burner for now; and where you want your team to take risks to advance the ball versus playing it safe to avoid mistakes. If something is really important to you, put someone senior in charge of it and then hold them accountable for results.

Early on, and periodically thereafter, get out of the office with your core team to deepen relationships, trust and camaraderie.

4. Set your agenda and drive it forward. Start working with your core team immediately to define your mission and objectives, set your priorities, and develop your initial agenda as a leadership team. There is no better way to norm and form a team than to engage them as partners in developing your vision and strategy. The best leaders start with a clear understanding of what is expected, pick a few priorities, and then focus on them relentlessly to create momentum and results. Be clear about your measures of success for the organization and for yourself as a leader. Be equally clear about what you are de-prioritizing to make room for the important stuff.

"Early on, pick one meaningful issue on which you have enough information to make a good decision, and move out on that. It will send a signal of action and create momentum."

– Sheila Bair,
former Chairperson of the
Federal Deposit Insurance
Corporation (FDIC)

Don't be afraid to make a few big bets early on when your leverage is greatest based on the President's agenda and what you have learned in preparing for your position. What initiatives do you want to launch? What fights do you want to pick – or avoid? And in what order? While bold moves are not without risk, if they are carefully chosen and crafted, launching one or two in the first 100 days can help create real momentum.

Keep a running list of potential quick wins as well as the things you want to change over time. If something small can be fixed right away, do it. Early, visible improvements will send a positive signal and build your credibility. Trumpet and celebrate them throughout the organization.

As you build trust with your team, ask your senior civil servants to "bring out the dead" – make a list of the big festering problems that no one has managed to resolve. Then determine where you want to drive change. In some cases, you may have latitude in the first 100 days to make a change that your predecessor could not or would not.

Engage your broader organization as you iterate your agenda. Anyone whom you expect to help implement it should have a chance to provide input as it is being developed. Participation is key to buy-in, and buy-in is key to getting results. Enlisting the support of your broader organization will also create a reservoir of good will that you can draw on down the road.

5. Create an organizational culture that embodies your values and incentivizes the right behaviors. Be clear and explicit about your values and management style – how you will treat others, how you want them to treat you, and how you expect them to treat each other. Apply your values consciously, knowing that your actions will speak louder than your words.

A few best practices to consider: Don't shoot the messenger. If you punish pre-decisional dissent, you will not get the information you need to make sound decisions. Praise in public, criticize in private. How you treat subordinates will make headlines across the organization and can boost or decimate morale. Decide early how you are going to behave on the worst

"Remember that the tone and patterns you set at the outset will stay with you for a long time. Be conscious about what you do early on. Even small choices will send signals about roles, responsibilities and how decisions will actually be made."

– Stephen Hadley,
former National Security Advisor

of days, and then try your damndest not to behave any worse. Be mindful of your own habits: Imagine your every move projected on a movie screen and you get the picture. When you articulate values for the organization, be prepared to be judged by them. Consider the “optics” of even small things like how visitors are welcomed, how your meeting rooms are set up, and where you have lunch, as they will shape the perceptions and expectations of those around you.

6. Communicate, communicate, communicate... and then communicate again! As a new leader, it is virtually impossible to communicate too much with your organization. Remember the “rule of nine”: You have to say something at least nine times before it sticks!

“Communicate and connect with your organization in every way that you can. I gave speeches to each major community in the Navy, spoke to media targeting the Navy, wrote letters to the fleet, even set up basketball games so I could sit around and talk with junior officers and NCO’s.”

– Richard Danzig,
former Secretary of the Navy

Develop a compelling narrative of where you want to take the organization and how you plan to engage them on the journey. Tell the story again and again in forums such as meetings, internal messages, or your blog. If you don't create your own “frame” early, others (including the media) will do it for you.

Think about the best way to communicate your leadership style, priorities and direction. Make a public impression early on – host a town hall, celebrate an employee's leadership or a team's contribution.

Always, always assume that what you communicate to large groups will reach the media. There's no such thing as “off the record” in a large group in Washington!

Conclusion

As you try to manage all of this – and more! – in your first 100 days, remember that time is your most precious asset. So, do what only you can do, and relentlessly prioritize how you spend your time.

Beware becoming a slave to the demands of other people's calendars. If you find yourself spending all of your time responding to the agendas of others, stop. Use your calendar as a strategic tool to organize your time around accomplishing your priorities. One former Secretary of State used to start each week with a list of six things to get done that week, and then doggedly managed her time to do so. This requires daily vigilance and regular re-adjudication to delegate what can be done effectively by someone else, defer the unimportant, and make room for your priorities. People will also infer your true priorities from how you actually spend your time.

In addition, be sure to set some personal boundaries. You are running a marathon, not a sprint. But occasionally you will have to run intervals. Pace yourself for the long haul to enable the bursts of energy that will sometimes be necessary. Lock in time on your calendar for the things that recharge your batteries, whether it is a regular workout, a family dinner, a night out with friends or time for reflection.

Above all, keep your integrity intact. As a political appointee, you should come to work each day prepared to tell your boss what he or she needs to hear, even if it means incurring their wrath or risking your job. Every political appointee pledges an oath to support and defend the Constitution. Be true to that oath and, at the most fundamental level, you can't go wrong.

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