



THE FIRST TWO WEEKS

A GUIDE FOR INCOMING CABINET SECRETARIES



As secretary you will assume the leadership of all employees in your agency and lead implementation of the administration's priorities.

This guide outlines best practices and key actions to take on day one and in your first two weeks to support a meaningful orientation and increase effectiveness. It covers:

- ✓ **What** you need to know
- ✓ **Whom** you need to meet
- ✓ **What** you need to communicate

From day one, your focus will be on establishing and communicating your vision, mission, priorities and key issues:

- Across your agency, including regional and field staff
- Directly to your leadership team, including agency career staff in critical positions¹
- With key stakeholders, including business leaders, members of Congress, White House personnel and others involved in issues critical to your agency

Your political appointees will not all be in place on your first day, in your first weeks or even, potentially, in your first several months. Accordingly, career officials acting in these roles ("acting designees") will be available to support you until your entire political contingent is confirmed and on the job.

¹ In preparation for potential gaps between the exit and onboarding of senior political appointees between administrations, agency heads are required to identify qualified career employees to serve in critical noncareer positions in an acting capacity if a position becomes vacant. These "acting officers" were identified as of September 15, 2016, in accordance with the Vacancy Reform Act (VRA).

BEST PRACTICES

PEOPLE AND ISSUES



Identify subject matter experts, leaders and influencers who have deep institutional knowledge of your agency's administrative structure and seek briefings from them on the immediate issues, challenges and actions you will need to take.



Understand your agency's budget priorities as outlined in the fiscal 2017 and fiscal 2018 budgets, and the implications of the deadline to raise the debt ceiling, the expiration of the continuing resolution, and sequestration.



Establish relationships with your leadership team and build a trusted group of advisors, including political appointees and senior career civil servants. They will provide you with critical insights and institutional knowledge to inform your decisions.



Do not rely exclusively on written briefing materials as they are intended to frame, not replace, ongoing discussions with your leadership team. In-person briefings will give you more context on specific issues.



Be highly visible and meet your agency's workforce, including regional and field staff, so you engage with the people who will be critical in carrying out your agency's mission.



Communicate early and often:

- With the White House—about the president's priorities, alerting them to any urgent agency-related issues that arise, and responding quickly
- With your staff—about your goals and expectations, so they understand your vision and what you want to accomplish for the short and longer term
- With key stakeholders—who could impact your agency's priorities, operations and core business

STRUCTURES, SYSTEMS AND PROCESSES



Define and develop roles, responsibilities and procedures so you can establish from the beginning how your front office will run; be clear about what you expect from your team, including your deputy secretary and chief of staff (or acting designees); and communicate this to your agency, including the heads of your agency divisions.

Note: The front office refers explicitly to the secretary, deputy secretary and chief of staff roles.



Establish clear and open channels throughout your agency to communicate with all agency personnel, including career and political appointees, employees in regional offices and field offices, and customers. They will be critical in implementing your agency's mission, priorities and ongoing core business.



Orient yourself with “Center of Government” entities, including the Office of Management and Budget, the White House, and policy and management councils that will help advance your agenda.

Note: The Center of Government is defined as the entities that surround the president that he can use to implement his policies efficiently and effectively. Center of Government entities include the chiefs and deputy chiefs of staff to the president and vice president, senior White House staff, OMB and the policy and management councils.



Understand how your agency's systems and processes support delivery of agency priorities:

- Key areas include human resources, information technology, cybersecurity, privacy, acquisition, budget execution, financial and performance management. Failures in these areas could lead to negative press and draw attention away from the administration's agenda.

Note: if you have appointed your deputy secretary, give him or her this responsibility. By law, the deputy secretary will serve as the agency's chief operating officer.

ACTION CHECKLIST: DAY ONE

PEOPLE AND ISSUES

- Meet with your beachhead and leadership teams, including your deputy secretary, chief of staff (or acting designees) and agency transition point of contact to:**
 - Communicate your vision and immediate priorities
 - Receive briefings on the critical and immediate issues you will need to make on your first day(s)
 - Prepare for briefings with the White House

- Meet with your deputy secretary, chief financial officer, the OMB senior budget team, the assistant secretary for congressional affairs (or acting designees) and anyone else leading agency budget preparations to discuss:**
 - The impact of the fiscal 2017 budget, the debt ceiling increase (deadline: March 16, 2017) and the continuing resolution (expiring: April 28, 2017) on your agency's priorities and core business
 - The fiscal 2018 budget development status, including discretionary funding for election commitments and other agency priorities
 - Other critical and immediate budget-related decisions you will need to make

- Prepare for the unexpected (with your chief of staff and deputy secretary or acting designees and career staff) on your first day(s):**
 - You may be required to lead an immediate emergency response to an unforeseen critical issue that occurs
 - You may be called to attend a policy council meeting or White House briefings with the president and his senior staff, depending on the nature and urgency of the issue²
 - You may have to respond to urgent issues and attend White House briefings on short notice, so direct your office to schedule discretionary time in your calendar
 - Have a list of key White House personnel on hand, including the chiefs and deputy chiefs of staff to the president and vice president, assistant to the president for cabinet affairs, press secretary and other senior staff

- If you haven't already, meet with the president's chief of staff (in person or by phone) to:**
 - Clarify the president's expectations of your leadership role as a member of his Cabinet and how you will work with the White House
 - Discuss the president's priorities for the first 100 days and how this relates to your agency's priorities

Note: Depending on the pressures on the first day, you may need to prioritize this in the first few days.

² For example, on his first day at the Treasury Department, Secretary Timothy Geithner attended the daily economic briefing with President Obama in the Oval Office; met with Larry Summers, director of the National Economic Council; and, in the afternoon, met with Rahm Emanuel, the president's chief of staff, reflecting the priority and urgency of the response to the economic issues at the time. Secretary Eric Holder attended a Homeland Security Council meeting on his first day, several hours after he was sworn in as attorney general.

STRUCTURES, SYSTEMS AND PROCESSES

- Meet with your deputy secretary and chief of staff** (or acting designees) to establish the roles, procedures and responsibilities of your front office and division heads, and communicate those to the rest of the agency. This will bring structure and order to the influx of issues, documents and requests you will face from day one.

- Direct your office to schedule meetings with your leadership team and direct reports** (acting designees or incoming political appointees) to:
 - Prepare for any White House briefings or policy council meetings that day and in the coming week(s)
 - Understand the key agency workforce, technology, budget and other issues you will need to address in your first days and weeks

- Send an all-staff email to the agency introducing yourself.** Include your background, leadership vision and what you hope to achieve in your first 100 days.

ACTION CHECKLIST: FIRST TWO WEEKS

PEOPLE AND ISSUES

* Activities designated should be prioritized for the first week

- * **Prepare for:**
 - Calls and face-to-face meetings with key stakeholders, including with business leaders, heads of state and others
 - Initial or further White House briefings with the president and senior advisors, and attendance at policy council meetings

- * **Meet with your deputy secretary and chief of staff** (or acting designees) to discuss:
 - The agency's top mission-focused programs or priorities
 - Your plans for filling vacant political positions
 - The key enablers and inhibitors to achieving mission success
 - Any items on the GAO high-risk list
 - Your participation in Cabinet and policy council meetings
 - Interaction with OMB leadership, especially in relation to budget, regulations and other executive actions

- * If not done pre-confirmation, **be briefed by your designated agency ethics officer**

- * **Informed by your day-one discussions with senior White House staff, meet with your assistant secretary for public affairs** (or acting designee) to determine how you will communicate, internally and externally, on key planned and unplanned issues that arise.

- * **Meet with your agency congressional liaison and legislative team** to discuss the key players and committees, and the legislative landscape of the 115th Congress including:
 - Relevant congressional committee members and their views on issues relevant to your agency, particularly those members on the House and Senate authorizing and appropriations committees
 - Their view on the implications of the deadline to raise the debt limit, expiration of the continuing resolution and sequestration
 - Your preferred approach for preparing for any congressional hearings, as you may be called upon to defend your agency's budget on Capitol Hill soon after your confirmation

- * **With your deputy secretary (or acting designee), ask your chief information officer and chief technology officer** to brief you on the status of information technology and cybersecurity systems in your agency, immediate key decisions to be made and opportunities to drive change. You should also seek the views of your agency's IG and the White House CIO on these issues.

- * **Ask your chief human capital officer** to brief you and the deputy secretary (or acting designee) on any immediate decisions that need to be made, including in relation to:
 - The workforce and talent profile for your Senior Executive Service corps, the most recent request to OPM for additional SES members, and all vacancies
 - The demographics (retirement eligibility and diversity, for example), location and comparative workloads of all federal agency staff. *Note: This will reinforce your role in your agency as the leader of the senior executive service.*

- With your deputy secretary** (or acting designee), **establish a regular rhythm of engagement with your division heads individually and as a team** to discuss:
 - The insights of those acting in “critical” positions, how they support the agency and your priorities as secretary
 - Critical issues and priorities that you and your incoming political leadership team will need to address
 - Your expectations of their performance
- Meet agency staff at headquarters** through planned walkarounds and being in areas where many agency staff will congregate (e.g. the cafeteria), and set a strategy for visiting field and regional offices and their managers.³
- Hold a conference call(s) with regional administrators** to introduce yourself and your goals, and to schedule a conference call with all regional employees.
- Meet with the comptroller general and your agency’s inspector general** for their perspectives on the management, resource and operational challenges of the department, and any other issues they identify as needing to be addressed.
- Meet with key stakeholders**, including, business leaders, nongovernmental entities, interest groups and associations, union leaders, relevant leaders across other agencies, state, local and tribal governments (where applicable), foreign dignitaries and diplomats who will be involved in the issues for which you have responsibility.
- Discuss a potential senior leadership team retreat** with your chief of staff and deputy secretary (or acting designees) for when your entire political contingent is confirmed and on board.

STRUCTURES, SYSTEMS AND PROCESSES

- Meet with your beachhead team and agency transition point of contact** for an introductory briefing on agency issues, systems and processes you need to be aware of in your initial weeks.
- Meet with your deputy secretary and chief of staff** (or acting designees) to continue day one discussions and communication about the roles, procedures and responsibilities of your front office and division heads.
- Begin to communicate regularly with the agency about your priorities and personnel**—in person, on conference calls for regional and field offices, and via all-staff email communication.

³ In her first week, Secretary Clinton scheduled time to stop by the cafeteria at lunch to meet staff

RESOURCES

- Position descriptions for top leadership positions government-wide: <http://bit.ly/2fVkl3i>
- Federal agency profiles, including technology and workforce snapshots for federal agencies: <http://bit.ly/2iwxowl>
- Best Places to Work in the Federal Government rankings and analysis: <http://bit.ly/163rxrO>
- High Risk List prepared by the Government Accountability Office: <http://bit.ly/1KxYxXW>
- Office of Management and Budget reform recommendations: <http://bit.ly/2jaiflO>
- Center of Government concept map: <http://bit.ly/2iWoSd4>
- Ready to Govern onboarding program for political appointees: <http://bit.ly/1op8Ur3>
- Office of Government Ethics: <http://bit.ly/2jm0tuy>
- Office of Special Counsel: <http://bit.ly/2iWak8B>

Other resources are available on the Center for Presidential Transition's digital platform, including the calendars from former secretaries that list their activities during their first weeks and months following the 2008 general election: presidentialtransition.org



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