



THE FIRST TWO WEEKS

A GUIDE FOR INCOMING DEPUTY SECRETARIES



As the deputy secretary, you are pivotal to your agency's success. You are taking on a critical leadership role in your organization, and across government, by driving the vision, mission and priorities of the administration and the secretary, and making sure the agency is able to implement them. This guide outlines the best practices and actions you should consider on day one and over the course of your first two weeks. It contains the immediate tactical, operational and strategic actions you will need to take to hit the ground running.

There will be:

- **Expectations**—of your leadership role
- **Strategic priorities**—of the agency and administration, which should guide where you spend your time
- **Immediate decisions**—on budget and critical mission-support functions and systems
- **Ethics requirements**—including completing training, compliance and review(s)
- **Meeting people**—from your frontline staff and people in agency headquarters to staff in regional and field offices as well as other stakeholders
- **Lessons**—from former deputy secretaries' experiences

This guide covers:

- **What** you need to know and do
- **Whom** you need to meet
- **What** you need to communicate
- **How** you might do this

BEING THE DEPUTY SECRETARY

As the deputy secretary, you most likely will assume the role of chief operating officer of a large and complex government organization.¹ You likely will be responsible for aligning the agency's mission with its management and critical support functions (such as budget and finance, acquisition and procurement, information technology and human capital) and working with your counterparts in other agencies to implement the administration's policy and management agenda.²

As the deputy secretary, you are uniquely positioned to promote performance, innovation and informed decision-making within the agency and across the government enterprise. You have the opportunity to drive collaboration across agencies and apply enterprise solutions that will affect your agency and government as a whole. For example, you can foster innovative practices at your agency by encouraging and rewarding risk taking among your staff; adopt new technologies to consolidate and

streamline duplicative mission-support functions; and use performance measures to monitor agency progress toward major program and policy goals. You can also provide leadership on major management challenges that aren't limited to a single agency, by going through the President's Management Council, which aims to improve coordination and collaboration across agencies on government-wide management challenges.

From day one, your focus will be on establishing your role and getting to know your people as well as understanding the secretary's strategic vision, and the agency's mission and key operational issues. You will deal with important, urgent and often unforeseen matters that will affect where you spend your time and energy, and you may be required to manage crises on behalf of your secretary. You also will need to stay focused on the longer term strategic agenda of the agency and administration.

“The federal government's chief operating officers are the top leaders responsible for ensuring that these complex organizations are well-managed and operating effectively to execute their programs and achieve their goals. When they are successful, their agencies can accomplish amazing things.”³

“Many management challenges, such as improving customer service or preventing cyber-attacks, cross traditional agency boundaries and cannot be solved by individual agencies. These challenges require a government-wide approach...To improve interagency collaboration, COOs serve on the President's Management Council and help execute the president's management agenda.”⁴

¹ The COO role is established in law in the Government Performance and Results Modernization Act of 2010 (GPRAMA). In some agencies, the secretary and deputy secretary will adopt a “shadow secretary” approach to the deputy secretary role, which emphasizes the policy role over the chief operating role, as outlined in GPRAMA.

² OMB's A-1113 (2014) further clarifies COO responsibilities regarding performance management

³ Partnership for Public Service and Booz Allen Hamilton, *Bridging Mission and Management: A Survey of Government Chief Operating Officers*, June 2015, 4. Available at <http://bit.ly/2m9Pnhb>

⁴ Ibid, 25

Tactical issues that demand your immediate attention could include:

- Major stories in the mainstream (or social) media that may require an official response
- Pending inspector general and other investigations, HR and union issues, and Government Accountability Office reports
- Regulations attracting attention from stakeholder groups and the media
- Major court cases affecting the agency, directly or indirectly
- Imminent congressional hearings and legislative proposals, and significant budget issues
- Direction from, and liaising with, the White House

Significant operational issues that need to be addressed may include:

- Any major mission-support challenges in administrative functions such as budget, finance and HR systems; acquisition and procurement processes; or information technology, workforce and human capital issues that include performance shortfalls, service interruptions or delays, and results from employee-engagement surveys
- The status of major acquisitions (or their implementation) that may come under IG or congressional scrutiny regarding cost, schedule and functionality
- Working with your secretary to ascertain your COO duties
- Working with your chief of staff and the secretary's to determine the responsibilities of your "front office"—which comprises the secretary, his or her chief of staff and you
- Governance processes in your agency

Strategic issues that need decisions in the short term may include:

- Major program and policy initiatives that are at a critical implementation stage
- The status of the current and proposed budgets, and their effect on your agency's priorities and performance
- Your agency's strategic plan and performance metrics measuring progress against desired outcomes, including relevant agency and cross-agency priority goals established pursuant to law
- Congressional activity and engagement, including oversight, investigations, pending legislation and appropriations

Your agency's political appointee team will not all be in place on your first day, or potentially even in your first several weeks or months. Accordingly, it will be critical to build relationships, trust and rapport with the career officials acting in these roles—not just because they will be available to support you until your entire political contingent is confirmed and on the job but because you will need their buy-in and support to succeed.

Key relationships include:

- Senior career executives in critical positions⁵
- The Office of Presidential Personnel staff as you assemble your team of political appointees, in coordination with your secretary, chief of staff and the White House liaison, who will keep you connected on a day-to-day basis
- White House senior staff, including the chief of staff, senior advisors and stakeholders such as business leaders, interest groups and associations
- Your personal office and immediate support staff, and your direct reports, such as your chief financial, human capital, technology and information officers, and assistant secretaries for program areas

⁵ In regards to acting officers, the Edward "Ted" Kaufman and Michael Leavitt Presidential Transitions Improvements Act of 2015 states the following: "Not later than September 15 of a year during which a Presidential election occurs, and in accordance with subchapter III of chapter 33 of title 5, United States Code, for each noncareer position in an agency that the head of the agency determines is critical, the head of the agency shall designate a qualified career employee to serve in the position in an acting capacity if the position becomes vacant."

BEST PRACTICES

PEOPLE AND ISSUES



Understand and help shape the administration and your secretary's vision and priorities for your agency.

This will inform discussions with your secretary about your role (see below), including how you will drive the administration's policy and program goals, and support the agency's operations, including day-to-day program delivery and mission-support functions.



Get clarity on what your secretary expects of you in your role as chief operating officer, including what you will have direct responsibility for, how this supports the secretary's role and what immediate issues you will be responsible for:

- As a COO, you will set policy, lead high-profile programs and initiatives, deal with external stakeholders, oversee organizational operations management and serve as the secretary's alter ego
- While the GPRA Modernization Act of 2010 establishes the chief operating officer role, some deputy secretary roles have focused more on policy than management

Note: While much of the COO role is described in law, each secretary and deputy secretary (or agency equivalent) could tailor the role to their skills, experience and personality



Establish trust and rapport with the career leadership. These leaders have significant institutional knowledge of the agency, what has worked and what hasn't, the key issues, and the policies and programs that will be crucial to your ability to deliver on the agency's mission. Many career officials will have been acting in critical leadership positions while new political appointees were being confirmed. They will help accelerate your understanding of:

- Informal organizational structures and relationships in the agency and across government, including with Capitol Hill and the media
- Significant legislation, litigation and other hot topics you may be required to respond to immediately
- Key stakeholders and interest groups you will need to reach out to in your first two weeks



Communicate early and often. Be highly visible, engaged and candid with the agency's workforce, including regional administrators and field staff. Making it a priority to learn about how your agency operates and its structure, core business and stakeholders, will enable you to build rapport with and support from the teams responsible for executing policies and programs, even when you need to make difficult or unpopular decisions.



Understand and prepare to drive your agency's budget priorities, and recognize how this will affect the agency's priorities and your role in your organization's budget-related activity. While this may require a significant amount of your time in your first two weeks, it will be critical in shaping what the agency can and cannot do for years to come.



Understand employee engagement and human capital at your agency including any skills gaps, needs of the SES cohort and overall attrition, and establish agency employee-engagement priorities. Current and past Federal Employee Viewpoint Surveys and other key human capital indicators (e.g. attrition, retention and critical skill gaps) can provide insights to inform these priorities.



Speak with past deputy secretaries who were successful in the role and ask:

- What challenges they faced on their first day and first two weeks
- How they approached their discussion with the secretary about their role as the agency's COO
- How they built productive working relationships with the agency's career staff

Note: The Partnership for Public Service will be able to assist you in connecting with former deputy secretaries.

STRUCTURES, SYSTEMS AND PROCESSES



Seek the expertise of your agency's chief human capital, IT, finance, procurement and acquisition officers, and chief management officers, to understand the key issues that will affect policy implementation and agency operations. It is critical to establish these relationships early to acquire institutional knowledge and strengthen the sustainability of operations from the beginning.

Note: In some agencies the chief management officer will be the assistant secretary for administration and management. In others, it will be the under secretary for management.



Define and develop roles, responsibilities and procedures so you can establish from the beginning how the front office (secretary, secretary's chief of staff and you) will run the agency. Communicate this clearly to the political and career heads of your agency's divisions.



Get to know and establish trusting relationships with “center of government” personnel and organizations that will help advance your secretary's agenda. Start by familiarizing yourself with existing processes to determine how you will use them. Key personnel and organizations include:

- White House senior advisors
- Key Office of Management and Budget officials and career staff
- OMB's deputy director for management, chief financial officer and the Office of Federal Procurement Policy
- Policy and management councils



Prepare to be an active participant in the President's Management Council, which you are a member of, to gather intelligence, build cross-agency relationships and gain an understanding of government-wide management challenges and the administration's management agenda.⁶ PMC attendance is critical if you are to fulfill the GPRA Modernization Act requirements that hold you accountable for achieving specific cross agency priority goals.

⁶ The PMC comprises the Chief Operating Officers of major Federal Government agencies, primarily Deputy Secretaries, Deputy Administrators, and agency heads from GSA and OPM and is chaired by the Deputy Director of OMB. Further information about the PMC and other management councils can be sourced from GSA (<http://bit.ly/2D4ZHvl>). Historically, PMC commence once the deputy director for management is in place.

ACTION CHECKLIST: DAY ONE

Meet with your secretary (along with the secretary's chief of staff) to discuss:

PEOPLE AND ISSUES

- His or her expectations (and yours) of you and your role in setting policy, leading mission-critical priorities, directly managing agency functions and systems down through the chain of command, and overseeing key internal and external stakeholders
 - You should consider developing a set of expectations that guide how your role aligns with the secretary's. You may also wish to do this with your team.
- Decisions on urgent issues that you and the secretary have identified, such as critical IG and GAO investigations requiring action and any items on the GAO high-risk list
- Methods for how the two of you and other trusted advisors will communicate internally and externally on issues, including those that arise unexpectedly, including with the press
- The status of and plans for filling vacant political positions
- Major issues that provide opportunities for cross-agency collaboration and existing initiatives and resources that support an enterprise approach

STRUCTURES, SYSTEMS, AND PROCESSES

- Preparation for any briefings with the White House that you and/or your secretary will attend
- Your participation in policy and management council meetings, including the PMC
- The frequency of your meetings with the secretary, as well as with the agency's senior political leadership team and, wherever possible, senior career executives, to get their insights and build support for the secretary's (and administration's) priorities
- The roles, procedures and responsibilities of the front office and division heads; once established, communicate these to the rest of the agency to bring structure and order to the influx of issues, documents and requests you will face from day one

Note: It is critical you begin discussions on these issues on the first day. It is unlikely you will get through all recommended discussion issues, but those that arise on day one should form the basis of ongoing discussions with your secretary throughout your first two weeks and beyond.

Meet with the political and career leadership at headquarters and office levels (or acting designees) to:

- Communicate the respective roles, procedures and responsibilities of the front office and your expectations of your direct reports
- Get briefed on the critical and immediate issues you will need to make decisions about including immediate agency human resources, technology, budget, acquisition and other management and operational issues

Prepare for the unexpected (with your secretary, his or her chief of staff, your chief of staff and other subject matter experts, as required) on your first day(s):

- You may be required, in place of your secretary, to attend White House briefings or external speaking engagements, respond to reporters or social media, or address urgent issues and adverse publicity, so build time in your calendar for these contingencies

- Have a list of key agency and White House personnel on hand that includes the chiefs and deputy chiefs of staff to the president and vice president, the White House cabinet secretary and communications staff, reporters and media outlets covering your agency's programs
 - Prepare for calls and face-to-face meetings with key stakeholders, including business leaders, nongovernmental entities, interest groups, associations, union leaders and other relevant leaders across agencies as well as state, local and tribal governments, who will be involved in the issues you have responsibility for
- As part of your efforts to familiarize yourself with the budget, **meet with your secretary, chief financial officer, OMB senior budget team, the assistant secretary for congressional affairs** and other experts, to discuss immediate fiscal issues and decisions pending in your agency and your role in addressing them, including:
- The impact of the current fiscal year budget on the agency's priorities and core business
 - The status of the future fiscal year budget request, including discretionary funding for presidential commitments and other agency priorities
 - Other critical and immediate budget-related decisions that you, the secretary and the CFO might need to make
- Have your office schedule meetings with your chief officers** (referred to as "CXOs") to:
- Understand the key agency workforce, technology, acquisition, finance and other issues you will need to address in your first days and weeks
 - Prepare for any White House staff briefings and policy and/or management council meetings that day and in the coming week(s)
- Note: You should establish a regular schedule of meetings with your chief officers, individually and as a team, to discuss program performance, mission priorities, risk management and the operational status of functional systems. One-on-one meeting issues are outlined in your "first two weeks" below, with the exception of the CIO, given the importance of cybersecurity.*
- Meet with your technology team including your **chief information officer, chief technology officer and/or chief information security officer** so they can brief you on any immediate decisions that need to be made, including in relation to:
- The status of cybersecurity systems and programs in the agency and its divisions, and opportunities to drive change
 - The organization of IT in the agency and its divisions, IT spending, staffing and performance issues
 - The agency's performance under the Federal Information Technology Acquisition Reform Act (FITARA)
- Note: You may wish to invite your secretary and his or her chief of staff to this initial briefing. You should also seek the views of your agency's IG, the GAO and the White House CIO on these issues.*
- Send an all-agency message to the agency introducing yourself.** Include your background, leadership vision and what you hope to achieve in your first 100 days. This will help you connect with staff as they get to know you, your priorities and expectations.

ACTION CHECKLIST: FIRST TWO WEEKS

* *Activities designated should be prioritized for the first week*

- * **Meet agency staff at headquarters** through planned walkarounds, going to areas where many agency staff congregate (e.g. the cafeteria or the building entrance)
- * **Plan corporate communications** to convey to staff from the beginning what you want done and why. For example, you may preface your discussions with agency staff (at headquarters and in field/regional offices) that you will be spending time over your first few weeks to listen and learn about the agency's people, programs and other priorities
- * **Set a timetable for visiting field/regional offices** and their staff:
 - Learn about their priorities and programs and how they connect to and support the agency and administration's priorities
 - Build on communication that has occurred between the secretary and regional administrators
- * **Get briefed by your designated agency ethics officer** (if not done prior to confirmation)
- * **Develop a strategic calendar**, informed by your discussions with the secretary, so you don't lose sight of what's important when urgent matters arise
- * **Meet with your chief management official** (i.e. the under secretary for management or assistant secretary for management) to:
 - Discuss the roles and responsibilities for agency management and operations, and to clarify your respective roles and how you will work together
 - Determine how you will assess the capabilities of the agency and its divisions; this assessment should cover security, procurement, budget execution, strategic planning and performance management
 - Establish a corporate-level risk-management system to validate and analyze performance data and develop plans to manage identified risk
 - Discuss the development of performance-management systems so they align with and inform decision-making (as a staff-driven organization)
- * **Meet with your chief human capital officer** to get briefed on immediate decisions that need to be made, including in relation to:
 - The workforce and talent profile, including for your Senior Executive Service—which should take into account the most recent request to OPM for additional SES positions, recruitment strategies, the number of SES vacancies and SES rotation plans
 - The demographics (e.g. retirement eligibility and diversity), location and comparative workloads of all federal agency and contract staff
 - The organization of HR in the agency and its subcomponents
 - The agency's employee engagement score, attrition rate and hiring freeze plans

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- * **Meet with your chief financial officer** to get briefed on immediate decisions that need to be made, including in relation to:
 - The status and governance of the working capital fund (where applicable) and if it is adequate to support agency operations
 - The availability of funds to advance agency priorities and programs
 - Status of audits, budget execution and any significant shortfalls

 - * **Meet with your chief acquisition officer or chief procurement officer** to get briefed on immediate decisions that need to be made, including in relation to:
 - The major contracts that exist in the organization
 - Major contracts that will be up for renewal in the first six months of your term

 - Meet with your agency's inspector general** to understand issues the IG identifies as relevant to your responsibilities, and that need to be addressed

Note: You should coordinate this meeting with your secretary, who may already have met with your agency's IG

 - Call the deputy director for management at OMB** to introduce yourself and discuss:
 - The White House's management priorities
 - Your responsibilities for overseeing mission-support functions and integrating management reforms with program and policy goals
 - Priorities and challenges for enterprise-wide mission-support functions (human capital, technology, acquisition, financial management, and budgeting and performance management)
 - Best practices for interagency and intergovernmental coordination
 - Expectations for how to strengthen government management performance and implement management priorities
 - Issues that will be covered at your first PMC meeting
 - Strategic planning and cross-agency priority goals

 - Call the deputy director for budget at OMB** to introduce yourself and discuss:
 - The White House's budget priorities
 - Key opportunities and challenges relating to your agency's immediate and future budget priorities
 - Enterprise-wide issues that will affect your agency's operation in the immediate and longer term
 - The interaction and coordination between the budget and management branches
 - Any concerns you might have about available funding for policy and program priorities for future budget cycles

RESOURCES

- A Guide for Incoming Cabinet Secretaries: <http://bit.ly/2l8MSMn>
- Bridging Mission and Management: A Survey of Government Chief Operation Officers: <http://bit.ly/2m9Pnhb>
- Position descriptions for top leadership positions government-wide: <http://bit.ly/2fVkl3i>
- Federal agency profiles including technology and workforce snapshots for each CFO Act agency: <http://bit.ly/2iwxowl>
- Best Places to Work in the Federal Government rankings and analysis: <http://bit.ly/163rxrO>
- Government Performance and Results Modernization Act of 2010 (GPRMA): <http://bit.ly/2m4gObY>
- 2017 High Risk List prepared by the Government Accountability Office (GAO): <http://bit.ly/1KxYxXW>
- GAO Report outlining the chief operating concept: <http://bit.ly/2ITjvLi>
- Office of Management and Budget reform recommendations: <http://bit.ly/2jaiflO>
- Center of Government concept map: <http://bit.ly/2iWoSd4>

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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