

MANAGE YOUR ENVIRONMENT

First, pace yourself. You can't do it all in the first 100 days. Your agency needs leadership more than it needs you to work long hours. You will find that your biggest impact will come through your ability to maintain a focus on your vision for the agency and on your stakeholders, to keep your agency focused on your top priorities, and to manage crises that are sure to come up during your tenure.

Second, your vision needs constant repetition. You need to maintain your relationship with key stakeholders so there is a good foundation for resolving the inevitable issues. You cannot allow the many urgent crises to push your program priorities to the back burner. You need to keep crises from taking all of your time and the agency's.

Third, you must constantly be aware of all your stakeholders and proactively manage your environment.

In a 2016 report on the importance of taking an enterprise-wide view of the governmental environment, Jane Fountain, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, writes that government increasingly “operates across boundaries and engages in coordinated, cross-agency collaboration to address many of the nation’s complex problems.” She advises that: “Leaders will accelerate achievement of the president’s priorities if they understand and use multi-agency initiatives and integrated management as key levers to accomplish policy goals and prevent operational failures.”*

Manage the politics.

One of your most important roles will be the political dimension of managing your agency. We will not be so presumptuous as to tell you how to do this. To put it simply, you must stay on top of the political issues. You must be careful in delegating political issues to your political staff. Keep a wide gap between political activities and your career staff. Also, keep a wide gap between political and agency activities.

Manage the stakeholder relationships, but save your personal time for the most important ones.

Your agency has long-standing relationships with the White House, the Office of Management and Budget, Congress, customers, industry, oversight bodies, and the media. These relationships transcend any individual program or decision.

Managing these relationships will be one of your most important roles. In some cases you will want to get personally involved. In other cases it will work better if your staff does it. Managing stakeholder relationships is a bit like

* See *Additional Resources*, page 138.

business world negotiations, which ensure that senior executives are brought in only at the appropriate time. Your personal involvement should be reserved for the most important issues or the most senior stakeholders. Make sure your subordinates are appropriately involved and step in as needed.

Meet regularly with your senior political/career management team on agency programs.

You are the head of a large agency that needs to be well managed. Most of this will be done by your senior management team. Meet regularly with them, making sure they are on top of what matters to the agency, not just what matters to you. This will help keep a secondary problem from turning into a full-fledged crisis and requiring your personal time. Make sure people who have the right training, experience, and aptitude are in charge of day-to-day management. The best policies in the world are worthless if the agency implementing them is adrift.

Don't take too long to fill important jobs or let key decisions slip.

Decisions need to be made in a timely manner because the consequences of making no decision are often worse than choosing the less-than-perfect option. Management slots need to be filled rather than left empty for months or even years, as is too often the case. Budgets have time limits on their availability and need to be allocated to programs early enough in the year so the money can be spent wisely—not “dumped” into an available program weeks before the money expires. Leaders with only policy expertise need deputies who are good at management, and they must work well with and support the deputies in making the regular hard decisions to keep policy implementation on track.

Empower your team, stay current with what they are doing, and focus on the big picture.

You are here to run an agency, not do projects. You have built a joint political/career team. You have ensured that the right people are in the right jobs. Empower them to deliver on the program. Follow up regularly on the progress.

Conserve your energy for what really matters. You may have to work directly with Congress. You may have to resolve disputes between different parts of your agency. You may need to engage with the White House. You may even have to engage on specifics with OMB, which over the past few presidencies has become increasingly involved in internal agency operations. Think of yourself as an orchestra conductor, not one of the musicians.

Reward innovation, collaboration, and success.

The federal government's incentive system puts too much weight on process and not enough weight on results, and it tends to be more top-down than collaborative. Process is a necessary element of program management, but alone it is not sufficient. Innovation is an important means to deal with shrinking budgets.

Organizations throughout the world increase their effectiveness through collaboration. By collaborating we are not invoking altruism and the value of working together for the common good. Appeals to altruism are of limited value. Appealing to the self-interest of different links in a chain has enormous value. Effective collaboration depends on pursuing pragmatic policies such that the various participants individually gain from the collaboration. Find ways to reward innovation, collaboration, and results. There are already enough incentives to follow existing procedures.

Manage the crises. Plan for unpleasant surprises and act quickly when they happen.

No matter how effective you are, how strong your team is, or how popular your programs are, something will go badly on your watch. All you can do is take steps to find out about those ticking bombs, take steps to avoid them before they go off, and be ready to address the issues when they do. Make your people think the unthinkable and prepare contingency plans. When the surprise happens, it will probably be something that wasn't planned for, but the anticipatory effort will make your agency better prepared.

When—not if—something does go wrong, the rules are straightforward. Act quickly to fix or mitigate the problem. Tell the public what happened and what you are doing about it. Do not try to cover it up. Cover-ups always fail and often cause more damage to your credibility than the original problem. Get information out quickly as you learn it. Only give out information that you know to be accurate. If you don't know, say you don't know. Yes, you may be criticized for not being on top of the situation, but it is worse to be attacked later for sending out misinformation.

Manage yourself. Don't let your calendar manage you.

Your priorities will come from the president and the White House, but you have some latitude. To frame it perhaps too baldly, you have the opportunity to make a big difference on a few things or no difference on a great many things. Many of your predecessors have found that they could get things done by focusing on a few priorities and not letting themselves be distracted—and there are many distractions. Your agency faces a great many problems. Addressing those problems crosses many diverse interests. Solutions tend to cross the boundaries between agencies, interest groups, and the private sector. Getting anything important done is difficult and will require your undivided attention.

Your calendar and in-box will be your worst enemies. Every day someone will want you to give a speech. Every day there will be too many meetings. Every day there will be too many documents to read and sign. Find ways to make those demands part of someone else's day so you can concentrate on what really matters. Delegate so you can concentrate.

Find people who will tell you the truth. Listen to them.

It is human nature to tell the boss what he or she wants to hear. You will have a communications organization working hard to put everything you do in the best possible light. You will have people coming to meet with you who want your agency to take some action. They, too, will tend to tell you what they think you want to hear. Much of the political establishment will be doing the same. Congressional oversight hearings might seem to be an antidote to this, but they are more often exercises in political theater than an attempt to convey a realistic picture of what is really going on.

Find people who will speak straight to you and tell you what you should worry about. Family and friends can be invaluable for this, but they often are not as close to the issues that matter for your agency as you might need. Find ways to talk to frontline employees as well as customers and citizens that deal directly with your agency. You may be able to learn more in five minutes from a real customer than in any status briefing.

Embed your legacy in the career bureaucracy, not your political subordinates.

Programs and policies that last longer than a single administration depend on at least some degree of consensus between the two political parties and the executive and legislative branches. You are best positioned to determine if your legacy meets this political test and can outlast your tenure. You should also embed your programs in the hands of your career staff.

You may want to use political appointees to get the programs started, but transition those programs to the careerists as soon as practicable. The later you do this in an administration, the more you risk that your successor will take your programs in a different direction.

Maintain a sense of proportion.

The work you do will be extremely important. Unfortunately, everyone will be telling you that and how important you are as well. After a while, it may be difficult to maintain a realistic perspective. Not everything you do will be important and not every action you take will be the right one. You may even receive more criticism for doing the right thing than if you had done the wrong thing. Friends and family can be an important counterbalance to overstated compliments or unfair criticisms. Stay connected to them.

We also suggest adding “the mother test” in deciding how important things are. Imagine explaining to your mother why something is important. If you think it’s unlikely she would agree, perhaps it isn’t important.

Do the job, don’t be the position.

Your job carries a title, a lot of prestige, a nice office, and an attentive staff. You should concentrate on what you can accomplish from the leverage of that position. Archimedes, the ancient Greek philosopher, is purported to have said, “Give me a lever long enough and a place to stand on and I will move the world.” This job gives you the lever and the place to stand.

Don’t burn your bridges.

Washington is a “society of immortals.” The organization you work with today will work with you tomorrow. The people you see today you will see tomorrow, though their business cards or even their party affiliation may change. The issue you work on today will come back tomorrow in a new incarnation. Disagreements or dishonesty will be remembered. Don’t burn your bridges; your ally today may be your adversary tomorrow and your ally the day after.

Takeaways

- Manage the politics.
- Manage the stakeholder relationships, but save your personal time for the most important ones.
- Meet regularly with your senior political/career management team on agency programs.
- Don’t take too long to fill important jobs or let key decisions slip.
- Empower your team, stay current with what they are doing, and focus on the big picture.
- Reward innovation, collaboration, and success.
- Manage the crises. Plan for unpleasant surprises and act quickly when they happen.
- Manage yourself. Don’t let your calendar manage you.
- Find people who will tell you the truth. Listen to them.
- Embed your legacy in the career bureaucracy, not your political subordinates.
- Maintain a sense of proportion.
- Do the job, don’t be the position.
- Don’t burn your bridges.