

ACT QUICKLY

Developing an understanding of how things work will be one of your early priorities, but you will also need to take some near-term actions. Asking your agency's career staff, customers, key stakeholders, and fellow political appointees questions is the fastest way to learn. Use them all.

G. Edward DeSeve, who served in the Clinton and Obama Administrations in a variety of key roles, recommends that incoming leaders “use existing support functions within their organizations.” He says, “Understanding and leveraging existing governance frameworks and processes can speed decisions on presidential priorities.”*

Start to communicate immediately with your new agency's staff with a short, positive message.

Depending on the size of your agency, you may never meet most of your employees, but they will be critical to your success. One of your first acts should be to communicate with them so you can start the relationship on the right foot. You may not know everything you want to do at the beginning, but you still have things to say. Give them a broad-brush picture of what you want to accomplish. Tell them you value their mission and you value their contribution to it. Tell them that part of your approach will be to listen to them to get their insights. Convey a sense of urgency. Don't say what they have been doing is wrong and they need to change, but don't promise that there won't be changes, either.

These early messages are the foundation for future communications which will get into specifics that may involve change or overruling staff recommendations. Use memos, emails, videos, town meetings, blogs, social media, or some combination of these communication vehicles. Use whatever feels most comfortable for you. The key is conveying a positive message at the beginning.

Your early messages should be aspirational, framed in terms of outcomes that matter, and with a sense of urgency and an emphasis on listening as part of your approach. And then, follow through.

Quickly communicate with agency customers and stakeholders.

It is equally important to start communicating with your customers and key stakeholders. They, too, will be wondering what you and the administration plan to do. A short, positive, aspirational message will help you get started on the right foot. You can then build on it as you implement your program. You may find it necessary to send different messages to different groups. They, of

* See *Additional Resources*, page 138.

course, need to be consistent. They should not be detailed because specifics will come later. These messages build a foundation for future conversations.

Build relationships with your agency's customers and stakeholders.

Getting anything important done in the federal government requires dealing with multiple parties. These include Congress, public interest groups, and industry. These also include other parts of the federal government, other oversight bodies, and the media. It's a long list. It is usually a good idea not to overestimate one's own power as a consequence. Learn who matters on what issue and from what viewpoint, and start to build a relationship with the key players. This will be easier to do before there is a contentious issue and will make that issue easier to resolve.

Find people in your agency who can help you master processes to meet your needs.

As noted earlier, the Washington environment puts a high premium on process, and how you engage can be as important as what you accomplish. One discounts process at one's peril. Congress has delegated regulatory authority to agencies to make decisions subject to the requirement that they follow certain procedures. Auditors and inspectors general evaluate agencies on whether they follow proper procedures. Criticisms of new policies are sometimes more about following the process than the merits of the new policy.

A key player in managing the "process trains" and keeping things on schedule is your department's executive secretariat. This department coordinates communications internally among key staff, helps orchestrate decision-making timetables on budget and regulatory decisions, and helps prioritize activities and meetings. The executive secretariat often also handles other important, but behind-the-scenes, functions such as records management, Freedom of Information Act requests, and correspondence. Ensuring early on that your department's executive secretariat is highly functional will keep you from having to manage many process-oriented mini-crises that can distract you from the substantive issues facing your agency.

One of the reasons process is so important is that everyone can understand it. Many issues in Washington are complex and different interests put their own spin on them. It is hard for an outsider to figure out the merits of the different policy positions and what is really going on. The public finds it easier to understand that a process was or was not followed. Billion-dollar programs have gotten into trouble over who bought lunch for whom, who met with whom, or who gave what advice. Getting a new policy or program in place will require care in doing it through a process that is viewed as fair, open, and objective.

Find people who can look at what you want to do through a “process” lens and still get things done. On a more mundane level, don’t get personally involved in contracting; make sure you have acquisition experts working for you who can get you access to good contractor support quickly. If you are overseeing a regulatory agency, be very careful in any discussions involving those regulations. Rule making follows rigorous procedures that specify how you must make regulatory decisions. Your Office of General Counsel can assist you.

Find and fix the “ticking bombs.”

Out of all the programs your agency is running or planning, some will be “ticking bombs” with a high likelihood of visible failure. Though they are often not predictable, you can learn much about them from talking to your staff, agency customers, and other stakeholders. Your predecessors had an incentive to kick problems to you that could be deferred from their watch. Act quickly to find out what those are and address them. Get ahead of the problems. You may not be able to address all of them, but get to the worst. Have a contingency plan for the others. Some leaders have instituted a “pause and reflect” strategy for programs when they arrive at an agency. If you opt to do that, make sure it is of short duration; the longer the pause, the larger the number of new “ticking bombs.”

Get control of key budget and key agency actions.

Some decisions can’t wait until you understand them fully. Move quickly to get control of your budget. Where is the money going? What is it being spent on? What is the process for reprogramming it? Who outside your agency needs to agree (typically OMB and the appropriations committees, but sometimes others)? What is the lead time needed between budget availability and the ability to spend the money? Budgeting, like many government processes, can get quite arcane, but understanding the mechanics can be quite important. An investment in understanding some, but not all, of the arcana can pay off handsomely.

By the same token, your agency is involved in multiple actions, many of which may be extremely important. They were started long before you arrived under policies you may wish to revisit. These might be regulatory actions or some other kind of agency action. Get a handle on the key actions in the pipeline; understand what they are and the consequences of delay.

Make sure your early political hires align with you.

At the very beginning, you may have very few political appointees. Other than the people you have brought with you, those that are there tend to move

on to other jobs after just a few months. There will be a rush to get jobs filled quickly so your agency can move quickly to implement the president's agenda. Some of those jobs need Senate confirmation, which means they will take time to fill. Others that don't require confirmation can be filled immediately. The White House and others will be making suggestions on individuals for jobs. Some of those suggestions will be stronger than others.

The candidates presented to you will demonstrate a wide range of skills that may or may not fit your needs and will have an equally wide range of political supporters. They will be more diverse in their career plans than your existing agency staff. Evaluate them across two dimensions. As with the career staff, the first dimension is matching their skills to the job requirements. The second is that they are aligned with what you want to do. In other words, they will support you rather than a different political constituency.

Many former political appointees have found it more difficult to keep their political staff aligned with their agenda than the career staff. This is particularly important in the early days when there is so much to do with so few people and personnel decisions need to be made very quickly. Keep in mind that once you have taken someone on, you may need White House approval to remove him or her. It is easier to say hello than goodbye.

Finally, your success will depend on forming a joint senior management team that includes both political appointees and senior career staff. When putting together your political staff, think about how the two communities will fit together down the road.

Get some quick wins.

There will be pressure from the White House and other stakeholders to demonstrate success. As you develop your vision and set priorities, look for examples of efforts already underway in your agency that may reflect them, and hold up those efforts as examples of what you are looking for. This not only gives a sense of progress, but it also provides your staff examples of their peers exemplifying what you are looking for. For example, in the 1990s during the Clinton reinventing government initiative, Vice President Al Gore outlined a set of visionary principles—such as putting customers first and cutting red tape—and then pointed to a team of field employees in the Department of Veterans Affairs that had been quietly working on such an initiative. By highlighting their efforts, he symbolically gave the sense of quick wins and progress, even though the effort had been underway for a number of months before the visionary principles had been announced.

Get started.

Triage your efforts into: (1) immediate, (2) short term, and (3) long term. Work to keep a balance of your energies across all three time horizons. Your

agency will not be standing still while you are figuring out the internal and external environment, deciding on your staffing, and getting a handle on actions that can't wait. You will also be getting engaged in the operations of your agency. Some decisions can be deferred until you can get a better handle on the pros and cons, but many cannot. You will have to get the best advice you can at the time and combine it with your own expertise to start moving forward. Don't let unmade decisions sit and fester; it is often better to make a pretty good decision right away than to wait until the picture is clearer.

Takeaways

- Start to communicate immediately with your new agency's staff with a short, positive message.
- Quickly communicate with agency customers and stakeholders.
- Build relationships with your agency's customers and stakeholders.
- Find people in your agency who can help you master processes to meet your needs.
- Find and fix the "ticking bombs."
- Get control of key budget and key agency actions.
- Make sure your early political hires align with you.
- Get some quick wins.
- Get started.