

CHAPTER EIGHT



The White House

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THE WHITE HOUSE

By Thurgood Marshall Jr and Christopher P. Lu

In your role as a new agency leader, one of your greatest challenges will be to balance the daily demands of your job with the important task of making progress on your agency's long-term priorities and goals. One important stakeholder—if not the most important stakeholder—that can be of great assistance to you in accomplishing your agency's mission is the White House. The greater your ability to work closely and effectively with the White House, the more success your agency will enjoy. Your goal will be to have your talented team interact seamlessly with their White House counterparts, their colleagues in other executive branch agencies, and representatives in and out of government.

Working with the White House

It is important to have realistic expectations. It is highly unlikely that you will be called to the White House on a daily basis, but you will have opportunities to interact with the White House throughout your tenure. Most of your dealings with the White House will be program- or policy-specific, or because of some crisis. When a crisis arises you will be working with White House staff intensely for a short period of time; then you will be off their radar until the next emergency situation.

Your job will be to make sure that your agency gets the most out of those interactions. You should get to know those in the White House who are assigned to or are interested in your agency. You and your staff must work to make sure that your agency is in sync with the White House.

A keen understanding of the overall White House structure, as well as which offices and staffers are in charge of various issues, will help to pave the way to a smoother working relationship when, as invariably occurs, you find yourself or members of your team presented with a project that calls for collaboration under pressure. In working with the White House, it is important to understand that it is run almost exclusively by political appointees. It works at a faster pace than departments and agencies.

While you clearly want to be responsive to the White House, you should also try to find exactly where in the White House a request is coming from. The White House is a big place with many different offices (see page 64) that are not necessarily aligned among themselves. Beware of phone calls that say, "The White House is calling." You have to find out to whom you are speaking.

It is important to understand that the White House is all about relationships. You have to develop credibility with individuals in the White House

and build relationships with them. Developing trust and good relationships is important to seeking White House support for your policy initiatives and can be as important when a problem arises.

Coordinating Your Agency Calendar and Activities with the White House

It will be incumbent upon you to build your agency calendar and activities in parallel with the administration and the White House. Political appointees must understand the White House agenda and what the White House is trying to accomplish.

With any administration, a series of action-forcing events fills its internal and external calendars. These events establish a rhythm that can help you to schedule actions and plan good news and bad news announcements. Internally, expect a blizzard of regular meetings to dictate the flow of events throughout the course of the day. Unexpected events will trigger other meetings, and your team may need to inject itself on occasion. Externally, a relentless and recurring series of events trigger activity at daily, weekly, monthly, and annual intervals. Those events can include regularly anticipated monthly reports such as economic updates, as well as breaking news.

Working with the White House Communications Office

Your team will need to be able to interact with many of the White House offices, some more routinely than others. Your department can expect daily contact with the White House Communications Office. In many ways, communications drive everything. Messaging is important and it is important for you to engage with communications staff.

With regard to the communications operation, you will and should be expected to amplify the administration's message and its accomplishments in your meetings and speeches. By the same token, you will need to work with the White House to inject your policy initiatives and accomplishments into the message for the President, as appropriate. Internally, department staff should be in the habit of tracking the on-record and off-record exchanges that the President's press secretary has with the press corps.

Be on the lookout for constituent anecdotes that highlight the positive impact of the President's programs your agency administers so those stories can be incorporated into the presidential message process. Get a sense of the rapid response apparatus at the White House and have a plan in mind for your office to plug into that process if a crisis arises. Your department should establish a pipeline of "good news" deliverables that you can share with the President, Vice President, and their spouses. They will significantly enhance exposure for your projects and bring more breadth to the press coverage of your agency.

At a Glance: Key White House Offices

The Office of Cabinet Affairs is the primary point of contact between the White House, cabinet members, and executive agency heads.

The Office of the Chief of Staff oversees White House staff and works with others to develop and pursue the President's agenda. This includes being the final "stop" where issues are vetted and positions taken before being presented to the President.

The Office of Communications is responsible for planning and producing the President's media events, and it also includes speech writing.

The Office of Digital Strategy is responsible for delivering the President's message to online audiences, as well as providing platforms for members of the public to connect with the administration and one another. The office develops and creates content for the White House's websites, mobile apps, email program, and official social media presences.

The Office of the First Lady aids the First Lady in all aspects of her public life, including the First Lady's personal initiatives.

The Office of Legislative Affairs serves as the President's liaison to the United States Congress.

The Office of Presidential Personnel recruits, screens, and recommends qualified candidates for presidential appointments to federal departments and agencies.

The Office of Public Engagement and Intergovernmental Affairs promotes presidential priorities through outreach to concerned constituencies and public interest groups. This includes planning White House briefings, meetings, and large events with the President, Vice President, and other White House staff. The office also serves as the President's liaison to state, local, and tribal governments.

The Office of Scheduling and Advance is responsible for planning, organizing, and implementing the President's daily and long-range schedules. All requests for appointments, meetings, or events with the President are directed through this office. The office coordinates all logistical arrangements for presidential visits.

The Office of the Vice President serves the Vice President in performing the many detailed activities pertaining to his immediate office.

The Office of the White House Counsel advises the President on all legal issues concerning the President and the White House.

As a political appointee, you must also know when to flag “bad news.” The White House does not like surprises. Your department needs to give people in the White House a heads-up on items that will be of interest to them. Your department may need to make a series of phone calls to different offices in the White House so nobody is surprised by the bad news. There is no central place to go in the White House, so your department will need to touch all the bases in addition to the communications office.

Working with the White House Office of Legislative Affairs

Your congressional lobbying team ought to perform its tasks in close tandem with your counterparts throughout the executive branch and the White House. They should be attuned to the relationships that the President has with members of the House and Senate who exercise authorization or appropriation authority over your agency. That can serve as an early alert system to opportunities or potential problems on the horizon. Make sure that your department cultivates strong relationships with the House and Senate leadership on both sides of the aisle.

Working with the White House Policy Councils

Your ability to engage with the various policy councils and strategic planning offices will be an essential component of your job, and it will require your personal time, supported by the expertise your department-wide team possesses. As you advance your agency’s agenda and tackle a long list of presidential promises framed during the election campaign, keep in mind that the power of the President’s pen can launch significant action. This power will be an especially welcome option during the administration’s post-election transition and during periods of harsh partisanship.

While there are clearly experts in the White House with substantive expertise, you should note that they will be focused primarily on getting the policy right—not implementation. Policies can only be implemented at the department and agency levels. Implementation will be your responsibility, and it is important that you alert the White House of potential implementation challenges during the policy development process.

Interacting with Other White House Offices

There are a number of process-oriented offices at the White House, including the Office of Cabinet Affairs and the Office of Scheduling and Advance. They will provide valuable information and opportunities. It will be important to keep those offices well-informed on events within your department.

Handled well, those individuals can act as surrogates for you within the White House operation to ferret out information and to advance your interests. When you and your team are asked to deploy in support of the President, your department should touch base with a senior member of the White House staff to make sure he or she is aware of the request so you don't find yourself working for a junior staffer rather than the President, as noted earlier.

There will also be instances when you might receive conflicting instructions from various parts of the White House. If you need to clarify conflicting instructions, your department can use the Office of Cabinet Affairs.

Important outreach offices will support your priorities and establish valuable bridges for your initiatives. The Office of Public Engagement and Intergovernmental Affairs is the foremost example. Working in tandem with those outreach efforts will yield benefits in the short term and the long term by explaining the rationale underlying your agency's programs; the collaboration also can help with promoting your agency's programs to important and influential stakeholders who can then build valuable support with key communities and interest groups.

Don't Forget the Office of Management and Budget

Be sensitive to cues from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). The viability of your programs will be at stake. In addition, OMB will offer a number of management cues through the President's Management Council, where you can expect that the Deputy Secretary of your department will have an important seat at the table to share your best practices and learn from others.

Every day will bring new challenges and fresh opportunities to harness your agency team's skills and expertise in ways that will enable the President to serve with great distinction. Few jobs offer such risks and rewards.

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