



HOW TO ACCELERATE YOUR IMPACT

A Guide for Incoming Assistant Secretaries
for Administration and Management



As the assistant secretary for administration and management, you are serving in a unique role that is pivotal to your department's success. You are the right hand of the secretary and deputy secretary, overseeing critical day-to-day operational and administrative functions, and providing guidance on a broad range of operational and management issues that directly affect the organization's ability to fulfill its mission. These issues may include budget and finance, human resources, information technology, shared services, facilities, physical property, acquisition, audit and compliance, strategic planning, organizational performance management, program evaluation, and other service operations.

The role of an ASAM is demanding and from day one there will be:

- **High expectations** of your leadership role from your secretary, deputy secretary, staff and colleagues.
- **Immediate decisions** you need to make about people, the budget, mission-critical priorities, pending investigations or reports and media inquiries.
- **Strategic priorities** of the administration you need to implement, including those outlined in the budget, as well as any major reform initiatives.
- **Relationships** you must build and manage with your immediate team, career senior executives, political colleagues, staff and others.
- **Critical communications** you need to share with your secretary, deputy secretary, chief of staff and a wide range of stakeholders in and outside of your department, including the White House and OMB.

This guide outlines leading practices and key actions you can take to accelerate your impact during your first month, and assess your success during your first year and beyond. It includes candid advice and insights from well-regarded current and former ASAMs, and covers:

- ✓ **What** you need to know and do.
- ✓ **Who** you need to meet.
- ✓ **What** you need to communicate.
- ✓ **How** you might approach your first day and weeks.
- ✓ **How** to evaluate your effectiveness over time.

ROLE OF THE ASAM

As an ASAM, you have both department-specific and enterprise-wide leadership roles. You are responsible for connecting different business units and subcomponents, and ensuring the right people, services and operations support mission priorities. You may be required to lead implementation of key management and reform initiatives, including the development of your organization's strategic objectives and execution of cross-agency priority goals.

As your department's senior management official, you may represent or accompany your deputy secretary to inter-agency forums like the President's Management Council and participate in meetings with center of government agencies, such as the Office of Management and Budget, the Office of Personnel Management and the General Services Administration. In addition, you may choose to attend other forums, including a monthly ASAM Roundtable hosted by the Partnership for Public Service.

While there are core elements of the ASAM role, the title, priority issues and key relationships will vary across government. In some departments, the ASAM has a broad span of control, holding responsibility for all enterprise management, performance and operational issues, and directly supervising many of the organization's C-suite executives. In other agencies, the ASAM is responsible for specific operational and functional areas, and serves as a chief human capital officer, chief financial officer or chief acquisition officer, or works alongside them.

“It is important to know the depth and breadth of your portfolio. Does it include finance, facilities, HR? Understanding your role involves everything from organizational charts to individual briefings with your respective direct reports.”

— Gregory Parham, former assistant secretary for administration, Department of Agriculture

ASAMs can be referred to as the chief management officer, undersecretary or assistant secretary for management or assistant secretary for administration, and may be career executives or political appointees.

It is important to clarify the scope of your responsibilities and expectations of your role with your deputy secretary. It also is essential that you acquaint yourself with and keep fully abreast of all the substantive policy issues facing your department. From the moment you step into this role, you will face time-sensitive issues and opportunities that need to be addressed, as well as relationships that must be built or nurtured. Look to your career colleagues to bring you up-to-speed on these issues as quickly as possible. Your predecessors also can help you navigate key challenges and meet expectations during your first month and beyond.

GETTING STARTED

LEADING PRACTICES



Understand the vision and priorities of the administration, your secretary and deputy secretary. This information will influence discussions about your role, including how you will drive the department's strategic priorities and support both day-to-day program delivery and business units.



Gain clarity on what is expected of you. Given how widely the role of the ASAM varies across government, it is important to understand your responsibilities, including those that may be mandated in legislation or by departmental regulations. Determine if you will lead high-profile strategic priorities or programs, deal with external stakeholders, oversee operations or serve as the alter ego of the deputy secretary, among other duties.



Understand and be prepared to drive budget and reform priorities. This includes the preparation of your agency's budget request and the implementation of various OMB initiatives, such as agency reforms and strategic reviews.

“The budget is so significant because it supports the strategic vision of the cabinet members. It is key to understanding the secretary's goals.”

— Lee Lofthus, assistant attorney general for administration, Department of Justice



Work to get political appointees on board as quickly as possible. The secretary and deputy secretary will look to you to lead this effort, and you will need to work with the CHCO, your agency's White House liaison and the Office of Presidential Personnel.



Build a robust agenda.

- **Establish bold goals that will have lasting impact.** Consider the administration's and your department's priorities, in addition to goals that are top of mind for you. This will help move the needle on the areas in which you want to make a difference.
 - **Look for quick wins.** Your team will have been working on projects and programs that are near completion or at a critical implementation stage. Help get these initiatives over the finish line. This will create momentum and build support among your staff and across the department.
 - **Prepare for the long haul.** Implementing changes will take time, commitment and persistence. Maintain your focus and drive toward achieving your priorities from the outset.
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Set up clear governance structures for your office and across the department. Quickly establish how your office will run and how decisions will be made. You also may need to implement similar governance structures for any efforts you are leading across the department.



Communicate early and often. Be highly visible, engaged and candid with your full team, both political and career. Integrate and make them allies in executing your agenda and be transparent about the progress and risks.



Establish trust and rapport with your career executives. Career leaders will accelerate your understanding of how things really get done and help you build critical relationships in and outside of your department. They will know about sticky issues and opportunities, as well as significant legislation and other hot topics you may need to address sooner rather than later.

“People want to be a part of the team. They want to contribute.”

— Ingrid Kolb, director of the Office of Management, Department of Energy



Consider your leadership style. Think about how you want to lead and what you want to achieve. First impressions matter. Be clear about and discuss your priorities and expectations of your team. Take advantage of their experience and institutional knowledge to refine your agenda and your leadership approach.



Use data-driven processes and available incentives to promote accountability and achieve results. This information will help you understand what areas are working well and where extra attention or intervention may be required, as well as drive progress. Benchmark performance to inform your measures of success, hold staff accountable and reward excellence.



Understand your department, both people and processes. Make it a priority to learn about how your department operates—its structure, core business, key relationships and talent. Suggested discussion points on these topic areas are outlined in **Table 1**.

KEY ACTIONS

Understanding your department, both the people and processes, and making sure it understands you are essential to hitting the ground running. Spend your first month building your most important relationships, communicating your agenda and priorities, and learning about your agency's mission, core business and major functional areas. Given that one of your most critical roles is driving change, it is important to understand the available levers and how to most effectively make use of them.

MEETINGS

- ☐ **Meet with your deputy secretary** to:
 - Discuss the deputy's expectations of your role and how you envision the job, and delineate your responsibilities.
 - Determine how you will share information and stay connected.
 - Discuss who will represent the department at interagency meetings.
 - Identify and make plans to address any urgent issues such as inspector general and Government Accountability Office reports and recommendations.
- ☐ **Meet with your direct reports** to:
 - Communicate roles, responsibilities and operating procedures.
 - Get briefed on critical issues that require immediate action, including those related to human resources, technology, budget, acquisition, and other management and operational matters.
- ☐ **Meet with your designated agency ethics official** to discuss how to navigate ethical rules and regulations, avoid common ethical and legal violations, and model ethical leadership within your department. Ask about any issues that have tripped up your predecessors.
- ☐ **Meet with your department's general counsel, public affairs, and congressional and legislative affairs teams** to understand the legislative process, priority issues, key players and committees, as well as the broader legislative landscape in Congress.
- ☐ **Meet with oversight officials** to understand any urgent issues that require a response from you, the secretary or the deputy secretary. Seek the views of congressional committee members and the inspector general on issues relevant to your areas of responsibility.
- ☐ **Meet with your counterparts** in other departments or subcomponents within your department, such as the bureau and mission program leaders, to deepen your understanding of what they do. Exchange ideas on leading practices and lessons learned.
- ☐ **Prepare for face-to-face meetings and calls** with stakeholders, including interest groups, associations, union leaders and other federal executives, as well as state, local and tribal government officials who may be involved in the issues for which you have responsibility.

COMMUNICATIONS

- ☐ **Develop a communications strategy that conveys to your staff from the beginning what you want done and why.** For example, you may preface your discussions with staff at headquarters and in regional offices by noting that you plan to spend time during your first few weeks listening and learning about the organization's people, programs, processes and priorities. Encourage staff to share feedback and provide a channel for them to do so.
- ☐ **Send a message to your team introducing yourself and meet staff in common areas through planned walk-arounds.** Include your background, leadership approach and key priorities in your message. Share your communication preferences (e.g., emails, memos, meetings, etc.).
- ☐ **Set a timetable for visiting regional offices, either in person or online.** Learn about their programs and priorities, and discuss how they support the administration's and the agency's priorities. Build on any communications that have already occurred between the secretary or deputy secretary and regional administrators.
- ☐ **Outline your top priorities and a plan for achieving them.** The priorities should be informed by your discussions with the secretary, deputy secretary, staff and colleagues. Make this plan public and build in feedback loops so you can acknowledge when a goal has been achieved, or identify when you might need to course correct and invest more time. This will help focus efforts on delivering your leadership agenda, and hold you and your team accountable for results.

PEOPLE AND ISSUES

Asking the right questions during the aforementioned meetings, as well as in conversations with other important stakeholders, will be critical to getting the information you need to manage your portfolio and meet your agency's mission.

Table 1 outlines suggested discussion points for each of these conversations. Remember that the career personnel who work with you have countless years of experience. They are dedicated professionals and their expertise will be invaluable. They will help you avoid pitfalls they (and your predecessors) have already encountered. Invite them into your core team so they can assist you in meeting the department's goals.

Table 1: Discussion Points

Function and Leaders	Discussion Points
Budget and Finance	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deputy secretary Chief financial officer OMB senior budget official Assistant secretary for congressional and legislative affairs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The status of the current fiscal year budget and the next budget submission, including discretionary funding for reform commitments and other departmental priorities. The status and governance of the department's regular and IT working capital funds as relevant. The status of budget execution, any significant shortfalls and audits.
Information Technology	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chief information officer Chief technology officer Chief information security officer or senior advisor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The organization of IT leadership in the department and its subcomponents, as well as IT spending, legacy systems, staffing and performance issues. The status of cybersecurity systems and programs across the department, including risks, vulnerabilities, any recent breaches and opportunities to drive change. The department's performance under the Federal Information Technology Acquisition Reform Act, including its most recent FITARA scorecard.
Human Capital	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chief human capital officer Equal employment opportunity director 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The organization of HR in the department and its subcomponents. The talent profile, including for the Senior Executive Service (e.g., recent requests to OPM for additional SES slots, vacancies, recruitment strategies and rotation plans). Workforce demographics such as retirement eligibility, diversity, location and comparative workloads of all federal agency and contract staff. Current and past Federal Employee Viewpoint Surveys and Best Places to Work in the Federal Government data, and any actions taken to address the results.
Acquisition and Procurement	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chief acquisition officer or senior procurement executive Facilities and logistics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The organization of acquisition and procurement in the department and its subcomponents. The major departmental contracts and key issues, including any documented protests, past ethics concerns and risk exposure. Major contracts that will be up for renewal in the first six months of your tenure. The status of all the department's owned and leased facilities. Any critical logistical issues facing the department.
Performance and Program Management Improvement	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Performance improvement officers Program management improvement officers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collaborative efforts among C-suite leaders to improve operational effectiveness and organizational performance (e.g., by aligning personnel performance planning with agency goals and priorities). The status of internal strategic review processes, including the results of quarterly data-driven reviews of departmental performance goals and cross-agency priority goals. Available data to assess performance of key departmental functions and improve performance and programs.


Note: Even if you hold any of the roles listed above, you should still meet with the senior career officials handling those functions.




EVALUATING YOUR EFFECTIVENESS



BEYOND YOUR FIRST MONTH

Although they will evolve, many of the issues and opportunities you will face as an incoming ASAM will remain relevant throughout your tenure. **Table 2** outlines how your responses to these activities might shift over time, as well as performance indicators and prompts you can use to measure and sustain your progress.

Table 2: Shifts Over Time, Sample Measures and Key Questions

Issues	Shifts over time		Sample measures
	<i>Reactive, learning and responding</i>	<i>Proactive, planned and informed</i>	
People, process and performance	From  To <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Getting your people in the door as quickly as possible. • Promptly establishing how your office will run and how decisions will be made. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building a high-performing team with defined roles, responsibilities and procedures. • Implementing governance structures, and operating processes, and building strategic partnerships across the department. 	How <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved employee engagement scores on the FEVS and Best Places to Work rankings for the overall department and your work units. • Higher percentage of political appointees on board. • Talent profile and workforce demographics.
	Key questions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can we improve the way the department attracts, develops and retains talent for our current and future workforce? Are we making the right level of investment? • Do we have the right talent, skills and experience to deliver on key priorities? What new skills do we need in order to build the highest performing team during the next few years? • What does the FEVS and Best Places to Work data tell us about employee engagement at the department? How can we better meet the needs of employees? • What rewards are available to create incentives for better performance? Can we use bonuses, professional development or recognition as motivators? • Do we have the right processes, procedures and governance structures in place to support collaboration across our business units and subcomponents? 		

Budget, management and reform priorities	<p>From </p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying the vision and priorities of the administration and department, and how the budget supports them. Getting to know your OMB examiner and program associate director. 	<p>To</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstrating leadership, progress on and the impact of agency reform priorities that are adequately funded. Proactively engaging with OMB about funding for future priorities. 	<p>How</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstrated progress via quarterly cross-agency priority goal reports. Internal review of progress toward implementing executive orders, memorandums and other reforms.
	<p>Key questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How well has our leadership team handled major change efforts within the department? What can we do to further embed these reforms? How can information about the progress of reforms better flow to and across all levels of the department? How effectively are government-wide and agency-specific priorities being communicated? How can we continue to build our relationship with OMB to further the department's strategic priorities? 		
Operational and administrative functions	<p>From </p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learning about your agency's structure, core business and key functional areas. 	<p>To</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Using data-driven processes and incentives to drive accountability and demonstrate results. 	<p>How</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> General Services Administration benchmarking data. Input from performance improvement officers.
	<p>Key questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How effectively do key functional areas communicate across the department? What silos need to be broken down? What partnerships need to be built or strengthened? How are we using benchmarking data to review and improve performance of mission-support functions? How can I partner with the performance improvement officer to improve outcomes, responsiveness and efficiency? 		
Oversight	<p>From </p> <p>Identifying:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The status of investigations by the IG, GAO or congressional committees. Congressional committees of jurisdiction for the department, their staff and areas of interest. 	<p>To</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understanding and anticipating key risks, priority issues and opportunities, building constructive relationships and responding proactively. This may involve appearing as a witness at a congressional hearing. 	<p>How</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Established relationships and open lines of communication with the IG and GAO. Established relationships with all relevant congressional committees of jurisdiction. Proactive responses to report or investigation recommendations within established timeframes.

	<p>Key questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can I build and sustain relationships with the IG and GAO? • How can we more effectively support the secretary and deputy secretary to engage with Congress and the committees of jurisdiction for the department? • What are the hot topics and controversial issues that we need to prepare to respond to during the coming year? 		
Colleagues, peers and stakeholders	<p>From  To</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying key issues and concerns of colleagues, peers and key internal and external stakeholders. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding priority issues and establishing trust and rapport with career and political leaders and other stakeholders through regular engagements. 	<p>How</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Established a regular meeting and engagement schedule with key stakeholder groups. • Well attended department-wide meetings and interagency forums.
	<p>Key questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What have been my top successes and failures? How can I learn from them and continue to build momentum to implement my priorities? • How can I work more effectively with my colleagues, direct reports, and other internal and external stakeholders such as the White House, OMB, regional offices and employee representatives? 		
Communications	<p>From  To</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reacting to immediate requests and queries. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicating key messages and priorities, and proactively addressing hot topics. 	<p>How</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in positive vs. negative media requests. • Positive customer experience data.
	<p>Key questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How well are we communicating with our internal and external stakeholders about our key priorities? • How well have we managed and communicated important and controversial issues across the department? • How might we communicate more effectively? 		

Delivering on the vision and priorities of the administration and your department takes time. That is why it is so important to take stock of your progress throughout your tenure as an ASAM, particularly after your first 12 months, to celebrate your accomplishments and consider how you will approach the remainder of your time in the position.

This is a difficult job, but one that you will find extremely rewarding as you make a positive impact on your agency and for the American people.

RESOURCES

Key resources that you might find useful, and which your team will likely share with you, are listed below.

- The **Federal Performance Framework** and **President's Management Agenda**: www.performance.gov
- The **President's Budget** Request to Congress: www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget
- **Best Places to Work in the Federal Government** rankings and analysis: www.bestplacestowork.org/BPTW
- **Government Performance and Results Modernization Act of 2010**: www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-111publ352/pdf/PLAW-111publ352.pdf
- GSA's **Office of Evidence and Analysis dashboards** including the Benchmarking Initiative dataset: www.gsa.gov/about-us/organization/office-of-governmentwide-policy/office-of-evidence-and-analysis
- **High Risk List** prepared by the GAO: www.gao.gov/highrisk/overview
- **Center for Presidential Transition** resources: www.presidentialtransition.org



600 14th Street NW
Suite 600
Washington, DC 20005

(202) 775-9111
ourpublicservice.org
CFC #12110



4800 Hampden Lane
Suite 400
Bethesda, Maryland 20814

(301) 664-7400
bcg.com