



# Tips for Building a Strong Team: Political-Career Collaboration

Ready to Govern® Resources for Political Appointees

Your success as a political appointee depends on how well you apply insights from career staff and how well you set the tone for a strong team environment. We recommend three important steps: Engage career staff early and often, assign responsibilities thoughtfully across the team and set clear governance structures.



## 1. ENGAGE CAREER STAFF EARLY AND OFTEN

Your words and actions signal to career employees that you value their efforts and engagement and help to build cohesion among the team as well as momentum to execute the president's agenda. Career employees will also help identify risks to the organization.

### Tips for Success

- Listen and learn.
  - Meet with your team early and often. Meet with career executives one-on-one or in small groups—they can help you identify risks to the organization and in your role.
  - Listen to career staff, and trust and learn from their experience. For example, career staff may provide advice that seems to oppose your initiatives. However, they are likely describing similar efforts in the past that failed and explaining why they were not successful.
  - Find out what other people are doing in your agency. It is easy to neglect things that are not directly connected to your top priorities, but which may be essential to the healthy functioning of your organization—these cannot be ignored.
  - Take time to learn about leadership journeys and public service motivation. This will help check assumptions that may exist and build trust.
- Ask for additional context if career staff seem to oppose an idea or approach. This will help determine if there is an authority that prohibits an activity or if there is concern about trying something new.
- Engage with fellow employees, including those outside of your office and the Washington, D.C. area, through “listening tours” in regional offices, walking the halls of your office to meet all levels of staff, and being visible e.g., eat lunch in the cafeteria and participate actively in virtual events.

- Lay out any tensions between career and political appointees e.g., appointees will be focused on the president's agenda while career leaders will also be focused on the long-term mission of the agency.
  - Acknowledge the tensions and identify how they bring balance to the agency and strengthen the agency's mission.
  - Take time to recognize common goals and shared motivations.
- Engage with career employees in meaningful leadership roles.
  - Pull your political and career staff together as one team.
  - Bring career staff into your "inner circle" and involve them in key decisions by soliciting and considering their advice before making your choices.
  - Empower career staff to lead some of the agency's major efforts; this will enable them to have an impact that outlasts your tenure.
  - Identify ways to proactively include and acknowledge the value of career staff, e.g., invite them to welcome or farewell occasions for an appointee or to a White House event when there is an opportunity.

#### **Derailers**

- ✗ Assuming your official authority obviates the need to build relationships and earn the support of your career staff.
- ✗ Working around your career staff instead of taking the time to get their buy-in and assistance.
- ✗ Rejecting out-of-hand reports on previous efforts, which might help you avoid future negative results.



## **2. BUILD A STRONG TEAM WITH HIGH-PERFORMING CAREER STAFF**

You may not get to select everyone on your team, so be strategic about who you want in the positions where you do have the flexibility to choose. You will also build and develop your team so they understand where they fit in the broader government ecosystem, and how they can have a unique and lasting impact.

### **Tips for Success**

- Identify the right selection criteria for members of your core team.
  - Who knows a lot about the agency? Who has complementary subject matter expertise or skills?
  - Who has relationships with important partners? Who is a key influencer?
  - Who can you trust to be honest and push back on your ideas and strategies?
- Find high performers early.
  - Assess talent in your meetings and listen for mentions of "go-to" people.
  - Ask for recommendations from people you trust and do your due diligence to learn more about these individuals. Create opportunities for staff to identify strong leaders.

- Get high performers on the team.
  - Work with HR staff to use all the hiring tools available, including reassignments and details.
  - Make the roles that you are recruiting for “career accelerators” that will lead to exciting future opportunities for staff.
  - Believe in people and mentor them.
  - Be explicit about roles—identify their highest point of contribution and how it complements other team strengths.
- Promote diversity in executive-level hiring and build a more diverse and highly qualified leadership corps.
  - Make Senior Executive Service recruitment and selection processes more transparent.
  - Adhere to hiring and Qualifications Review Board best practices.
- Help federal leaders build an enterprise-wide view of government.
  - Encourage aspiring senior executives to participate in rotation programs, joint duty assignments and cross-sector collaborations so they can run programs well and improve how services are delivered to the public.
- Bring career senior executives together in support of cross-agency initiatives.
  - Provide opportunities to work across silos in support of government-wide priorities such as the President’s Management Agenda and cross-agency priority goals.

#### Derailers

- ✗ Failing to recognize and leverage the expertise of career staff.
- ✗ Failing to make your core team diverse by including both political and career employees and failing to build diverse slates of candidates during the recruiting process.
- ✗ Failing to clarify roles and responsibilities, leaving team members jockeying for position or not stepping in when needed.
- ✗ Failing to understand how your leadership role impacts other policy and program priorities across the government enterprise.



### 3. SET CLEAR GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES

Governance is the set of processes that a leadership team implements to manage its activities and monitor whether it is achieving its objectives. Over time, most agencies have created standardized procedures governing how and when leaders meet to make decisions or stay connected on priorities. In some agencies, these structures last across administrations; in others, they change depending on new leadership preferences. Setting clear governance structures can be challenging since much of this already seems to be in place when you join your agency. The underlying philosophy behind governance is this: If people don’t understand decision-making, then everything flows to the top, creating bottlenecks and frustrating people. Be thoughtful about how you might want to change the governance structure to suit your style and to be efficient and effective.

## Tips for Success

- Consider your information flows and be clear on how you want to give and receive information.
- Establish your operating procedures.
  - Strike a balance between adjusting governance structures to make them work for you as a new leader and maintaining some existing systems that your staff is accustomed to using.
  - Learn the activities that your office engages in regularly as well as for those that are integral to getting work done.

### Derailers

- ✗ Not setting structures and protocols quickly.
- ✗ Altering existing processes for the sake of change and not learning how processes really work or how decisions are made.
- ✗ Allowing decisions to languish in your agency's front office.
- ✗ Overreliance on political advisors or counselors for decision-making.



## Engaging Others: Key to Public Sector Leadership

Fostering an inclusive culture by encouraging constructive feedback, recognizing good work and promoting professional development opportunities help build engagement among team members. This environment is the foundation for collaboration within and across federal agencies. Individuals, teams and agencies working together will have a greater impact on government effectiveness.

## Reflective Questions to Build Inclusive, Representative and Respectful Teams

- To what extent do I understand unconscious bias and have I taken any steps to mitigate my own biases?
- When dealing with a workplace conflict, how often do I recognize both the intent behind an action/statement and the impact that action/statement had?
- What steps do I take to increase inclusivity and accessibility in my workplace?

More resources on the Public Service Leadership Model can be found [here](#).



## Resources

For additional tips and stories from leaders demonstrating core public service values, check out the following resources.

- Employee engagement resources: [Best Places to Work in the Federal Government®](#), and [employee engagement materials](#) including tools, training and research.
- Public servant leaders demonstrating core values:
  - Former NASA Administrator Charlie Bolden briefly discusses the importance of diversity and inclusion at NASA in [this clip](#).
  - Former VA Secretary Bob McDonald briefly talks about the importance of engaging others as a fundamental attribute of successful leaders in [this clip](#).
  - Former director of the Division of Administration at the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, Arleas Upton Kea, talks about engaging others in this [case study](#).
- Participants in prestigious federal programs who could help build a strong agency team: [Presidential Rank Award](#) nominees and winners, [Presidential Management Fellows](#) or [Samuel J. Heyman Service to America Medal](#) winners.