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MAKING AN IMPACT

A Guide For New Cabinet Secretaries

This guide is intended to support you as a new member of President Donald Trump's Cabinet. Developed with input from former Cabinet secretaries and senior federal leaders, it outlines best practices to increase your impact as a leader of a large and complex organization. As a member of the president's Cabinet, you have a unique place in history. Established in Article II, Section 2 of the Constitution, Cabinet members have the responsibility to advise the president on issues relating to the duties of their departments.

GETTING YOUR PEOPLE IN PLACE

Traditionally, the Senate has moved quickly to confirm Cabinet secretaries soon after the inauguration. However, it takes much longer for the Senate to confirm nominees at the sub-Cabinet level (**Figure 1**).¹ It is often the case that career officials fill critical positions in an acting capacity until the Senate confirms those nominated to serve.

EXECUTING YOUR MISSION

In order to successfully represent the American people and carry out the expansive mission of your department, you and your staff should expect to be held to the highest standard and demonstrate a deep-seated commitment to public service. As a senior leader, you take an oath of office to uphold the Constitution and faithfully execute the duties of your office.

Core values, such as stewardship of public trust and commitment to public good, underlie this oath and should guide your decision-making.² These values are the core of the Partnership's [Public Service Leadership Model](#) that was developed with the input of former Cabinet secretaries, CEOs, eminent academic scholars and military generals. This model sets the standard for effective federal leadership. It also will help translate your oath into practice through core values and critical competencies necessary to advance your department's priorities (**Figure 2**).³ These values will also influence how you build your leadership team and your ability to focus your department and workforce to achieve its mission.

The first 100 days of a new administration will define the scope of its effectiveness for the next four years. During these initial days—and indeed, throughout your tenure—you and your senior team will rely heavily on the expertise of career officials dedicated to serving the American people. There will be crises to manage, budget proposals to defend, and policy and legislative proposals to lead. You will also deepen your knowledge of the department's strengths, policy and management challenges, internal culture, relationship to other agencies, and emerging issues that require immediate action.

The following sections give guidance about:

- How to build an effective team, establish processes and focus early attention on key issues.
- What needs to be communicated to your senior team and throughout your department about your vision and priorities.
- Whom to reach out to inside the department and across government.

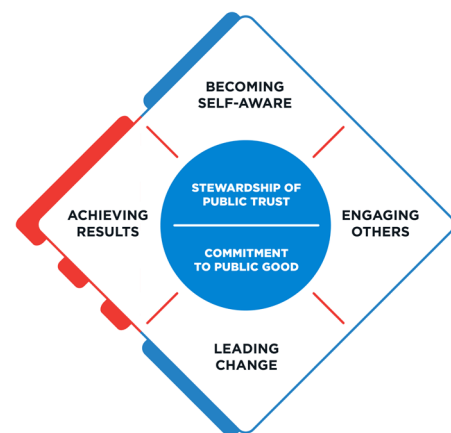
FIGURE 1: AVERAGE NUMBER OF DAYS FOR THE SENATE TO CONFIRM PRESIDENTIAL NOMINATIONS

- » During President Joe Biden's first term in office, the Senate took an average of about 191 days to confirm nominees compared with 70 days during President Ronald Reagan's two terms.
- » The process differed by the type of position as Cabinet secretaries are confirmed much more quickly.
- » Since 1981, each confirmation for Cabinet officers took an average of 25 days.
- » By contrast, the average for all sub-Cabinet confirmations was about 112 days, more than four times as long.
- » Under Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump, sub-Cabinet confirmations took an average of 158 days.

FIGURE 2: PUBLIC SERVICE LEADERSHIP MODEL COMPETENCIES

"With a foundation in core public service values that derive from the Constitution, and indispensable competencies, the model offers a vision for how best to serve our country in today's society. Political appointees can use this model to guide their actions, steer their growth and uphold the constitutional principles they swore to support and defend."

Partnership for Public Service Government Leadership Council Call to Action



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¹ Center for Presidential Transition analysis.

² Partnership for Public Service, "Public Service Leadership Model." Available at <https://bit.ly/2XI3bAM>.

³ Partnership for Public Service, "Government Leadership Advisory Council Call to Action." Available at <https://bit.ly/3ISFAXD>.

1. Building Your Team and Operations

Few political appointees will be in place on your first day and those who require Senate confirmation will not join you for weeks or even months as their nominations are pending. Typically, career officials will fill these roles until your entire political contingent is confirmed and on the job.⁴ The White House Office of Presidential Personnel, your White House agency liaison and legislative affairs office are key to ensuring that the confirmation and appointments process for your incoming senior team advances expeditiously.

BEST PRACTICES

- » **Build a trusted group** of advisors, including political appointees and senior career civil servants. There are many factors for the Presidential Personnel Office to consider in staffing a department, and many individuals they select may be new to you. Either way, these appointees and the career staff will provide you with critical insights and institutional knowledge to inform your decisions.
- » **Outline your expectations for your senior team.** Be clear about how you view their roles and responsibilities, how you want to work together and how you will hold them accountable. Discuss your decision-making style.
- » **Establish how your front office will run.** Set expectations about decision-making protocols, roles and responsibilities within your department, including the heads of your department divisions.
- » **Communicate early, openly and often with your staff** about your goals and expectations so that they understand what you want to accomplish for the short and longer term. Department personnel, including career and political appointees, employees in regional offices and field offices, and customers will be critical in implementing your department's mission and core business.
- » **Request in-person (or virtual) briefings.** Many leaders find that written briefing materials help frame important issues, but that interactive discussions with your leadership team are critical to begin managing those issues.
- » **Cultivate a culture of success** by setting clear department standards and objectives, promoting cooperation across the department, outlining explicit deliverables, defining the scope of responsibilities, resolving disputes when they arise and using effective communication channels.
- » **Build trust and rapport with the career leadership.** These leaders have institutional knowledge about legislation, litigation and other hot topics for your immediate response. Many will be acting in critical continuity roles and will help you navigate informal structures in the department and across government including with other departments, Capitol Hill, outside stakeholders and the media.
- » **Make it a priority to meet with your entire workforce.** Introduce yourself to department staff at headquarters, and use virtual platforms to outline your goals to the staff at field and regional offices. Access to a remote working environment will make it easier for you to meet and connect.
- » **Consider holding a senior leadership retreat** with your chief of staff, deputy secretary and key advisors, or their acting designees to establish shared priorities and accountability measures. Take advantage of the virtual environment where you can meet with those on your team based outside the Washington, D.C., area.

⁴ The Federal Vacancies Reform Act (Pub. L. No. 105 -277) requires agency heads to identify qualified career employees to serve in vacant critical noncareer positions in an acting capacity. This minimizes potential gaps between the exit and onboarding of senior political appointees between administrations.

2. Advancing the Administration's Agenda

From day one, it is critical that you work with your core team as you outline your mission and objectives, establish priorities and set your leadership agenda. Engage the team regarding your vision and strategy for the department and clarify the expectations you have of them. This is especially important for your deputy secretary, chief of staff and senior advisors. Former secretaries have spoken about the value of starting with a clear understanding of what is expected of your top deputies and their teams, picking a few priorities and then focusing on them relentlessly to create momentum and results.⁵

BEST PRACTICES

- » **Build an ambitious but achievable agenda that will have a lasting impact and prepare to advance it over the long haul.** Consider the administration's and your department's strategic and operational priorities, and the performance insights needed to measure progress. This will help move the needle in the areas in which you want to make a difference.
- » **Identify a few trusted advisors who will be able to provide you with honest perspectives, advice and support.** Make sure you choose people who will tell you what you need to hear, not just what you want to hear.⁶
- » **Find quick wins.** Your department will have been working on projects and programs that are near completion or at a critical implementation stage. These may include agency and cross-agency priority goals focused on areas where the department and the federal government are driving transformation and change. Help get these initiatives over the finish line. This will create momentum and build support among your stakeholders and staff.
- » **Speak with subject matter experts, leaders and influencers.** They will have deep institutional knowledge of your department's administrative structure and how it might impact the decisions you will make.
- » **Establish a regular rhythm of engagement with your deputy secretary, chief of staff, front office staff and department heads** (or acting designees). In addition, seek insights from career officials acting in critical positions, about how they can support the department and your priorities as secretary. Discuss with them the critical issues your political team must address:
 - The department's top mission-focused programs and priorities, and implementation risks.
 - Your plans for filling vacant political positions.
 - Inspector general and Government Accountability Office findings, including items on GAO's High-Risk List.
 - Your participation in Cabinet and policy council meetings.
 - Interaction with Office of Management and Budget leadership, especially in relation to budget, regulations and other executive actions.
- » **Schedule briefings on the status of pressing technology, HR, acquisition, performance, finance and budget issues.** For example:
 - Your chief information, technology and information security officers should brief you on IT and cybersecurity key risks, usage of government IT systems in accordance with the law and established policy, and opportunities to drive change.

⁵ Partnership for Public Service's Center for Presidential Transition, "Effective Transition Planning Helps Presidents Have a Successful Year One and Year Five," April. 2020. Available at <https://bit.ly/3BOv3Kl>.

⁶ Partnership for Public Service's Center for Presidential Transition, "Presidential Transition Guide," 2023. Available at <https://bit.ly/4hivOvN>.

- Your chief human capital officer should brief you on the workforce and talent profile for your Senior Executive Service members, the most recent request to the Office of Personnel Management for additional SES members, skill gaps and areas of high vacancy or turnover, and opportunities to improve diversity at all levels (see **Figure 3**).⁷
- Your chief acquisition officer should brief you on the department’s acquisition strategy and key procurement issues.
- Your chief financial officer should brief you on any federal budget impacts on new and existing programs e.g., the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act.

By law, the deputy secretary will serve as the department’s chief operating officer and have responsibility for these areas. If the deputy secretary is on board, you might hold a meeting to familiarize yourself with these issues and understand how they may impact department operations.

- » **Prepare to drive your department’s budget and reform priorities.** This will include the preparation of your department’s budget request and the implementation of various Office of Management and Budget initiatives, such as department reforms and strategic reviews. It will be critical in shaping what the department can and cannot do in future years. For example, the president’s budget request to Congress is due no later than the first Monday in February of each year. However, the budget is often delayed in the first year of an administration’s first term.⁸
- » Meet with your **department congressional liaison and legislative team** to discuss the key players and committees, and the legislative landscape of Congress including:
 - Congressional committee members and their views on issues relevant to your department, particularly those members on the House and Senate authorizing and appropriations committees.
 - How congressional budget processes and constraints—like continuing resolutions, sequestration and the debt limit—affect department operations.
 - Your preferred approach for preparing for any congressional hearings, as you may be called upon to defend your department’s budget on Capitol Hill soon after your confirmation.
 - The status of appropriations negotiations between the White House and Congress outlined in the president’s budget requests for the current and prior fiscal years.
- » Meet with the **comptroller general and your department’s inspector general** for their perspective on the management, resource and operational challenges of the department and any other issues they identify as needing to be addressed. This is particularly important for department programs on the GAO’s High-Risk List.

FIGURE 3: REPRESENTATION ACROSS THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

The federal government has a long path ahead in its pursuit of comprehensive diversity, including age and gender at every level. Just 7.5% of the federal workforce is under 30, compared with 20% of the broader labor market. Of those in the Senior Executive Service — the elite corps of career civil servants responsible for leading the federal workforce — roughly 61% are male.

⁷ Partnership for Public Service, “A Profile of the 2023 Federal Workforce,” Sept. 2023. Available at <http://bit.ly/4heEDGW>.

⁸ President Biden’s first budget request was sent to Congress in May 2021 and President Trump sent his in May of 2017. Both presidents briefed Congress on their general economic and budgetary plans the prior February.

3. Working with the White House, Office of Management and Budget and Other Stakeholders

The Executive Office of the President is the nerve center of the executive branch. Your ability to advance your department's agenda will depend on your success in gaining active support from the White House, the Office of Management and Budget and other stakeholders critical to your role.

BEST PRACTICES

- » **Communicate early and often.** This will help build trust with your key constituencies, such as the White House and the Office of Management and Budget, about progress with the president's priorities, urgent departmental issues, the president's budget and management goals. Also communicate with the oversight community, such as Congress, the inspector general and the Government Accountability Office, on your department's priorities, operations, activities and results.
- » **Map the larger ecosystem for you and your department.** Get to know your colleagues, customers and critical external stakeholders—particularly those whose buy-in you need to advance your agenda. These will include senior White House staff, the OMB director and deputy directors, the Office of Personnel Management director, the administrator of the General Services Administration, counterparts in other agencies, and influential members of Congress and their staff.
- » **Establish a rule of “no surprises.”** New problems will come to light, and you will earn trust with stakeholders by communicating with transparency. Coordinate with the White House and your legislative affairs and public affairs teams about how you will communicate, internally and externally, on planned and unplanned issues that arise.
- » **Prepare for White House briefings and meetings.** Given ongoing international conflicts and natural disaster response challenges, it is likely that you will be spending a significant amount of time at briefings with senior White House staff and at policy council meetings.
- » **Meet with the president's chief of staff** (if you have not already) to clarify the president's expectations of your leadership role as a member of their Cabinet and how you will work with the White House. Discuss the president's priorities for the first 100 days and how this relates to your department's priorities.
- » **Identify and meet with your department's external stakeholders.** Prepare for calls and virtual meetings including with business leaders, nongovernmental entities, media organizations, interest groups and associations, union leaders, relevant leaders across other agencies, state, local and tribal governments (where applicable), foreign dignitaries and diplomats who will be involved in the issues for which you have responsibility.

Leadership and Agency-Specific Resources

LEADERSHIP AND TRAINING RESOURCES

- [Political Appointee Tracker](#). A website created by the Partnership for Public Service and The Washington Post that is dedicated to tracking more than 800 key executive branch positions
- [Ready to Govern](#). Sessions for new political appointees to accelerate their impact and connect with other federal leaders on priority topics including navigating the federal budget, hiring, managing talent and stakeholders
- [Transition Lab Podcast](#). A podcast series from the Center for Presidential Transition that gives a behind the scenes look at presidential transitions
- [Advice to Incoming Agency Leaders From Those Who Have Been There](#). A 2023 report from the Center for Presidential Transition featuring best practices and lessons learned from former leaders

BEST PLACES TO WORK IN THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT®

- [Overview and Agency Rankings](#). Employee engagement rankings government-wide and at individual departments, agencies and subcomponents based on the annual Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey

AGENCY DASHBOARDS

- [Agency Performance Dashboards](#). An overview of the mission, workforce, employee experience, budgetary resources and information-technology maturity of 33 major federal agencies, each with more than 1,000 people

CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

- [Exploring Performance Report](#). A report analyzing the factors that enable agencies to create work environments that contribute to a better customer experience

OTHER INFORMATION SOURCES

- [Federal Budget](#). Budget requests to Congress
- [GPRAMA](#). Government Performance and Results Act Modernization Act of 2010
- [GAO High-Risk List](#). Programs and operations that are “high risk” due to their vulnerabilities to fraud, waste, abuse and mismanagement, or that need transformation



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