Your First 100 Days
Starting Strong as a New Leader in U.S. Government

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November 2012
A strong start is critical for new leaders in government. During your first 100 days in office, your credibility and reputation will be established—and cemented. Insights gathered from dozens of former senior officials, CEOs, and military leaders can help you find your way.

First Steps
While there is no guaranteed recipe for success, a few guidelines will help you start off on the right foot: take stock of your strengths, weaknesses, and leadership style, and begin setting priorities; identify trusted information sources within the organization; assemble and empower a capable team; set your agenda and get buy-in for it; create an effective organizational culture; and communicate constantly.

Time Is of the Essence
New leaders often feel pulled in many directions. Instead of responding to others’ demands, organize your time around accomplishing your priorities and pace yourself for the long haul. Above all, keep your integrity intact and stay true to your oath to support and defend the Constitution.

AT A GLANCE
As a new leader in federal government, you face an exciting, if daunting, set of challenges: taking charge of an unfamiliar organization; pulling together a unified, committed team; developing a substantive agenda and generating momentum for it; figuring out how to get things done in your new environment; and managing the tyranny of your inbox.

 Yet getting off to a strong start is crucial. Your performance during the first 100 days can make or break your success in office. You will be in the spotlight the moment you walk through the door, and the first impressions you create will both establish your credibility and cement your reputation. A rocky start can be very difficult to overcome.

 During the honeymoon period of the first few months, therefore, set clear priorities and mobilize your organization around a common vision and journey. Work to develop key relationships with other leaders in the White House, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), other agencies, and on Capitol Hill. And make sure you don’t waste a moment: the average tenure of a political appointee is only about two years.

 While there is no definitive road to success, and no path is guaranteed, you can learn a lot from top leaders in both the public and the private sector. The following insights reflect the collective wisdom of dozens of former senior officials, CEOs, and military leaders. They offer a compass for finding your way during this challenging, and sometimes risky, adventure.

 Prepare Yourself

 The clock starts ticking before you take office. So as soon as you are tapped for a position, take stock of your strengths, weaknesses, and leadership style. Think carefully about how you intend to fulfill your new role, how you will define and measure success, and what you will need to achieve your goals. Learn as much as you can about your prospective organization in advance. Then begin defining your objectives and developing a sense of what you want to accomplish during your tenure.

 In addition, identify a few trusted advisors who will be able to provide you with perspective, advice, and support. Make sure to choose people who will tell you what you need to hear, not just what you want to hear. They will keep you from living in the insular “bubble” that too often forms around senior appointees.
Know Your Organization and Its Ecosystem

Once in office, avoid the temptation to immediately dive into the daily fray. Take time to get to know your people—their roles, the work they do, and the culture they live in. Listen, ask questions, learn, and reflect.

Figure out what makes your organization tick. Research its recent history and reputation. How is it perceived externally? What problems and challenges does it face? Identify the important cycles within your organization, such as the budget process and the congressional calendar. Study the transition materials prepared for you. Be sure to regularly switch views from the upper level to the ground floor to gain different perspectives on the organization. Engage not only your direct reports but also frontline staff. Conduct focus groups. Get out of your office and visit people where they work. Sit down with a program manager and ask what she would do if she couldn’t go home until a particular problem was fixed. Find out from an administrative assistant the one thing that would make him more efficient. Don’t shy away from asking hard questions. Understand your resources and how they are allocated. Identify trusted information sources at various levels of the organization. And be aware that some staff members may try to co-opt or pressure you to adopt their agenda.

Don’t be afraid to rethink and reframe your organization. At the same time, don’t assume that it needs major repair or that your predecessor was an idiot. In fact, one of the smartest first moves you can make is to talk with the outgoing leader—even if he or she is a member of the other political party. You could gain a great deal of information, history, and perspective on your organization.

Map the larger ecosystem in which your organization exists so you can identify your customers as well as your most important external stakeholders—particularly those whose buy-in is essential for advancing your agenda. Key contacts could include White House staff, OMB staff, counterparts in other agencies, and influential members of Congress or their staff. Reach out to them to get an outside-in view of your organization. Ask them to candidly assess your organization and its performance, and then listen carefully to their insights and advice. Over time, invest in building those relationships to elicit valuable feedback and build the coalitions you will need to get things done.

Assemble Your Team Swiftly—but Carefully

Building a strong, cohesive, and effective leadership team should be your highest priority. Nothing is more important than getting a capable team in place ASAP. As a new appointee, you will face one of two very different scenarios.

In the first scenario, you take office under a brand-new administration. In this case, you may well be the first confirmed official in your department or component organization, which means that you will find yourself spending lots of time sifting through resumés, interviewing candidates, checking references, and negotiating with the White House to get your choice of political appointees. Since this can be a full-time job in itself, appoint a trusted staff member with superb diplomatic skills to keep potential members of your team moving forward.
through the byzantine appointment process. Act right away and be assertive to get the choice picks. The faster you assemble your team, the faster you can begin having real impact.

Surviving and thriving before your team is fully in place can be incredibly challenging. While you are waiting for your full team to be confirmed by the Senate, you will need to rely on midlevel political appointees (such as deputy assistant secretaries), whose positions do not require confirmation, as well as your organization’s senior career civil servants. Seek to harness the energy and initiative of the former and the subject-matter expertise, deep institutional knowledge, and experience of the latter. If a few individuals from the previous administration occupy mission-critical positions, you may want to ask them to stay on until their successors are confirmed.

Under the second scenario, you take office in the middle of an administration or during a second term. As a latecomer to the party, you will probably inherit a team you did not choose. Here, it’s important to take the time to get to know your staff members before deciding whether or not you’ll need to make any changes to the roster.

In either scenario, the number of political appointees is likely to be quite limited, so develop key relationships with career staff and ask your predecessor about the best leaders within the organization. It is absolutely critical to include senior career civil servants in your leadership circle. Don’t distrust or denigrate them because they faithfully served the previous administration—they were only doing their jobs! Instead, build trust and engage them, and you will benefit enormously from their institutional knowledge and experience. You will also signal to the workforce at large that they are “inside the tent” and part of your team.

Take particular care on two fronts. First, you may find that you’ve come to rely on, and trust, a small inner circle of advisors. This is natural, and close advisors can be a solid source of support. But make sure that the group does not prevent you from seeking valuable insights from people outside the inner circle as well—especially from others in your organization. An insular, inaccessible leader can create resentment and competition and sap morale. Second, be certain that the subordinates you empower are worthy of your endorsement. Supporting ineffective—or, worse, abusive—team members will undermine respect for your leadership. And since the organization will take cues from your choices of whom to empower, make sure to get 360-degree perspectives on leaders before endorsing them.

As your team takes shape, be crystal clear about the expectations you have for its members: how you see their roles and responsibilities, how decisions will be made, how you expect them to support you and to work together, and how you will hold them accountable. Then give them as much authority as possible within that framework.

Clearly articulate to your team the things that really matter to you: the issues you are determined to advance aggressively, the ones to keep on the back burner for now, and where you want your team to take risks instead of playing it safe to avoid

— Madeleine Albright, former Secretary of State

“Winning over the bureaucracy is hard. They will wait you out if you don’t win them over. You have to figure out how to reach down into the system and engage them, find people you trust. Hold town halls and cadre meetings. Host ‘no fault’ discussions to enable more creative and open discussions of key issues.”
mistakes. If something is really important to you, put a senior staff member in charge of it and then hold him or her accountable for results.

Early on, and periodically thereafter, get out of the office with your core team to deepen relationships, build trust, and promote camaraderie.

Set Your Agenda and Drive It Forward
Start working with your core team immediately to define your mission and objectives, set priorities, and develop an initial agenda as a leadership team. There is no better way to form a cohesive team than to engage the members as partners in developing your vision and strategy. The best leaders start with a clear understanding of what is expected, pick a few priorities, and then focus on them relentlessly to create momentum and results. Be clear about your measures of success for the organization and for yourself as a leader. Be equally clear about what you are de-emphasizing so you can focus on the important stuff.

In the beginning, when your leverage is greatest, don’t be afraid to make a few big bets based on the president’s agenda and what you have learned in preparing for your position. What initiatives do you want to launch? Which fights do you want to take on—or avoid? And in what order? While bold moves are not without risk, if they are carefully chosen and crafted, launching one or two in the first 100 days can help create real momentum.

Keep a running list of potential quick wins as well as a list of the things you want to change over time. If something small can be fixed right away, do it. Early, visible improvements will send a positive signal and build your credibility. Trumpet and celebrate them throughout the organization.

As you build trust with your team, ask your senior civil servants to make a list of the deep-rooted, festering problems that no one has managed to resolve. Then determine where you want to drive change. In some cases, the honeymoon period may provide enough latitude for you to effect a change that your predecessor could not, or would not, undertake.

Engage the broader organization as you iterate your agenda. Anyone you expect to help implement it should have a chance to provide input as it is being developed. Participation is key to buy-in, and buy-in is key to getting results. Enlisting the support of your broader organization can also create a reservoir of good will for you to draw on down the road.

Create an Effective Organizational Culture
Work to establish a culture that embodies your values and encourages the right behaviors. Be clear and explicit about your values and management style—how you will treat others, how you want them to treat you, and how you expect them to treat one another. Apply your principles consciously and deliberately: your actions will speak louder than your words.
A few best practices to consider:

- *Don’t shoot the messenger.* If you punish dissent before decisions are made, you will not get the information you need to make sound decisions.

- *Praise in public, criticize in private.* The way you treat subordinates will make headlines across the organization and either boost or hurt morale.

- *Manage your anger and disappointment.* Decide just how badly you’re going to allow yourself to behave on the worst of days, and then try your damnedest not to behave any worse.

- *Be mindful of your own habits.* Imagine your every move projected on a movie screen. You should get the picture.

- *Live by your principles.* When you articulate values for the organization, be prepared to live by them and to be judged by them.

- *Pay attention to details.* Even small things—such as how visitors are welcomed, how your meeting rooms are set up, and where you have lunch—will shape the perceptions and expectations of those around you.

Communicate, Communicate, Communicate…and Then Communicate Some More!

As a new leader, you can never communicate too much with members of your organization. Remember the “rule of nine”: people have to hear something at least nine times before it sticks!

Develop a compelling narrative that describes where you want to take the organization and how you plan to engage your staff on the journey. Tell the story again and again in forums such as meetings, internal messages, and your blog. Remember that if you don’t frame your message yourself, others (including the media) will do it for you.

Think about the best way to communicate your leadership style, priorities, and direction. Create a positive public impression as soon as you can—host a town hall, celebrate an employee’s success, or reward a team’s contribution.

Always—*always*—assume that, as far as Washington is concerned, anything you communicate to large groups will reach the media. Nothing is ever off the record!

As you try to manage all of this—and more—in your first 100 days, remember that time is your most precious asset. Ruthlessly prioritize how you use it.

Beware of becoming a slave to other people’s demands on your time. If you find yourself constantly responding to the agendas of others, stop. Use your calendar as a strategic tool to organize your time around accomplishing your priorities. One
former secretary of state used to start each week with a list of six things to get done by Friday and then doggedly managed her time to do so. This requires daily vigilance and regular adjustments: delegate whenever possible, defer less-urgent tasks, and make room for your priorities. Remember that the way you choose to spend your time will signal your priorities to members of your organization.

In addition, be sure to set some personal boundaries. You are running a marathon, not a sprint, though occasionally you will have to run intervals. Pace yourself for the long haul to enable the bursts of energy that will sometimes be necessary. Lock in time on your calendar for activities that recharge your batteries—a workout, a family dinner, a night out with friends, time for reflection—so you will be able to go the distance.

Above all, keep your integrity intact. As a political appointee, you should come to work each day prepared to tell your boss what he or she needs to hear, even if it means incurring wrath or risking your job. Every political appointee pledges an oath to support and defend the Constitution. Be true to that oath and, at the most fundamental level, you won’t go wrong.
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Acknowledgments
This publication would not have been possible without the support of BCG’s Public Sector practice. The authors would especially like to thank Caroline Blanch, and they are also grateful to Katherine Andrews, Liilith Fondulas, Kim Friedman, Abby Garland, and Sara Strassenreiter for production and editing assistance.

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11/12