

## LEARN HOW THINGS WORK

Your agency is a large bureaucracy with a large number of career employees and relatively few political appointees. Most of the programs are managed by career executives who typically have been with the agency longer than you will be there. The bureaucracy is both the means by which you will achieve program success and a separate culture that will support your agenda and give continuity between administrations.

You will learn that process is king, so learn about the process. How you make a decision can be as important as the decision itself. There are processes to buy, to hire, to regulate, and to solicit advice. There are even processes to speed up the process. Successfully implementing your agency programs will depend, in part, on mastering these processes rather than letting the processes master you.

Being successful will require the ability to maneuver among and leverage the various competing interests, while overseeing a complex bureaucracy and using existing processes that can stand scrutiny. You must focus on the important few priorities while keeping the less important ones from occupying all your time or, worse, blowing up into a full-fledged crisis that thwarts your agenda and tarnishes your legacy.

To get things done, you will need to understand your customers. You will also need to understand your stakeholders, what they want and don't want, and how they influence outcomes. You will need to understand the tools your agency has available and their limitations. You will need to understand enough about how your agency operates to be able to use those tools effectively.

### **Learn what your agency's customers want.**

Your agency has customers. You should find out who your agency's customers are and what they want. Talk to representatives of the different customer communities to get a handle on their concerns and understand how they view your agency. In many cases, other federal agencies and state and local governments have programs that overlap with your own and affect the same customers. As a result, agencies are finding it more important to work together. Understanding these overlaps is important. In addition, ask your staff about what they think customers want and compare it with what you are hearing directly.

### **Develop an understanding of your agency's programs and how they achieve the outcomes you want.**

You will need an understanding of how your agency delivers programs to customers. This will also require an understanding of the role of the

stakeholders in those programs because program delivery involves both your customers and your stakeholders. You will also need a high-level understanding of how your agency operates to deliver these programs. Your agency follows complex internal procedures as part of its normal way of operating. In many cases, these are dictated by laws and regulations, but sometimes they are simply the standard procedures that have been followed in the past. You don't want to get lost in that complexity, but you need to know the dimensions of program delivery.

Your career staff understands that complexity and knows how to get things done within the bureaucracy. Get them to help you understand the internal operations of your agency and how you can get it to do what you want. The civil servants you choose to work with closely should have an understanding of the internal processes of your agency, an understanding of what you want to do, and an ability to help focus your leadership on those who most need to be led. The right ones can also help modernize those processes to better keep with the needs of today's government.

### **Understand your agency's career workforce.**

Before taking your new position, you should undertake research on your agency's workforce:

- Find out your agency workforce's trends in its demographics, skill mix, pending retirements, succession planning for career executives, and any critical skill gaps.
- Find out your employees' "level of engagement" from recent surveys.

The federal government annually surveys the entire federal workforce regarding a range of issues, via the Office of Personnel Management. The survey of employee attitudes and perceptions provides data going back a decade, so you can see changes in trends and comparisons between agencies.

Don't just look at the top-level numbers but also at the range of responses on key questions between different components within your agency, such as ratings of trust in top leadership and frontline supervisors, and employees' degree of engagement in their work and mission.

The nonprofit Partnership for Public Service annually analyzes the OPM data, grouping agencies with similar missions together for comparisons and ranking agency components from best to worst place to work, etc. Ask your staff for relevant summaries.

Why is this important? A recent study of past reports by the Government Accountability Office shows that the root cause for why many agencies tend to be at a high risk for fraud, waste, and mismanagement can be traced back to an inadequate or under-skilled workforce.

## **Understand that your workforce also may have a large contract workforce.**

You should recognize that your workforce is not just civil servants, but it also includes a mix of contractors. You should find out who your major contractors are, where their staffs are located (sometimes they are mixed in with your staff, perhaps even outside your office), and to what extent they may be a critical player in selected areas of your agency's mission delivery. Agencies will vary from just a few contractors to upwards of 90 percent of their workforce.

## **Learn what stakeholders want and how they affect your programs.**

What your customers want is only part of the story. What stakeholders want can be equally important, and much of this book is devoted to discussing the perspectives of stakeholders with whom you will be working throughout your time in office. By stakeholders, we mean any person or organization that is not your agency's customer but has an interest in what your agency does.

The top-level stakeholder is Congress, through its constitutionally established relationship with the executive branch; but it is also a conduit for other stakeholder concerns. Your agency will need to work with the White House, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), and other agencies and the various interagency policy councils.

A set of stakeholders that have an interest in how you support them will surround your customers. These can be the companies that support your customers, public interest groups, or state and local governments.

Your agency will also face reviews from the Government Accountability Office and your agency's Office of Inspector General. Finally, the media are stakeholders, but in a unique way. They make issues more visible, are conduits for other stakeholder concerns, and tend to frame issues in whatever way makes a more compelling story.

Your most important relationships will be agency-specific. For example, there is no single stakeholder called industry. In reading Part II (Stakeholders), keep in mind that the most important stakeholder relationships will be those specific to your agency. Delivering any important program requires addressing stakeholder interests as well as meeting citizen or customer needs. Understanding who the stakeholders are, what their interests are, and how they affect outcomes will be critical to developing a strategy to get things done.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of stakeholders to your success. Many programs have foundered when an interested party persuaded Congress to block some action, oftentimes occurring with no clear picture of who did it or how it was done. Your colleagues in the White House can weigh in on your programs, but they may not agree with each other. The Office of Management and Budget has an enormous impact on your resources and is also intertwined with the internal operations of your agency.

Finally, keep in mind that many stakeholders have a vested interest in the status quo you are planning to change. Talk to the stakeholders; find out their concerns. Get briefed by your staff on those concerns and on how stakeholders intervene in your programs. Talk to your predecessors and find out from all of them how stakeholders weigh in. Each perspective will be a bit different, but combining those perspectives will give you a more complete picture.

### **Learn how the media affect your programs.**

Part of program delivery is conveying the value of the program and responding to its critics. Perception is important, and often the coverage of an event or program in the media creates a perception of events. Take the press seriously. Try to understand how they have framed your agency's issues in the past so you can work to frame them the way you want to in the future. This is an area where talking to your predecessors can be particularly useful.

We offer the following four insights:

- The media will give more play to an agency mistake than an agency accomplishment. Efforts to change that are likely to be futile.
- Most stories in the mainstream press involve a hero and a villain, so finding a way to make your agency the hero can be a good strategy.

## **Political Appointees' Impressions of Careerists**

### **First Impressions**

*"[At first,] they were skeptical of me and our agenda."*

*"Very risk averse."*

*"Seemed tentative and afraid to give their real opinions."*

*"Too much focus on process."*

*"They seemed very eager to please."*

*"Some of the careerists thought we were crazy!"*

### **Later Impressions**

*"They wanted to play in the policy process."*

*"The civil servants really trained me."*

*"They really responded to good management."*

*"Most of them understood that I belonged at the table to fight for certain policies."*

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From "Getting to Know You: Rules of Engagement for Political Appointees and Career Executives" by Joseph A. Ferrara and Lynn C. Ross. In *Learning the Ropes: Insights for Political Appointees*, Mark A. Abramson and Paul R. Lawrence, editors (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

- A large number of specialized publications will be covering your programs. Those publications matter as well. The White House reads *The Washington Post*, but your most engaged stakeholders read the trade press. You will need to deal with both.
- The media are fragmenting as a result of the Internet and new technology. The role of the mainstream media remains important, but the role of bloggers, Twitter, and social media is rising. Pay attention to social media.

## Myths (and Realities) About Career Civil Servants

| Myth   | Reality   |
|--|---|
| Careerists are loyal to the previous administration. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most careerists check their politics at the door and define their role in terms of the policy process, not the administration's political agenda.</li> <li>• Most careerists see their role as technical, not partisan.</li> </ul>     |
| Careerists don't work hard.                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most careerists work extremely hard under tight deadlines and often stressful conditions.</li> <li>• Careerists are "running a marathon;" political appointees are "running a sprint."</li> </ul>                                      |
| Careerists are mostly interested in job security.    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most careerists are motivated by a strong sense of public service, mission dedication, participation in the policy process, and intellectual challenge.</li> </ul>   |
| Careerists always say no to new ideas.               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most careerists are not "against" new policy ideas but are sensitive to the various implementation challenges.</li> <li>• Careerists' many years of experience have conditioned them to see change in very pragmatic terms.</li> </ul> |
| Careerists want their political bosses to fail.      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most careerists want their political executives to succeed because they believe in the system and because they want their agencies to succeed.</li> </ul>  |

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**Get out of your office.**

You can learn only so much from briefings and meetings. Get out of the office. Many former agency heads found that undertaking a “listening tour” of field offices and having town hall meetings with employees, and with citizens and users of your agency’s services, were very useful. This can be a very enlightening way to learn more about your agency directly from the front line. While doing this can be time consuming, it can create strong links with, and support from, those who are doing the work and interacting with your agency on a day-to-day basis. Meeting them on their turf, not yours, can create a good deal of goodwill, which can help make your job easier.

**Learn the flash points and opportunities.**

Every program has hot-button issues that trigger extreme reactions from stakeholder groups. These are often the product of earlier rounds of discussion on an issue and may generate controversy that is disproportionate to the issue at hand. Knowing these flash points beforehand will help you in deciding when to—or if you should—take them on. Actions that look easy may be hard. Alternatively, recent changes may have made easier what used to be difficult, so there may be opportunities as well.

**Begin to assess your senior career staff, but defer judgment.**

Federal personnel rules impose what is currently a 120-day period that starts when you take office during which you may not involuntarily reassign members of the Senior Executive Service in your organization. If you bring in a senior political appointee, then the 120-day period starts again for those senior executives reporting to the new appointee.

This law is intended to give you and your senior political staff time to get to know your senior executives before making important personnel decisions. As using them effectively will be critical to your success, this is a good time to start understanding their strengths and weaknesses. An argument they may make against something you want to do may be because they see real problems that are new to you. Or, the argument may be primarily because your approach is new to them. Figuring out which it is will be critical.

The career civil service’s ethic is to serve the political leadership of the executive branch. In addition, the senior career staff sees itself as serving the public good. Like you, their oath is to the Constitution and they take it seriously. Odds are they have been with the government, and perhaps even your agency, for decades. The recurring myth that they are loyal to the previous political appointees is almost never true. It is true, however, that they tend to see issues from the agency’s perspective. This is both good and bad.

Your senior career staff knows the history of how programs got to where they are today. They understand stakeholder interests and are likely to have

credibility with those same stakeholders. They know what has succeeded in the past and what was tried and failed. They will have insights on those failures. They are likely to be quite loyal to the agency. They will be ready to support you when you want to them to.

Your senior career staff is the product of a rough meritocracy. Despite the dysfunctional nature of some of the bureaucracy, careerists at the senior level tend to be highly skilled and very effective within the constraints they face. They can get things done. If they are running large organizations, they know how to manage within the legal and regulatory constraints of federal service. If they are managing budgets, they know how to get resources from OMB and Congress and allocate them to programs in accordance with agency priorities. If they are working with Congress, they know which argument to use with which committee and staff member.

You may want to look at your senior career staff across two dimensions. The first is normally categorized as skills for the job. The skills are standard factors like knowledge, expertise, and the ability to work with people. These are critical to your organization's effectiveness. They are particularly critical because much of getting things done depends on knowledge that only the career people have.

Temperament is the second critical dimension needed for success. Do they display neutral competence? Are they objective and do they give a balanced view of the pros and cons of a strategy? Are they too wedded to the status quo? Finally, do they begin with the outcome and then address the constraints, or is it the other way around? People who begin with the outcome often get more done than those who begin with the constraints.

### **Avoid the appearance of unethical behavior.**

Ethics matters in government as it does in all walks of life. How it matters differs. The government's ethics rules are about appearances as well as actualities. A government official does not have the latitude to behave in ways that would be well within the private sector's norms. Perhaps more importantly, allegations of ethical improprieties can be used against your policy agenda. You will receive a briefing on government ethics laws and regulations, but here are some useful rules of thumb:

- Don't keep gifts of value. Accept them graciously and pass them to the appropriate agency official.
- Don't mix government and personal travel.
- Don't use someone's private jet for official travel and reimburse the owner for the "full fare equivalent."
- Don't approve your own expense reports. You may have the authority to do so, but give that job to someone else with explicit instructions to question any expense that might be troubling.
- Don't let another organization pay for official travel, even if your staff tells you it is legal.

- Don't get personally involved in contracting. This area has myriad rules that are easy for a newcomer to transgress. Tell your contracting staff what you need and they will work to get it done.
- Don't hire—and don't encourage anybody else in your organization to hire—relatives, no matter how qualified they might be.
- Don't have federal employees do personal services for you or your family, even though they may be eager to do so. Doing so will only spell trouble.

Finally, be careful allowing your staff to do legal things they may want to do for you that might look questionable from the outside. This is not an ethical issue per se, but the media love to do stories on how the taxpayer is being fleeced for an office renovation or expenses such as putting an agency seal on towels or soap. Be sure to meet with your designated agency ethics officer who can help you avoid ethical challenges.

### **Learn the politics.**

There will be a political dimension to your agency's programs that is likely to be new to you. Learning it will be important to your effectiveness. We mention this last, as you will be more effective if you begin with the program and adjust it to the politics rather than the other way around.

### **Takeaways**

- Learn what your agency's customers want.
- Develop an understanding of your agency's programs and how they achieve the outcomes you want.
- Understand your agency's career workforce.
- Understand that your workforce also may have a large contract workforce.
- Learn what stakeholders want and how they affect your programs.
- Learn how the media affect your programs.
- Get out of your office.
- Learn the flash points and opportunities.
- Begin to assess your senior career staff, but defer judgment.
- Avoid the appearance of unethical behavior.
- Learn the politics.