



MAKING AN IMPACT A GUIDE FOR NEW CABINET SECRETARIES

About this Guide

This guide is intended to support you as a new member of President Biden’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, the Cabinet’s role is to advise the president on any subject they may require relating to the duties of each member’s office. Clearly the Cabinet’s responsibilities have increased exponentially since that time.

Getting your People in Place

Traditionally, the Senate has moved quickly to confirm Cabinet secretaries soon after the inauguration. However, it can take 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 Developed with the input of former CEOs, eminent academic scholars, military officers and former Cabinet secretaries, the Partnership’s [Public Service Leadership Model](#) offers a new standard for effective federal leadership. It also helps 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.

Figure 1: Average number of days for the Senate to confirm presidential nominations

- ⇒ During President Donald Trump’s first three years in office, the Senate took an average of 115 days to confirm nominees compared with 56.4 days during 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 21 days.
- ⇒ By contrast, the average for all sub-Cabinet confirmations was 83.6 days, nearly four times as long.
- ⇒ Under Obama and Trump, sub-Cabinet positions took an average of 115.2 days to be confirmed.

¹ Center for Presidential Transition, “Senate Confirmation Process Slows to a Crawl”, Jan. 2020, 2–3. Available at <https://bit.ly/39x3GDk>.

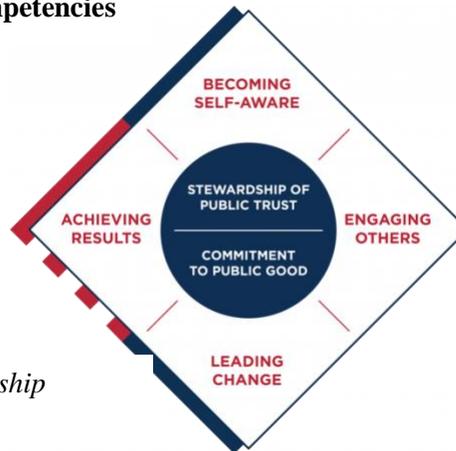
² Partnership for Public Service, “Public Service Leadership Model”. Available at <https://bit.ly/2XI3bAM>.

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

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 it 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



The first 100 days of a new administration will define the scope of its effectiveness of 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.

1. Building Your Team and Operations

Few political appointees will be in place on your first day and, due to the pandemic, many of those who are in place will be situated remotely. Those who require Senate confirmation will not join you for weeks or even months as their nominations are pending. Accordingly, 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. They 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.

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.

- ⇒ **Establish how your front office will run.** Talk about decision making protocols, roles and responsibilities to your department, including the heads of your department divisions.
- ⇒ **Communicate early, openly and often with your staff** about your goals and expectations, so 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 (virtual) briefings.** Do not rely exclusively on written briefing materials as they are intended to frame, not replace, ongoing discussions with your leadership team.
- ⇒ **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, and outside stakeholders and the media.
- ⇒ **Make it a priority to meet with your entire workforce.** Introduce yourself to department staff at headquarters, field and regional offices using virtual platforms to connect and outline your vision and goals. The 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 of the Washington D.C. area.

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 them in 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 them 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 on the areas in which you want to make a difference.

⁵ Boston Consulting Group, "How Agency Heads Can Make the First Hundred Days Count", Jan. 2021. Available at <https://on.bcg.com/36hTY6Z>.

- ⇒ **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 federal government, is 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 they 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). Seek insights from career officials acting in critical positions, about how they support the department and your priorities as secretary, and to discuss 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, and 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.
 - Your chief human capital officer should brief you on the workforce and talent profile for your Senior Executive Service, the most recent request to the Office of Personnel Management for additional SES members, skills gaps and areas of high vacancy or turnover, and opportunities to improve diversity, equity and inclusion 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 Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act.

Figure 3: DEI Across the Federal Government

The federal government has a long path ahead in its pursuit of comprehensive diversity, equity and inclusion at every level. For example, only 22% of those in the Senior Executive Service—the elite corps of career civil servants responsible for leading the federal workforce—identify as people of color, compared with about 40% of the U.S. population.

⁶ McKinsey and Company, “Navigating the First 100 Days: Lessons from Former US Cabinet Members”, Jan. 2021. Available at <https://mck.co/3poueND>.

⁷ Partnership for Public Service, “A Revealing Look at Racial Diversity in the Federal Government,” Jul. 2020. Available at <https://bit.ly/3cu3N5A>.

By law, the deputy secretary will serve as the department's chief operating officer and have responsibility for these areas. However, if you have appointed your deputy secretary, you might meet with them to familiarize yourself with these issues and understand how they may impact department operations.

- ⇒ **Prepare to drive your department's budget and reform priorities.** These will include the preparation of your department's budget request and the implementation of various OMB 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 this 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.

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, 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 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 OPM

⁸ President Obama's first budget request was sent to Congress on May 7, 2009 and President George W. Bush sent his on April 9, 2001.

director, administrator of the General Services Administration, counterparts in other agencies, and influential members of Congress and their staff.

- ⇒ **Act on the basis of “no surprises.”** Prepare for the unexpected and act with transparency. You may be required to lead an immediate emergency response to an unforeseen critical issue. Coordinate with the White House, and your public affairs team about how you will communicate, internally and externally, on planned and unplanned issues that arise.
- ⇒ **Prepare for White House briefings and meetings.** Given the ongoing pandemic and economic challenges, it is likely that you will be spending a significant amount of time at briefings with senior White House staff, and policy council meetings (see **Figure 4**).⁹
- ⇒ **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 his 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.

**Figure 4: Treasury Secretary
Timothy Geithner**

On his first day at the Treasury Department in January 2009, Secretary Geithner attended the daily economic briefing with President Obama in the Oval Office; met with Larry Summers, director of the National Economic Council; and met with Rahm Emanuel, the president’s chief of staff, reflecting the priority and urgency of the response to the economic issues at the time.

⁹ U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Secretary’s Calendar Jan 2009 - Jan 2013.” Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3adKUks>.

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 dedicated to tracking more than 750 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, ethics and optics, 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.

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 Snapshots

- [Congressional Oversight Agency Snapshots](#). An overview of Chief Financial Officers Act agencies including their mission, budget, technology capability and recent inspector general and Government Accountability Office recommendations.

Customer Experience

- [Customer Experience Profiles](#). These profiles offer detailed data and insights on how customers experience 11 key federal services.

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.