Agency Leadership:
Political and Career Leaders Working Together Through Change

NATIONAL ACADEMY OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION®

Introduction

As the federal government goes through major reform and restructuring, the National Academy of Public Administration (Academy) is applying its expertise and long history in public administration to develop a series of products to help guide public institutions through these changes. Each product is developed by Academy staff in collaboration with Academy Fellows and informed by past reports and subject matter experts. Federal entities are at different stages of transformation and change; therefore, the guidance is not one-size-fits-all but provides considerations intended to support all departments and agencies, no matter what stage they are in. In addition to these products, the Academy intends to be a resource for public institutions as they restructure and rebuild to ensure they can continue their mission of serving the American people.

Questions for Consideration

The following questions are intended for political appointees and civil servants to consider as they shape activities in support of a department or agency mission and the administration's goals and ensuring the best service to the American people.

Leaders	Questions and Considerations
Political Appointees	• Am I clear on the President's agenda and its goals for the agency? Am I focusing on the priorities of the White House? • Who is ultimately responsible for the agency's mission? Which other Executive organizations have competing priorities for the agency? • How do I report necessary accomplishments to the White House? • How do I engage career civil servants to support the agency's alignment with the President's agenda? • Have I developed trust with career civil servants? Am I willing to listen to details related to the agency's inefficiencies or operational challenges from civil servants?
Career Civil Servants	• What do the appointed agency leaders need from civil servants to be successful? • How do I create meaningful team and individual performance objectives to describe mission accomplishments in support of the administration's direction and priorities? • Have I developed trust with the agency head? Am I willing to share details related to the agency's inefficiencies or operational challenges? • How can I use my understanding of the agency to prioritize, coordinate, plan, and execute agency changes to implement the President's agenda? • Am I providing alternatives or solutions to the political appointee to assist them within the law?

Acknowledge the Duties of Political and Career Public Servants

Political appointees and civil servant executive leaders both aim to deliver the mission of an organization, but come to that task with different priorities, timetables, agendas, experience, and expertise. Political appointees are expected to drive the administration's agenda, which almost always involves change. Civil servants may see themselves as protectors of the status quo while others see themselves as change agents. Ultimately their role is to demonstrate critical knowledge of the agency's mission and operations to successfully execute a particular public law or rule. Ideally, the interaction between political appointees and civil servants is healthy but if not mitigated by both sides, it can become far more confrontational and dysfunctional. Healthy tension in the relationship is important to build trust amongst the members of an agency's leadership team to guide the organization, and is the ignition point for policy implementation.

Engaging with civil servants provides appointees with the agency's institutional and operational knowledge needed to advance the administration's priorities. Civil servants should provide insights into an agency's mission, history, programs, budgets, and personnel; identify key offices or individuals with relevant experience; and navigate stakeholder interests to guide appointee decisions. Combining the expertise of appointees and civil servants improves implementation results.

Develop Trust and Clear Communication

The integration of appointees and civil servants into a united agency leadership team is important for managing the ongoing changes, including workforce reductions, reorganization, and relocation of mission delivery or support functions. Successful implementation of these efforts is dependent on both political and career staff establishing a trusted working relationship.

The relationship between political appointees and civil servants is often complicated due to differing perceptions and priorities. Civil servants may view appointees as overly political and lacking experience in government administration, while appointees may view civil servants as resistant to change and overly protective of organizational stability and established policies. This dynamic makes it imperative for both groups to find common ground and collaborate effectively, particularly in an environment where public discourse frequently frames them as adversaries and actively diminishes their respective contributions to governance. Establishing trust between political and career staff is a challenging yet essential step in meeting the agency's mission and the administration's goals. It is advantageous for both groups to invest time in sharing experiences and normalizing the expectations, roles, and responsibilities of the relationship.

> *"Civil servants should help political appointees identify operational and legal roadblocks and offer alternative approaches to implement the administration's agenda, and political appointees should be willing to listen to the advice of the civil servants."*

Strong relationships require clear communication to build trust. This relationship should begin with an understanding of and respect for each other's role—political appointees need to execute the administration's agenda, and career civil servants must deliver the agency's services to the public, both within the law. Cooperation

should be swift where the implementation can occur within the President's agenda and the agency's established legal authority. Disagreements may arise when political appointees seek changes that require reinterpretation or a challenge to the agency's accepted procedures or legal authorities. In such cases, resolving the conflict between the perceived duties of the political appointees and civil servants, and implementing the change, will depend on the level of communication and trust established between them. Civil servants should help political appointees identify operational and legal roadblocks and offer alternative approaches to implement the administration's agenda, and political appointees should be willing to listen to the advice of the civil servants. There may be disagreements about how to implement the administration's agenda, but appointees should consult civil servants who know the operation of the agency best.

Understand Agency Functions and Staff

In the current climate, agencies are undergoing reorganization or relocation processes while simultaneously separating personnel. Agency leaders are determining what functions are critical or legally required to continue, while identifying other functions that may be downsized, consolidated, or eliminated. Any changes to functions will likely lead to changes in who is deemed required personnel. Some but not all of whom may possess critical skills and institutional knowledge. The loss of staff can equate to a loss of institutional knowledge regarding the functions they manage but can also provide an opportunity for change.

As staff reductions occur, agency leaders need to understand what functions the staff supported; the required skills, staffing levels, technologies, and other factors needed to support them; and how, if the function is deemed necessary, to directly provide those services to the public. There may be existing documentation, produced by the agency or external entities (e.g., Office of the Inspector General, General Accountability Office), that outlines how the function operates and its responsibilities. If there is no documentation or staff (or contractor) knowledge about a required function, leaders should consider assigning functions to individuals who are capable of identifying process requirements and using this information to operationalize the function. This can also assist in identifying skills and operational gaps, or determining if the agency no longer needs to perform that function.

Agency leaders should:

- Inventory critical agency functions
- Assess staff expertise and knowledge
- Review and update SOPs and documentation

Political appointees and civil servants should consider if reengineering functions and tasks, eliminating them altogether, devolving them to state or localities, or outsourcing them may be an alternative option to supporting or eliminating a function. Where there is a requirement to fill specific capacity (size) or capability (skills) gaps, leaders should look broadly at how to fill them including through training, rehiring staff, contractor support, state/local governments, technology options, non-governmental organizations and other nonprofits, and utilizing professional staff in other agencies.

As the uncertainty subsides and agencies stabilize, agency leaders should consider conducting an inventory of the agency's functions to comprehend its responsibilities and ensure that the public is receiving the services that were authorized by Congress. Leaders should also assess the expertise and knowledge among the agency's personnel to identify any skill gaps and determine how to address these areas or manage around them. Beyond cataloging staff expertise, reviewing and updating standard

operating procedures (SOPs) and other documentation methods are crucial to maintaining necessary institutional knowledge. This can help inform any future organizational changes. Leaders can be more strategic about how they conduct staffing and organizational changes if they invest in assessing and documenting, when necessary, functions and staff capabilities.

Best Practices and Expertise

Based on the Academy's research, there are a number of approaches and best practices that political appointees and civil servants should consider as they physically and organizationally relocate federal functions. To develop a cohesive leadership team, there should be a focus on staff expertise, mutual trust, and knowledge of the agency. Academy studies have highlighted the **importance of leadership roundtable sessions** to ensure alignment of and communication among agency leaders to carry out the agency's mission and priorities. Effective communication and engagement with leaders and employees are essential to build trust and generate buy-in within the organization (as noted in the Academy's white paper on Ensuring Excellence: A Guide for Cultivating Healthy High-Performing Agencies). The Academy's assessment of the USDA's National Finance Center and other Academy studies recommended agencies **enhance two-way communication** to facilitate transparency and establish clear expectations for leaders and staff. Moreover, it is imperative for organizations to **ensure the existence of SOPs**. If SOPs are not already established, they should be developed and documented to guarantee uniform practices and clarity regarding functions and responsibilities in the event of future organizational changes.

The Academy has formulated multiple recommendations to assist agency leaders through change management initiatives, including advising the USDA's National Finance Center and NOAA's National Marine Sanctuaries Program to **devise a clear plan for short-term, medium-term, and long-term priorities** to ensure organizational capability for sustained transformation (e.g., functional realignment or reorganization). Furthermore, the Academy's study for NSF's Directorate for Technology, Innovation and Partnerships recommended the new directorate **implement a formal, integrated strategic management process** that explicitly defines priorities, strategic goals, objectives, and performance metrics.

Federal and External Stakeholders

As agency political appointees and civil servants build relationships and plan for the future, they need to listen to and work with federal and external stakeholders. Agencies have multiple major stakeholders, including Congress, Central Management Agencies (General Services Administration (GSA), Office of Personnel Management (OPM), and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB)), the private sector, academia, and the public. These three agencies support the implementation of the President's vision and priorities among Executive Branch departments and agencies by providing government-wide expertise and services in federal acquisition and management of real property; civil service rules and regulations, classifications, health care and retirement; and development and submission of the President's budget to Congress.

Agencies need to work with Congress to ensure they maintain statutory functions and operations and have an appropriate budget and authorities to carry out their missions. Especially as agencies look to

modernize many technological functions and start incorporating artificial intelligence, they need to ensure they have the funds to implement and support them.

In addition to technology modernization, agencies should consult GSA, OPM, and OMB when making changes to staffing, organization, and physical location. This will help the agency to ensure they are lawfully making changes and in accordance with best practices. Agencies also should engage with other federal agencies to identify opportunities to leverage people, processes and IT to produce savings or other efficiencies through shared services.

Besides federal stakeholders, agencies should also consider working with the private sector and academia. These stakeholders can provide skills, expertise, technology solutions, training, and more to help agencies, and the federal government at-large, become more effective and efficient. The private sector can share their expertise to help agencies modernize infrastructure and become more agile, while academia can help build the future federal workforce through education and training opportunities.

Finally, the public receives many government services and interacts with agencies every day, directly and indirectly. Agencies need to ensure they continue to support mission delivery without interruption.

Yet to Come

Additional planned Academy products:

- Expanded review of topics including People, Money, Technology, Legal Authorities and Functions, and Mission Impact
- Other products on critical issues related to recent Administration initiatives
- Additional engagement by the Academy to convene key voices and thought leadership

Who We Are

The National Academy of Public Administration is an independent, nonprofit, and nonpartisan organization established in 1967 and chartered by Congress in 1984. It provides expert advice to government leaders in building more effective, efficient, accountable, and transparent organizations. To carry out this mission, the Academy draws on the knowledge and experience of its over 1,000 Fellows—including former cabinet officers, Members of Congress, governors, mayors, and state legislators, as well as prominent scholars, career public administrators, and nonprofit and business executives. The Academy helps public institutions address their most critical governance and management challenges through in-depth studies and analyses, advisory services and technical assistance, congressional testimony, forums and conferences, and online stakeholder engagement. For more information on the National Academy of Public Administration, its fellowship, publications, and working groups, visit us at www.napawash.org.

Academy Fellows
Donald Bathurst
Gail Lovelace
Ronald Sanders

Academy Staff
Brenna Isman, Director of Academy Studies
Mark Hertko, Senior Research Analyst
Sarah Jacobo, Senior Research Associate