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The background of the top half of the page is a photograph of the White House, specifically the portico with its iconic columns. A digital overlay of a network with glowing nodes and connecting lines is superimposed on the image, creating a high-tech, cybernetic aesthetic.

EFFECTIVE EOP LEADERSHIP LEARNED GUIDANCE FOR AN INCOMING APPOINTEE

By Duane Blackburn

Table of Contents

Preamble.....2

Introduction3

Leadership Principles in the EOP4

 Foster a Collaborative and Inclusive Environment.....4

 Embrace Strategic Vision and Decision Making5

 Interagency Collaboration and Leadership6

 Drive Effective Public-Private Partnerships7

 Leverage the Convening Power of the White House8

Learned Best Practices8

 Understand Yourself as a Leader9

 Build and Leverage Your Teams.....9

 Maintain a Reservoir of Expertise at the White House11

 Be a Mentor11

 Understand the Bureaucracy12

 Leverage External Communication13

 Learn from Past Leadership Experiences14

 Take Action and Demonstrate Commitment14

 Understand Effective Policy Development and Execution.....15

 Take Advantage of the Circumstances with Which You Are Presented16

 Celebrate Successes.....17

 Assume Your Position Is a Change Management Situation17

Conclusion18

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Preamble

Welcome to the Executive Office of the President (EOP), a place where history is made and the future is shaped. The EOP is more than just a workplace; it is an arena where ideas are polished, policies are crafted, and key decisions on the future of our nation are made. As you step into this role, you are stepping into a position of immense responsibility and influence. The decisions you make will echo across the nation and around the world, impacting the lives of millions, if not billions, of individuals. It is a place where the stakes are high, the scrutiny is intense, and the rewards are unparalleled.

However, it is also a place that often lacks formal training or even informal guidance for its new appointees, which can significantly hinder your chances of success. This document aims to help overcome that gap, offering insights into EOP-focused leadership principles and learned best practices to help you acclimate quickly.

Introduction

Working within the EOP is a unique and unparalleled experience. The decisions and impact you make here will be unlike anything else you will encounter in your career. Your work will be filled with a sense of historical significance, with every document you handle becoming part of the President's official record. This high-stakes environment often places you under the intense scrutiny of the media, the public, and other branches of government. Every decision, statement, and action you make will be dissected, analyzed, and criticized. It is therefore crucial to maintain a steadfast focus on the welfare of the nation, resisting the temptation to prioritize personal achievements over national progress—a pitfall that has ensnared many EOP staffers in the past.

The EOP is a political arena where you must skillfully navigate partisan politics and manage pressures from various interest groups. This must be done while ensuring the smooth operation of federal agencies, even when their activities intersect and disagreements arise. It is crucial to maintain diplomacy and strong negotiation skills, and to approach decision making with an unbiased mindset, focusing on the nation's best interests.

You will also be working within a personal term limit, which adds another layer of complexity. Not only must you achieve your goals within a specific timeframe, but you also must ensure that the initiatives you champion will endure long after your departure. This underscores the importance of sustainability and long-term planning in policymaking. Remember, effective policymaking is not solely about its development, but rather is primarily about its execution.

In this role, you will find yourself serving many masters, each with their own mandates and expectations. At the same time, you will often find yourself without an involved supervisor, leaving you to determine both what needs to be done and how to do it. The bureaucracy you will encounter is vast and complex, often resistant to change and focused on maintaining the status quo. The workload is immense and unpredictable, requiring adaptability and a readiness to seize opportunities as they arise. The pace can be dizzyingly fast one moment and frustratingly slow the next.

Despite these challenges, working in the EOP is likely to be the pinnacle of your career. However, it is important to remember that you cannot accomplish anything in this job alone. Collaboration is key, and your role will constantly shift from leading collaborations, to supporting them, and occasionally to dismantling those that work against your goals—often in the same day on different subjects.

Unfortunately, incoming EOP employees are often thrown into the deep end without any training or guidance on how to navigate these complexities. They are left to figure it out on their own. While the competent ones usually do, this understanding often happens just as their one- to two-year appointment is coming to an end. This document aims to provide a high-level guide to help you hit the ground running. Drawing from my eight years of experience in the EOP, specifically working in the Office of Science and Technology Policy and closely with several other offices—including two presidential transitions—I hope to share insights and lessons that will be useful as you embark on your new role.

Leadership Principles in the EOP

This document does not aim to provide a comprehensive overview of general leadership principles, as numerous available resources cover this topic extensively. Nor does the document delve into the organization and duties of the various offices and positions within the EOP, which can be found in documents such as those from the Congressional Research Service.^{1,2,3} This document assumes that you have already familiarized yourself with this foundational knowledge.

Instead, the document focuses on the leadership principles that are of utmost importance and uniquely applicable to the EOP environment, which requires a unique blend of skills, including political acumen, strategic thinking, and the ability to navigate complex interagency relationships. The principles outlined in this section are tailored to the distinctive dynamics, challenges, and opportunities that come with working in the White House. They are designed to guide you in navigating the complex landscape of the EOP and in making decisions that can have far-reaching implications. The next section will delve into learned best practices, offering practical insights and strategies gleaned from my years of experience within the EOP.

Foster a Collaborative and Inclusive Environment

In the EOP, fostering a collaborative and inclusive environment is not just a leadership principle, it is a strategic necessity. The EOP (and the interagency activities that it leads and supports) is a nexus of influences, with inputs coming from various directions—from senior officials within the EOP, peers in other offices and federal agencies, Congress, lobbyists,

budget constraints, and public perception. Navigating this complex landscape requires a leadership approach that values collaboration and inclusivity.

Encourage Variety of Thought and Expertise:

The EOP is a melting pot of ideas and perspectives, and each one brings unique insights that can enrich decision-making processes. As a leader, it is your responsibility to ensure that all impacted voices are heard and valued. This not only enhances the quality of decisions but also fosters a sense of ownership and commitment among team members. Most of the time, policy decisions are not yours to make on your own. Instead, your role is to advise superiors and/or lead the involved parties to reach a consensus, even when it means some may be unhappy with the outcome.

Promote Open Communication and Active

Listening: Open communication and active listening are critical to fostering mutual understanding and respect. This involves not only expressing your own ideas clearly (and in a strategically timed manner) but also genuinely listening to others' viewpoints. This two-way communication process is essential for building trust, facilitating dialogue, and resolving conflicts.



Working in the EOP often requires navigating competing interests and viewpoints to find the middle ground. In these cases, the outcome may be accepted by all, but probably doesn't make anyone completely happy with you. This is usually a strong indication that you're effectively striking the right balance in the middle.

-- Robie Samanta Roy

Cultivate Strong Relationships and Networks

of Support: Building strong relationships and networks of support is key to facilitating collaboration and consensus-building. This involves consistently demonstrating respect, integrity, and fairness in all your interactions. Over time, these efforts will build trust and goodwill, making your job a little bit easier. Remember, your role is not just about achieving immediate goals but also about nurturing relationships that will support the long-term success of the EOP and its policies.

In the EOP, everyone should feel that their desires and concerns are accounted for within the deliberative process. The more you foster a collaborative and inclusive environment, the stronger the relationships you build will be, and the more trust you will earn for future issues. While the job will never be easy, these practices can make it more manageable and rewarding.

Embrace Strategic Vision and Decision Making

Effective leadership within the EOP requires a clear strategic vision and the ability to make informed, timely decisions. These principles not only guide the EOP's actions but also ensure alignment with broader presidential objectives and national priorities. While political appointees, who are sometimes influenced by political motivations, frequently make the final policy decisions, your role is to remain impartial, thorough, and centered on the national interest. This ensures that those making the decisions are fully aware of all alternatives and their potential consequences.

Define Vision, Mission, and Goals: A crucial first step in strategic decision making is defining a clear vision, mission, and goals for the topic. While the President's strategic objectives often provide a broad framework, it is important to develop a more specific vision for your area of responsibility.

This vision should support the President's goals while also being adaptable to future changes in administrations and policy directions.

Employ Informed and Timely Decision Making:

In the dynamic environment of the EOP, decision making is a balancing act. Decisions should be data driven and strategically considered, aligning with the principles of the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act.⁴ Yet, they sometimes also need to be made swiftly to keep pace with the fast-moving nature of the EOP's work. You will need to continually gather evidence on your assigned topics so that you are prepared to act when required. More importantly, you will need to connect with external experts whose guidance you trust, because it is impossible to remain completely current on the multiple topics you will be working on inside the EOP.

Use a Strategic Planning Framework:

MITRE recommends adopting a strategic planning framework (Figure 1) that encompasses a compelling vision for the future, a set of goals that collectively realize this vision, and distinct, time-bound objectives and activities for each goal. Additionally, MITRE advises incorporating a set of

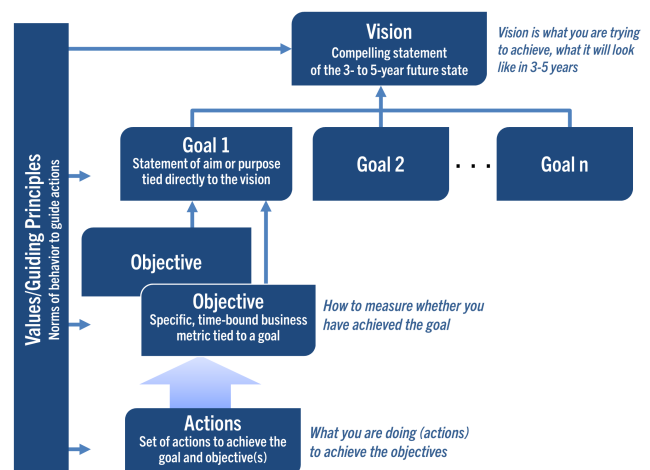


Figure 1 - Strategic Planning Framework with Values/Guiding Principles

guiding values and principles to steer subsequent activities. This approach aids in better structuring the strategy and provides a mechanism for the EOP to measure and track progress. It also significantly enhances the likelihood that the EOP's work will drive substantial impacts, rather than simply highlighting the administration's priorities. A recent EOP example that followed this practice is the *2023 Federal Cybersecurity Research and Development Strategic Plan*.⁵

Remember, strategic vision and decision making in the EOP is about shaping the future of the nation. It is about making decisions that will have lasting impacts and building a legacy that will endure beyond the current administration and/or your own term.

Interagency Collaboration and Leadership

Interagency collaboration and leadership will be a defining aspect of your EOP tenure. Recall from earlier that you will not have the authority or ability to decide most policies independently. And you certainly have no chance of *implementing* governmentwide policy by yourself. Your impact will be realized through your leadership of interagency teams. This requires not only guiding the interagency bodies to reach consensus on priorities and courses of action, but also helping team members conclude that the most effective path forward for their respective agencies is through this collaborative interagency effort.

Lead Interagency Collaboration: In the EOP, your role is not to dictate, but to facilitate. You will play a crucial role in bridging gaps between different agencies and departments within the landscape of the federal government. This involves understanding the unique missions, cultures, and priorities of each agency, and finding common ground that also aligns with the President's strategic objectives.



I was gently warned at the start of my EOP term that, due to the collaborative and consensus-driven nature of the role, I likely would not receive overt recognition for my achievements. EOP positions are usually not suited for those who desire constant commendation or anticipate public acknowledgement for the results of their efforts.

-- Celia Merzbacher

Foster a Culture of Teamwork and Shared Objectives:

A key responsibility in your role is to cultivate a culture of teamwork and shared objectives across agencies. This involves recognizing and validating the contributions of each team member and fostering a sense of collective ownership and commitment toward achieving the President's strategic objectives, as well as those of each participating agency. Relatedly, rammed-through policies that lack this sense of shared duty from those impacted often quickly die in the implementation stage.



In cross-department/agency coordination, you cannot over-communicate.

-- Robie Samanta Roy

Ensure Longevity of Collaborations: When managed effectively, the interagency teams that you lead will develop a sense of collegiality and recognize the benefits of their mutual collaboration. In some cases, their collaboration will continue long after your term and/or when the formal interagency body's charter ends, continuing to drive impact long after you have left the EOP.

For a detailed examination of how to successfully lead interagency teams, refer to the guide *Interagency S&T Leadership*.⁶ While it was

primarily written for OSTP staffers, it is also useful for other EOP staffers. The guide has even been included as required reading in an Ivy League graduate studies program on leadership.

Drive Effective Public-Private Partnerships

In your role within the EOP, establishing and maintaining strong relationships with private sector leaders to leverage their expertise and resources will be crucial. You will also need to develop mutually beneficial collaborations to achieve sustainable impact and progress toward national goals.

Recognize the Value of External Collaboration:

While there will be instances where issues are too sensitive or government-specific for collaboration with non-governmental organizations, these are the exceptions rather than the rule. More often, you will be encountering government versions of issues that are also faced elsewhere. In these cases, it is beneficial to leverage lessons learned from these external entities and, where possible, collaborate with them for mutual benefit.

“ Though the EOP is distinctive, many of the issues it tackles are not entirely unique. Often, they are larger, broader, and/or more influential versions of issues that others have previously addressed or are currently handling. Drawing from their experiences and collaborating with them can expedite your success and enhance the quality of your outcomes, as opposed to working in isolation.

-- Duane Blackburn

Adhere to FACA Restrictions: Any collaboration with external entities must comply with Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA)⁷ restrictions. This act governs the process by which federal agencies seek advice from external entities and ensures that

advice is objective and accessible to the public. Your office's general counsel will be able to help you in this regard.

Leverage the EOP Position: Collaborating with external entities can often be easier for the EOP than for federal agencies due to the lack of acquisition considerations that often limit agencies. Plus, when it is the White House asking, groups usually are quick to help. This is discussed in more detail in the “Leverage the Convening Power of the White House” section of this document.

Utilize FFRDCs and Engage with Associations or Regional Hubs: Federally funded research and development centers (FFRDCs) can be a great resource for reaching private entities as they are designed, in part, to help federal agencies (their sponsors) collaborate with non-governmental organizations. As an EOP staffer, you can often easily convince an agency to leverage its FFRDC for this purpose. Similarly, leveraging associations or regional hubs can be an effective outreach strategy, as they are a single outreach conduit for accessing a much larger pool of entities and their expertise.

Ensure Variety and Expertise in Outreach:

It is important to ensure that your outreach is both varied and expert. Avoid the common trap of predominantly leveraging the help of advocacy organizations politically aligned with the President. This can lead to a narrow perspective and may result in missing key insights on the issue at hand. Instead, strive for a balanced and comprehensive understanding of the issue by engaging with a broad range of experts.

For more detailed insights on effective public-private partnerships, refer to the MITRE document *Partnerships to Accelerate Advancement of Priority S&T*,⁸ particularly the “National-Level Network of PPPs: Insights from the GEAR Center” section.

Leverage the Convening Power of the White House

One of the unique and powerful aspects of service within the EOP is the power to convene. When the White House invites individuals or organizations to a meeting, they tend to show up. This power can be leveraged to unite a wide range of stakeholders, facilitate dialogue, and drive consensus on key issues.

“The “Power to Convene” is a central and unique aspect of EOP service. When I worked with the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs to set up what became the White House Emerging Technology Interagency Policy Coordination Council, we were able to assemble and ratify functional guiding principles for oversight of fast-emerging domains like synthetic biology and nanomaterials. These critical and practical policy guides were collaboratively established as a result of the power to convene (across and beyond the National Science and Technology Council).

-- Travis Earles

Leverage the Power to Convene: As an EOP appointee, you have the ability to convene meetings that can bring together individuals and organizations from across the public and private sectors. This can include senior officials from federal agencies, leaders from the private sector, representatives from non-profit organizations, and other key stakeholders. By convening these diverse groups, you can facilitate dialogue, build consensus, and drive action on key issues.

Create a Platform for Dialogue: The meetings you convene can serve as platforms for open and constructive dialogue. They can help bridge gaps between different sectors, foster mutual understanding, and promote collaboration. This

can be particularly valuable in addressing complex issues that require a multi-sector approach.

Drive Consensus and Action: The power to convene is not just about bringing people together; it is about driving consensus and action. By facilitating dialogue and collaboration, you can help align various stakeholders around common goals and strategies. This can lead to more coordinated and effective action on key issues.

In summary, the power to convene is a unique and powerful tool at your disposal as an EOP appointee. By leveraging this power effectively, you can facilitate dialogue, build consensus, and drive action on key issues, contributing to the effective execution of the administration's priorities.

Learned Best Practices

During my eight-year tenure in the White House, which spanned two administrations, I had the unique opportunity to observe leadership at the highest level. I experienced firsthand the challenges and opportunities inherent in leading within the EOP, gaining invaluable insights into what strategies work and what approaches are less effective in this distinctive environment.

In this section, my aim is to impart these insights to you. Drawing from my personal experiences and observations, we will explore practical strategies and tactics that can be utilized in the day-to-day operations of the EOP. We will delve into a range of topics, from understanding your own leadership style to building a cohesive team, to navigating the bureaucracy, to leveraging external communication effectively.

These best practices are not rigid rules, but rather insights derived from my years of hands-on experience. They represent tried-and-tested approaches that have proved effective in the past,

and I encourage you to adapt them to suit your unique circumstances and leadership style. By sharing these lessons, my hope is to provide you with practical tools and strategies to successfully navigate your leadership journey within the EOP.

Understand Yourself as a Leader

As a leader in the EOP, you will be confronted with a myriad of decisions, challenges, and opportunities. To navigate these effectively, it is crucial to have a deep understanding of yourself as a leader. This encompasses recognizing your strengths and weaknesses, understanding your personal goals, and being aware of how your personality influences your leadership style.

During my tenure in the White House, I continually saw how self-awareness is a key component of effective leadership. Your work should not be about ego or personal ambition; it is about understanding how you can best serve your team and your country. Here are some practical strategies I have found helpful:

Engage in Regular Self-Reflection: Regularly take time to reflect on your actions, decisions, and interactions. This practice can help you identify patterns, understand your motivations, and recognize areas you need to improve.

Welcome Feedback: Do not shy away from constructive criticism. Regular feedback from your team can provide valuable insights into your leadership style and how it is perceived by others.

Understand Your Leadership Style and Skill Set:

There are many different leadership styles, and understanding which one aligns with your personality and skill set can enhance your effectiveness as a leader. You might be a transformational leader who publicly inspires and motivates, a world-renowned expert in your field, or a generalist who is a master of understanding

complex critical issues with a related knack for navigating bureaucracy to achieve results. Each style has strengths to leverage and weaknesses or gaps to overcome.



No one naturally possesses all the qualities required for success in the EOP. Swiftly acknowledging this and forging partnerships to complement your skill set will significantly enhance your impact.

-- Duane Blackburn

Prioritize National Interest over Personal Goals:

Personal objectives, if not managed carefully, can greatly influence your professional decisions. Within the EOP, it is crucial to put the nation's welfare above personal ambitions. Ensure that your actions and decisions are guided by a clear and consistent purpose that promotes national objectives. Note that, unless they have personal ties to the President, EOP staffers who overly focus on personal goals tend not to have a long tenure.

Remember, effective leadership in the EOP is not about advancing your own agenda or boosting your own profile. It is about serving the American people to the best of your ability. By understanding yourself as a leader, you can ensure that your actions and decisions are guided by this fundamental principle.

Build and Leverage Your Teams

Building and leveraging strong, cohesive teams is a critical aspect of your role within the EOP. This involves not only the interagency team(s) that you will be leading, but also other pre-existing teams that you can leverage as well as your personal team of supporters and trusted confidants. Here are some practical strategies for effective team building:

Assuming Leadership of Interagency Teams:

Transitioning into a leadership position in an existing team requires a delicate balance of supporting the ongoing work of the interagency team while assessing whether its focus, structure, or processes need adjusting. Initially, prioritize understanding the strengths, weaknesses, and capabilities of the team and its members, rather than rushing into decisions that could disrupt functional structures and dynamics. The previously referenced document *Interagency S&T Leadership* provides extensive insights on how to effectively lead interagency teams.

Let the Team Lead: “There are multiple models for an interagency group structure that can be successful. The interagency leader will have to select the arrangement that best meets the interagency team’s overall needs. In general, I recommend a structure that distributes as much responsibility to subgroups as possible. This not only enables your team’s subject matter experts to have appropriate input into the decision-making progress, but also creates a sense within multiple team members of ‘owning’ the team’s success as their own—which is a critical leadership tool.”⁹

“One of the interagency groups I led while at OSTP was chartered with a six-month working window. I had done extensive preparatory research before initiating the group, so I had a really good idea what direction the team needed to take. I also realized that no one else had really thought of the big picture as much as I had, so I didn’t force action. Rather, we spent the first two months letting everyone else get up to speed, discuss ideas, and reach consensus. Their approach was 90% similar to what I envisioned, but it was now their approach. That two-month investment allowed them to take ownership of the group’s direction and success, and made subsequent steps a breeze.

-- Duane Blackburn

Strategically Leverage Other Teams: As an EOP staffer, your initial strategy should be to harness the capabilities of existing teams thoughtfully and effectively (whether they are within the EOP, across the federal government, or in the private sector) to achieve your objectives. Exercise caution to avoid hastily establishing a new EOP-level team that might inadvertently diminish the relevance or overshadow the activities of any existing teams. While EOP-level interagency teams possess unique capabilities, strategically leveraging these other teams can amplify your impact, acting as a force multiplier. This approach not only cultivates goodwill (as opposed to fostering resentment), but also enhances the longevity and prosperity of your policy initiatives beyond your tenure or the formal existence of your EOP interagency team.

It is important for these other teams to understand how they contribute to your goals and how they fit into your overall strategic planning framework. They should also be aware of any new requirements and restrictions that may be placed on them while supporting EOP activities.

Build Your Personal Team: One of the challenges of working in the EOP is staying current on operations and innovations due to being distanced from their front lines, while also juggling a multitude of different topics. To overcome this challenge, identify and engage individuals who you trust and who possess more current, frontline knowledge than you. Your personal team of supporters and trusted confidants can offer invaluable advice and varied perspectives from the front lines. When combined with your policy-level insights, this will enable you to make informed decisions. Remember to value and support your personal team members, as their success directly contributes to your own.

In summary, effective team building in the EOP involves leading interagency teams, leveraging pre-existing teams, and building your personal team of supporters and trusted confidants. By doing so, you can create a strong, cohesive network that is capable of achieving the goals and objectives of the EOP.

Maintain a Reservoir of Expertise at the White House

If your role involves staff selection, then you are faced with an additional critical task that will significantly influence the future success of your office or team. Building and maintaining a reservoir of expertise within the White House is a challenging yet crucial aspect of effective EOP leadership, with unique considerations specific to the EOP.

Recognize True Hiring Needs: You will likely face pressure to hire individuals from campaign teams, particularly early in an administration, or from politically influential organizations aligned with the administration. However, caution is advised, as these individuals often have *advocacy* experience, while EOP staff must provide *advice*.¹⁰ They also typically lack experience in developing consensus amid conflicting viewpoints or external pressures, which this document has already established as being critical.

Build a Balanced Team: Aim to assemble a team that encompasses a broad spectrum of skills, experiences, and even political persuasions, drawing from various federal agencies, FFRDCs, the private sector, and academia. This comprehensive approach can enhance your team's ability to tackle complex issues and develop effective solutions. Remember, creating a well-rounded team requires fostering a range of viewpoints and cognitive approaches to ensure issues are considered from all angles.

Continually Identify and Engage Experts: The median term of service of policy staff in most EOP offices empirically appears to be less than two years.¹¹ This means you will need to continually be on the lookout for potential new hires, both within and outside the government, assessing their potential as future staff. As an added bonus, engaging with these experts to meet this need also provides you with valuable insights and perspectives that can inform your current decisions and strategies.



At OSTP, maintaining a reservoir of in-house scientific and technical expertise was key. Scientists in the White House have a particularly big hill to climb when understanding how to influence policy matters. This challenge is what interested me at EOP and what kept me there for 13 years.

-- Ted Wackler

Be a Mentor

Mentoring is a vital aspect of your role within the EOP. As a leader, you should provide constructive feedback and guidance to others, particularly to members of your interagency team. Here are some key points to consider:

Understand Home Agency Pressures:

Interagency team members are representatives of their home agencies and are often under pressure to ensure that EOP policies align with the desires of those agencies. As a mentor, you can help them broaden their perspective to better consider interagency and national objectives. Assist team members in understanding and communicating to their home agency how this collaborative approach can benefit the agency's goals and existing activities.

Align with Presidential Priorities and National Strategies:

Team members will likely not be as attuned to presidential priorities and national strategies as you are. As a mentor, you can guide them to better understand these priorities and strategies, and how they both align with their work in the interagency team and provide direction to their home agencies.

Promote Understanding of Different Perspectives:

Some team members may not have the experience to understand the different perspectives of their peers, or of how the White House works and influences their home agency. As a mentor, you can help them gain these insights, promoting a more comprehensive understanding of the interagency team's work.

In summary, effective mentoring in the EOP involves understanding the pressures faced by interagency team members, aligning team members with presidential priorities and national strategies, and promoting understanding of different perspectives. By doing so, you can help your team members grow professionally and contribute more effectively to the interagency team's objectives.

Understand the Bureaucracy

Navigating the bureaucracy is an inherent part of working within the EOP. Understanding how to work within this structure effectively is crucial for achieving your objectives.

Understand Government Design: The government is designed to provide consistent or expected outcomes, not necessarily to embrace innovative approaches. However, this does not mean innovation is impossible. It simply means that you need to understand the rules and work within them to drive change.



On some topics it can be essential to not overlook the importance of establishing and maintaining positive relationships with the legislative branch. Get to know the relevant Congressional professional staff members on both the authorizing and appropriating committees for both Senate and the House.

-- Robie Samanta Roy

Navigate the Gray Space: While it is important to follow the rules, there is often a lot of gray space between them. Many staffers (and most everyone working in General Counsel's offices) strictly follow the rules as written. However, provided you stay true to the intent of the rules, you can often find room to maneuver. When doing so, however, it is essential to ensure your approach supports administration objectives and that you have thoroughly identified and mitigated any risks associated with your nontraditional approach.



While serving at the OSTP, I led an interagency team in creating the "NSTC Policy for Enabling the Development, Adoption, and Use of Biometric Standards." As part of its ratification process, the NSTC also instituted a "Registry of Recommended Biometric Standards" and agreed that agencies would adopt these standards within their operational systems to ensure interoperability across federal biometric systems.

Interestingly, no one could recall a previous formal "NSTC Policy," the idea of a federal standards registry was innovative, and the NSTC issuing requirements for operational systems was significantly beyond its purview. However, this approach addressed a critical national security issue, every impacted agency agreed on the need, and doing so was in line with the EOP's overarching mission, so it was met with no objections.

-- Duane Blackburn

Act as an Entrepreneur within the Structure:

“Don’t hide behind the bureaucracy.”¹² Instead, be an entrepreneur within the structure. Look for opportunities to innovate and drive change within the constraints of the system. This entrepreneurial mindset can help you overcome bureaucratic obstacles and achieve your objectives.

In summary, navigating the bureaucracy in the EOP involves understanding the government’s design, navigating the gray space between rules, and acting as an entrepreneur within the structure. By doing so, you can work effectively within the system to achieve your objectives.

Leverage External Communication

As a leader within the EOP, you possess a unique platform that can be strategically harnessed to further your objectives through strategic communications. This platform not only amplifies your voice but also significantly enhances your influence. When you speak or act, individuals within your organization, across the federal government, and within the broader public sphere take notice. While doing so, however, it is crucial to remember that communication is a strategic tool to achieve your goals, not the goal itself.

Utilize Communication as a Tool for Policy

Execution: Effectively leveraged communication serves as a potent instrument in policy development and implementation, enabling you to drive strategic outcomes. You can communicate and engage with the private sector and the public in numerous ways, ranging from social media posts to speaking at conferences or hosting workshops. While the allure of organizing high-visibility events for their immediate impact may be strong, it is essential to remember that these events can yield substantial results only if they are integrated into a comprehensive implementation or execution follow-up plan. The key is to select the most effective channels to

reach your intended audience and achieve your communication goals, thus supporting your policy objectives.

Recognize Your Influence: As a member of the EOP, you possess a certain degree of power and sway in the administration’s external communication, despite not being the President’s Press Secretary. This is because external communication is not confined to formal briefings alone. It also encompasses your daily interactions, such as personal emails, social media updates, and even informal lunches or coffee chats. Your words carry weight, and when you speak, people will take notice.

Work within EOP Guidelines: While you have a platform for communication, it is vital to work within the established rules and processes of the EOP. This includes understanding the appropriate channels for communication, respecting confidentiality and privacy rules, and ensuring that your messages align with the overall goals and policies of the administration. A misstep in this regard will likely result in an involuntary departure from your position.

Incorporate Important References: As an EOP leader, you can influence various published documents, such as strategies, administration highlights, executive orders, and agency testimonies. By incorporating important references into these documents, you can subtly influence the direction of discussions and policies. You also have influence through your work supporting the Office of Management and Budget Legislative Reference Memorandum (LRM) review process. By editing pending testimony of executive branch leaders and fine-tuning the wording of responses to Congressional Questions for the Record, you can help ensure your needed messaging is disseminated.



A useful approach I frequently employed was to view LRM reviews as long-term strategic opportunities. I'd work to add statements to them (accurate and evidence-based, of course!), which had the effect of multiple federal departments and cabinet secretaries echoing my desired points or calling for similar actions due to their importance. Once I had a collection of these statements, I would then leverage them to prod their policy staffs to take the actions that I considered necessary. On occasion, I even used them to persuade the White House to initiate action on a new topic!

-- Duane Blackburn

In summary, leveraging external communication to advance policy involves recognizing your influence, working within EOP guidelines, utilizing various communication channels, and incorporating important references or phrases into other published documents. By strategically using your position, you will be able to utilize communications to support your activities and achieve your objectives.

Learn from Past Leadership Experiences

Drawing lessons from the experiences of previous leaders can inform your current practices and help avoid past mistakes. This learning process can be divided into two main categories:

Establish a Relationship with Experienced EOP

Personnel: One of the most valuable resources you have as a leader in the EOP is the collective wisdom of those who have worked in this unique environment before. Establishing relationships with current and former EOP personnel can provide invaluable insights into effective leadership within the EOP. These individuals

can share their experiences, successes, and challenges, providing practical lessons that can inform your leadership approach.

Learn from Non-EOP Management Individuals, Theories, and Personal Experiences: While the EOP has unique characteristics, many leadership principles and practices are universally applicable. Drawing on management theories, insights from leaders outside the EOP, and your own past leadership experiences can be beneficial. Even though the EOP environment is distinct, your past experiences and knowledge can help you translate external insights into effective strategies within the EOP context. By doing so, you can inform your current practices, avoid past mistakes, and enhance your effectiveness as a leader within the EOP.

Take Action and Demonstrate Commitment

In the context of the EOP, leadership is not just about providing direction and effective coordination, but also about demonstrating commitment through action. This means you are not merely a figurehead issuing directives, but a hands-on leader ready to contribute to the work at hand. It is crucial to understand that some colleagues within the interagency may perceive the tasks for which you are advocating as additional work or tangential to their core mission. Others may adopt a “wait and see” approach, aware that their tenure will likely outlast yours. It is your responsibility to navigate these dynamics and inspire action.

Ignite Initiative: To spur the interagency into action, you need to spark initiative. This involves motivating some to act and providing the necessary top cover to others. As highlighted earlier in the document, EOP leaders often cannot make unilateral decisions or issue orders on their own. Your most potent tool is the power of persuasion, underlining the human element of your role. Your work is fundamentally about interacting with people.

Lead by Example: One effective way to motivate the interagency is to lead by example. Demonstrate your readiness and willingness to actively participate in and contribute to the work. The team members are aware of your busy schedule, so your dedication to a task will emphasize its significance.

“When starting to craft an interagency document, I often began by assigning myself as the lead author of a section. I would explain that I have the necessary insights for this section, but not for the others. I would then quickly draft my section and share it with the team. This approach served two purposes. First, it spurred others to start working on their assigned sections. Secondly, my work set an example of the expected tone and quality for the overall document, which other authors should follow.

-- Duane Blackburn

Strike a Balance: Of course, you cannot shoulder everything yourself. Nor should you, as the overall success of the group hinges on team members viewing the group's success as integral to their own agency's success. Therefore, you will need to strike the right balance between leading by example and waiting for the team to initiate action themselves, which will vary depending on the topic and group dynamic. The key is to demonstrate your commitment and readiness to take action, while also empowering and motivating your team to do the same.

In summary, taking action and demonstrating commitment as an EOP appointee involves igniting initiative, leading by example, and striking a balance. By doing so, you can effectively motivate your team and drive progress toward your objectives.

Understand Effective Policy Development and Execution

Your ultimate success within the EOP hinges on the development and execution of policy that effectively delivers desired outcomes. This process requires discerning the signal in the noise, understanding that policy is as much about execution as it is about development, and acknowledging the crucial role of other individuals in policy development and execution.

Discern the Signal in the Noise: In the bustling environment of the EOP, it is essential to focus on proper policy considerations, not merely what is most loudly or forcefully advocated. Overemphasis on lobbyist or media concerns could lead to actions that lack a factual foundation. Instead, strive to identify the root cause or issue, gain an evidence-based understanding of it, and let that knowledge guide your decisions.

Understand Policy Development and Execution:

The importance of policy development is undeniable, but its execution is what truly brings about change. This is a critical aspect that those without prior EOP or federal service often miss, as they might be accustomed to focusing on theoretical concepts or what elicits emotional responses from their prior political campaign work, and might not fully grasp how things actually get done in the government. Crafting a policy that cannot or will not be implemented merely wastes valuable time and resources, with the only tangible outcome being a line on your future resume.

“A vision without funding is a hallucination. The most important influencing strategy at EOP is to convince the appropriate OMB stakeholders that your idea needs to be funded. You will make them happy if you give them priorities - not lists - and actually recommend things that can be cut. Think simply in terms of “start, stop, continue”.

-- Robie Samanta Roy

Preserve Relationships: As you navigate the policy development process, it is crucial not to damage relationships. The same individuals you collaborate with during policy development are key to ensuring the policy's initial and long-term implementation, long after your tenure at the EOP has ended.

Realize the Importance of People: At the end of the day, policy development and implementation comes down to people and how you treat them. The EOP's primary tool is not the wielding of authority, but the art of persuasion. Your capacity to work with and through people is what will determine the success or failure of your policy initiatives.

In summary, effective policy development and execution in the EOP involves discerning the signal in the noise, understanding the importance of policy execution, preserving relationships, celebrating successes, and realizing the importance of people. By doing so, you can develop and implement policies that are effective and impactful.

“ I once attended a National Security Council Interagency Policy Committee meeting to work on implementing a requirement in a new law. Its leader kicked off the meeting by stating something along the lines of, “Congress and the White House have mandated that we do this, I’m in charge, and here are your marching orders.”

This group didn’t accomplish anything for a couple of years except regular bickering until new leadership was assigned, who succeeded by taking a more collaborative approach.

-- Duane Blackburn

Take Advantage of the Circumstances with Which You Are Presented

In the dynamic environment of the EOP, circumstances can evolve rapidly. As a leader, it is essential to stay alert to these changes and be prepared to seize opportunities as they emerge.

Embrace Change: Change is an inherent part of the EOP landscape. Rather than viewing these changes as new hurdles, think of them as opportunities. Whether it is a shift in political climate, a new policy direction, or a sudden crisis, these changes can create new opportunities for policy development and execution. Embrace these changes and explore ways to leverage them to advance your objectives.

Adapt and Innovate: When circumstances evolve, it is crucial to adapt your strategies and approaches while maintaining consistency in your ultimate goals. This might involve innovating new solutions, revising schedules, reprioritizing case studies, or rethinking your collaboration strategies. The ability to adapt and innovate in response to changing circumstances, while staying true to your objectives, is a key attribute of successful EOP leadership.

“ In the dynamic EOP environment, foresight and preparedness are key. Drawing parallels to a chess player or wartime military officer, the constant consideration of potential external activities or influences, their impacts, and strategies for leveraging them as opportunities is essential.

-- Celia Merzbacher & Duane Blackburn

Elevate Your Work: Changes in circumstances often reveal new resources or new problems that your ongoing work can help address. These resources and problems can be strategically leveraged to elevate the importance of your activities. Always remain alert for opportunities to harness change to amplify the priority of your activities.

In summary, taking advantage of the circumstances presented to you involves embracing change, adapting and innovating, and leveraging existing resources. By doing so, you can seize opportunities and navigate the dynamic EOP environment effectively.

Celebrate Successes

Effective policymaking is extremely difficult. And as an EOP staffer you are in a situation where when you finish one task, you will need to immediately jump into three new ones. Amid this demanding landscape, it is easy to overlook the importance of celebrating successes. However, acknowledging and celebrating achievements is not only beneficial for you as a leader but also vital for the morale and motivation of the interagency team(s) that you coordinate.

“There are times in the EOP where the best outcome is “bad policy or action was avoided”. This is often harder to celebrate and measure but an important part of the job.

-- Celia Merzbacher

Recognize and Document Successes: Given the multitude of equally important tasks occurring simultaneously, it is unrealistic to expect public praise from the President for your accomplishments. Therefore, recognizing and documenting these successes falls on you. Moreover, you do not want to leave it to historians to sift through your emails to discern the administration's impact on a topic. Take the

initiative to document these successes yourself to ensure the impacts are accurately conveyed. This practice also has near-term benefits, serving as a valuable resource when reporting to higher-ups and as a motivational tool for your team.

Create Moments of Celebration: Every accomplishment, regardless of size, is a testament to the hard work and dedication of your team. It is essential to celebrate the team's achievements. This could take the form of a team meeting dedicated to recognizing successes, a note of appreciation circulated among the team, or a small celebration. These gestures of recognition not only boost morale but also foster a sense of camaraderie and shared accomplishment, which will further benefit you in the future.

In summary, celebrating successes is a vital aspect of leadership within the EOP. It involves recognizing and documenting achievements and creating moments of celebration. By doing so, you not only validate the hard work of your team but also foster a positive and motivated team environment.

Assume Your Position Is a Change Management Situation

Upon your arrival in the EOP, it is crucial to recognize that your entry represents a significant change that needs to be managed with your peers and interagency teams. Often, you will be stepping into the shoes of a predecessor who was a familiar figure to everyone in the EOP and interagency. Recognizing this and leveraging change management practices from the outset can help smooth your transition and set the stage for early success.

This perspective is always important when entering the EOP, but it becomes even more critical during a presidential transition, which represents a larger shift to manage.

Effectively Communicate: Your arrival is a change for the EOP and interagency, and clear and effective communication is key to managing this transition. Articulating your vision; aligning it with the overall goals of the administration; and engaging with key stakeholders, including other White House staff, government agencies, and the public, is vital. Their understanding and buy-in are crucial for your successful integration.

Manage Resistance: Anticipating and managing resistance to change is also key. This can be achieved by listening to concerns, providing clear information, and involving your teams and partners in the change process. Acknowledging the changes and people's concerns during this period can help ease the transition and reduce resistance.

Maintain (or Build) a Supportive Culture: Your arrival could either mean a continuation of the existing work culture or be the impetus for building a new culture. In both situations, you will need to work to foster a culture that supports change, promotes open communication, encourages innovation, and creates a sense of shared purpose. This culture will help individuals navigate through the transition and embrace the new beginning that your entry represents.

In summary, it is essential to manage the significant change your arrival represents. This involves effective communication of your vision, managing resistance to change, and fostering a supportive culture. During a presidential transition, these practices become even more critical to ensure a smooth transition and early success.

Conclusion

In conclusion, leading within the EOP is a unique and challenging endeavor, one that requires a distinctive blend of skills, strategic thinking, and the ability to navigate complex interagency relationships. The principles and practices outlined in this document are designed to guide you in this journey, providing you with the tools and insights needed to make a meaningful impact in your role.

The heart of effective EOP leadership lies in the cultivation of a collaborative and inclusive environment, where diverse ideas are valued and every voice is heard. It is about nurturing a strategic vision that aligns with the President's objectives and national priorities, and making informed, timely decisions that drive this vision forward.

Your leadership journey in the EOP will be characterized by the relationships you build, both within your interagency teams and with external partners. These relationships, anchored in respect, integrity, and shared objectives, will be the bedrock of your success. Coupled with your ability to adeptly navigate the bureaucracy, these relationships will determine the effectiveness of your policy execution and the achievement of your objectives.

Drawing from my eight years of experience in the EOP, and several years before and after supporting it, this document aims to provide you with a roadmap to effective leadership within this unique environment. As you embark on this journey, may these insights and lessons guide you in successfully shaping the future of our nation.

About the Author

Duane Blackburn helped establish and serves as the science & technology lead for MITRE's Center for Data-Driven Policy, which brings objective, nonpartisan insights to government policymaking. Mr. Blackburn previously served for eight years as an Assistant Director of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) and as an R&D Program Manager in the Departments of Defense and Justice.

About the Center for Data-Driven Policy

MITRE's Center for Data-Driven Policy brings objective, evidence-based, nonpartisan insights to government policymaking, bolstered by the expertise of MITRE's ~10,000 workforce of scientists, researchers, and engineers. MITRE operates federally funded research and development centers and has an unwavering commitment to scientific integrity. We work in the public interest. We are prohibited from lobbying and have no owners or shareholders. We don't develop products and do not compete with industry. Our unique position empowers the Center to conduct research and policy analysis free from political and commercial pressures, ensuring that our recommendations remain genuinely objective and data-driven. Connect with us at policy@mitre.org

Endnotes

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⁹ Interagency S&T Leadership.

¹⁰ *Advocacy* refers to the practice of promoting specific actions or initiatives (typically in support of certain projects or targeted outcomes), often without considering the value of alternative options. In contrast, *advice* in the EOP context involves the systematic identification and impartial evaluation of a variety of options, and subsequently presenting results of this analysis to individuals in decision-making roles.

¹¹ There are certainly exceptions, such as in the Office of Management and Budget, where many staff remain for decades.

¹² A. Pope. Don't Kid a Kidder: Lessons in Leadership from President Joe Biden. 2021. Forbes, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ampope/2021/01/22/dont-kid-a-kidder-lessons-in-leadership-from-president-joe-biden/>. Last accessed December 28, 2023.