

WHITE HOUSE POLICY WONKS: THE OVERLOOKED KEYS TO AN ADMINISTRATION'S SUCCESS

By Duane Blackburn



Cabinet secretaries. Agency leaders. White House Chief of Staff. All are incredibly important positions in a new administration, and they rightfully receive the most attention as DC searches for insights on a new administration's leadership and priorities. But there's another, often overlooked group of people who play significant roles in determining an administration's success: staffers within the Executive Office of the President (EOP—also colloquially referred to as the White House).

An administration needs to wisely select individuals for EOP positions, based on particular qualities and attributes. These are not ideal roles for political campaign operatives. Nor are they jobs for those with an “outsider” mentality. Rather, what's needed are people who understand how to make government work to smooth the way for an administration's agenda.

The EOP consists of multiple offices (such as Office of Management and Budget, National Security Council, Office of Science and Technology Policy, and the Council of Economic Advisers); many of these are statutorily required, and a handful of others come and go within individual administrations. Collectively, these offices are designed to support an individual President's needs and priorities so they can govern effectively.

The number of EOP employees also varies; for example, the current EOP employs more than 1,800 individuals. Although many are career civil servants, many others are selected for short-term appointments by individual administrations (the breakdown will vary by EOP office). Individuals selected for these positions come from a variety of sources: non-competitive and political appointees (Schedules A and C), visiting fellows from outside the government, and detainees from various executive branch agencies. The abilities of these oft-overlooked staffers will determine an administration's success on its most complex priorities, so they must be selected, supported, and mentored properly.

Policy issues that EOP entities coordinate are not only the administration's priorities (by selection or necessity), they're also usually quite complex. The EOP primarily focuses on government-wide policies that impact multiple federal agencies, each of which is angling for a resolution in its own best interests. Furthermore, these policies are influenced by multiple, often contradictory, considerations, such as science and technology, budget, operational requirements, privacy and civil liberties and, of course...politics.

The job of EOP staffers is to bring together representatives from impacted agencies and guide this interagency group as they develop a consensus plan, in such a way that, at the end, the agencies are willing and able to implement their portions of the plan. This is not usually quick or easy.

Achieving consensus requires EOP staffers to have a variety of insights and experiences, a wide circle of existing relationships, and great interpersonal skills to earn the trust of interagency team members. EOP staffers must be internally driven to succeed, but also recognize they cannot generate any successes on their own. And they must be intellectually curious.

The following are key qualities staffers need to succeed in an EOP policy role. Transition teams and chiefs of staff should be mindful of these when making personnel decisions.

Qualities for Success in the EOP

Is humble and a servant leader. In many cases, EOP policy staffers will be less experienced and less senior in their careers than the agency representatives they are tasked with leading. These careerists have worked for decades to rise through the ranks of their agencies, often with a focus on the specific topic at hand, and they have detailed insight and experience the EOP staffer may not yet recognize as important. A willingness to learn from and leverage these individuals is very important.

Smart staffers embrace a leadership model where they share the administration's goal (at a high level) with these individuals and then let them have a predominant role in the group's deliberations about how to meet that



I purposefully arranged the work of virtually every interagency policy group I led into subteams that had career staffers from various agencies leading them. Doing so not only best leveraged these individuals' insights, but also promoted a sense of ownership of the group's success within each member.

The interagency meetings I led then reviewed each subteam's progress, ensuring that all agencies were onboard and the work of the subteams was collectively advancing us towards our objective.

objective. Successfully implementing the developed plan depends on the enthusiasm and determination of the interagency group members as they lead their agency's subsequent activities; this is much easier to achieve when they've developed the plan themselves rather than being given a plan by an unknown appointee.

The policy staffer's job in this model is to help the group overcome obstacles, which can be difficult and time-intensive on its own. The staffer must not overwhelm their teams with overlapping objectives and projects, or with an unreasonable working cadence. There is also quite a bit of grunt work involved to ensure that interagency meetings run smoothly and advance the group towards their objective. Working the phones before and after meetings to understand agencies' positions and concerns, or issues that subordinate teams are encountering, and doing everything possible to overcome them outside the large meetings are key. Good EOP staffers are rarely surprised at anything that comes up in these meetings.

Uses persuasion rather than a hammer. EOP-led interagency groups generate the most success when the group's representatives strongly believe their agency's best chance of success on the topic is via the interagency group and the plans they've developed. That buy-in does not happen automatically, and there is no consistent recipe for success. The EOP staffer must subtly lead each member of the group to reach that conclusion.

Although the EOP staffer does have some tools to force an agency's action (such as budget levers or elevating the debate to a higher political level), in reality these are seldom used—and the less they're used, the better. Experienced representatives on an interagency team will recognize this and leverage it for their agency's benefit. They will also quickly recognize political promises that are unlikely to be fulfilled, or when an objective will take a significant amount of effort (and they are undoubtedly already overwhelmed with their "day job"). The EOP staffer must continually read the room, individually and collectively, and work to maintain participants' focus and willingness to collaborate.



Persuasion skills are necessary within EOP as top-down direction usually doesn't work—even in the White House!

I once attended an EOP-led interagency policy coordination meeting where I was a back-bencher (because the S&T aspects of the issue were very minor compared to the other issues at hand.) The topic was a priority for both Congress and the administration, and the leader had virtually every possible EOP “hammer” mechanism at his disposal. At the first meeting, the group leader claimed dominion over everyone else on the topic and started handing out instructions. I could physically see every attendee get mad and start to tune the guy out. The effort flailed for over a year until he was replaced. The new leader instead took a servant leadership approach and the group quickly began generating successes.



Inevitably, some staffers come into the EOP predominantly because of their political connections, but lack meaningful experience in either the executive branch of the federal government or the topic space. Many will flame out in short order, while simultaneously delaying any significant progress on their assigned policy topics. However, there is usually a handful that do succeed—often bringing fresh insight and enthusiasm, along with familiarity and expertise in the incoming administration's priorities.

Knows the EOP. Policy staffers need to know how the EOP works and have strong relationships with individuals in sister EOP entities that will influence the activities of their interagency teams. Unfortunately, these relationships are most easily gained via personal

experience. New staffers should heavily leverage their senior and more experienced colleagues for guidance.

Senior political leaders within the EOP are not only the staffer's supervisors, but also play important enabling roles for their tasks. Staffers will often need to cover from the political level to initiate new lanes of effort and to get the interagency team's plans reviewed and formally approved at the necessary level. Staffers need to maintain a productive personal relationship with their political supervisors and give them constant progress updates so they won't be surprised about anything as the time nears for making important decisions. Finally, staffers need to ensure their leadership understands the operational and political ramifications of the developed recommendations, how the team is planning to communicate and manage them, and what they should discuss with their political appointee peers in external agencies.

Can resolve conflicts. Most EOP policy bodies exist because there is an important topic with ramifications for multiple federal agencies, but no obvious solutions. What may be ideal for some agencies would create significant harm for others, or the EOP needs agencies to change their priorities and internal procedures to meet bigger picture objectives.

These usually are not just simple disagreements, since individual laws and existing federal policies have been crafted for legitimate reasons. It's no simple feat to talk an agency representative away from their agency's status quo, and then have them go back to their agency to champion adjusting their policies to meet broader objectives. Policy staffers need diplomacy, discretion, and tact to achieve consensus while staying focused on the administration's goals.

Has the proper focus. The EOP staffer must ensure they, and the interagency team they lead, are focused on driving the proper outcome: meeting the team's overall objectives in a measurable, beneficial way. Too often, EOP staffers and interagency teams become focused on crafting and meeting interim objectives (such as strategies, implementation plans, or budget adjustments) rather than properly viewing them as means to a desired end.



From my experience, individuals who unnecessarily push for Executive Orders early in a group's efforts tend to be assigned to the White House for a very limited term (such as an appointment lasting one year or less.)

While authoring an EO will look good on their resumes, their drive to create that legacy often undermines a group's ability to meet its true objective. Overly driven efforts to rapidly craft EOs often don't focus sufficiently on ensuring the directive can be implemented or actually achieve beneficial and measurable outcomes. The directives may read well, but they may not be individually feasible nor collectively support the administration's overall objective.

A related, critical error is an EOP-led effort that starts with a proclamation that the group is going to craft an Executive Order (EO) or some other form of presidential directive. While new appointees in the room may get excited, the career employees representing the agencies will roll their eyes and sigh at such a premature proclamation. Why? Because they recognize the focus is on the wrong outcome. It's important to realize that most interagency policy agreements will not require this level of documentation. For those that do, it will become obvious to all team members during deliberations. But even then, an EO or presidential directive is a vehicle to achieve the end objective, not the objective itself. Indeed, an EO requires obtaining multiple additional levels of political appointee concurrence, and weeks, if not months, of delay. If presidential-level direction is not absolutely needed, chances are good you're better off without it.

Leverages networks. The fuel of progress within the EOP is relationships. EOP staffers must realize this and then continuously nurture and leverage these relationships. There are different types of relationships to be aware of:

Personal peers. Every staffer enters their new position with a host of existing relationships, each of which will immediately change when they take office. It's important for staffers to maintain and leverage these relationships (without crossing the Federal Advisory Committee Act, of course) not only to get things done, but to maintain a proper grounding. The longer a person stays in an EOP position, the further distanced they become from personal insights from their work. Personal relationships will help a staffer continue to see what is real.

EOP Peers. Most policy issues an EOP staffer addresses span not only multiple federal agencies, but multiple EOP offices. Staffers in these offices obviously must be on the same page, but they can also provide mutual support, since the entity with more leverage or ability to persuade an agency can vary by topic and agency. Similarly, peers within a staffer's own office can provide mutual mentorship. Even though they are working on different topics, their struggles will be very similar. Plus, whatever plans each develops will often have to be blessed by the same higher-level entity, so sharing insights can be beneficial.

Agency-Agency relationships. Agency representatives on the teams an EOP staffer leads likely know each other, and many have built strong relationships from collaborating over the years. These relationships are usually a gold mine for an EOP staffer, who can leverage them to help overcome agencies' thorny issues. (They're also a danger zone for an ineffective EOP leader—agency representatives can very easily get on the same page and rapidly scuttle an initiative.)

Political-Political relationships. Political appointees share a common bond and purpose, and often have their own longstanding relationships. Backchannel conversations between an EOP political appointee and a political appointee out in an agency can make a huge difference and advance a staffer's progress.

Knows the Topic. Although an EOP staffer's personal knowledge of the topic can be beneficial, it's often less important for success than the qualities already discussed. Those with experience must be aware of its limitations, otherwise it could become a liability.



One relationship typically underutilized by current EOP staffers is with former EOP staffers. This is unfortunate, as former staffers can quickly and easily provide a wealth of beneficial insight and helpful guidance, while simultaneously maintaining strict confidence. I've been asked multiple times to provide input on an issue or informally mentor a new staff member as they get their feet wet – and I've been heartily thanked each time for the benefits provided. This is far from the norm, however, within the EOP culture. New senior leaders should strongly consider leveraging former EOP staffers as confidential mentors for their newly hired staff.

Recall too that some EOP staffers are on temporary loan from a federal agency, and will return to that agency at the end of their service. Several will later resurface as their agency's representative on an interagency coordination body, often with more insights and relationships than the current staffer who took their place.

The ideal is to find candidates with some topic knowledge—just enough to know they are not and cannot be an expert on everything.

Policy topics that require EOP coordination of federal activities depend on multiple influences that have nuanced variances within different federal agencies. No individual will have insight and experience across the entire federal space, and every other person in the meeting will know something about the topic the EOP staffer does not.

There is also a natural tendency to predominantly focus on a topic subspace one personally knows well, at the expense of other important areas. To prevent this, EOP staffers will need to perform self-assessments or ask a trusted colleague to give them candid feedback.

Conclusion

Selection of EOP staffers usually happens outside the public eye and is not always strategically optimal – despite an administration's reliance on these individuals for success on priority topics. Although there is no magic formula to guarantee success in the EOP, hiring individuals with the qualities discussed in this paper, and then providing them with coaching or experienced mentors, will set an administration on the surest footing to drive desired change.

About the Author

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