

Public & Social Sector Practice

How new leaders of federal agencies can set up a great front office

Consciously shaping the relationship between the director and the deputy director is critical for effective governance.

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Congratulations on assuming your new role in federal government! The composition of your team and your ability to create a high-performing front office will be the foundation for achieving your goals. Given the breadth of front-office responsibilities, no one person can manage them alone. Directors and deputy directors alike must therefore think seriously—and early in their tenures—about what a good front-office pairing looks like and how to structure this working relationship.

Our interviews with former principals, directors, deputies, and chiefs of staff in public, private, and nonprofit organizations revealed a consensus on what constitutes a strong front office: individually competent leaders who collectively form a team that consistently achieves its objectives. To do so, keep two central principles in mind:

1. The director and the deputy should have individual traits and capabilities that underlie different competencies but also help these leaders to succeed as a pair.
2. Effective operating principles for directors and deputies help the front office succeed.

Optimal director–deputy pairings

The deputy is responsible for managing and executing the leadership priorities set by the director. A strong pairing proactively positions the front office for success. The most influential and successful front offices consider the following issues when they develop their director–deputy partnerships:

Ensure complementary director–deputy competencies. Parallels between the public and private sectors are not always valid. But the value of ensuring that a management team performs strongly as a unit is quite real in both realms.¹

Successful director–deputy pairings know how to lead effectively (for instance, by setting strategic agendas) and manage capably (for example, by working to achieve their objectives). They also have deep subject-matter expertise. Neither the director nor the deputy needs to be proficient in all of these areas, but between the two of them they must cover the full spectrum. Considering the traditional government hierarchy, it is particularly important that the director be an effective leader and the deputy an effective manager. The deputy's managerial role typically touches on five core elements: administration, gatekeeping, counseling, implementing, and proxying. Ensuring that the deputy has the competencies to deliver these elements will help ensure that the director has the necessary support to execute priority initiatives.

Balance working styles. Directors and deputies should have synergies in their management approaches and deploy their complementary skills at the right times. A director who is a big-picture thinker, for instance, would work well with a deputy who is more detail oriented and focused on execution. Truly complementary styles are ideal, but in practice front offices can often surmount misalignments by developing a transparent working relationship.

Optimize for credibility. Although trust is essential for any effective partnership, it can take years to establish. Not all front-office leaders can build a team including people with whom they already have a personal, trust-based relationship. When they can't, they will probably be able to build a mutually trusting relationship fairly quickly by choosing people with a successful track record and established credibility across the organization or among administration leaders. If an incoming team member lacks established credibility, the leader should deliberately seek out opportunities to build it and to mitigate any doubts about the team's capabilities.

¹ See Carolyn Dewar, Martin Hirt, and Scott Keller, "The mindsets and practices of excellent CEOs," October 2019, McKinsey.com.

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Effective operating principles for front-office teams

The second basic requirement for the front-office team is to establish a sustainable, coordinated operating model that helps it execute effectively.

Align on objectives and priorities. One of the first conversations a director and deputy should have concerns how to define a successful tenure. Typically, success involves policies (for instance, the execution of executive orders), political needs (such as fulfilling the president's campaign promises), and personal requirements (for example, strengthening relationships with other top officials). These aspirations serve as the leadership team's "North Star," informing the day-to-day priorities of both the director and the deputy. Without such clearly defined aspirations, the front office risks wasting valuable capacity on efforts that don't help it realize genuinely significant objectives or priorities.

Establish and continually reevaluate a clear division of roles and responsibilities. The director and the deputy must transparently and tactically divide the responsibilities of the front office. Two established frameworks follow:

1. Divide and conquer: the front office divides responsibilities according to logical, established criteria (such as external versus internal or the respective interests and passions of the leader and the deputy).
2. Proxy/shadow: the deputy shadows the director (rather than owning a discrete piece of the portfolio), providing direct support for all front-office priorities.

A front office can use both frameworks in different contexts—in some cases, divide and conquer may be more appropriate, in others proxy/shadow. No matter how the director and the deputy divide their responsibilities, both should not only focus on things they find energizing but also prevent any "must dos" from falling through the cracks. Over time, the front office's division of roles and responsibilities will probably evolve. To ensure consistent coverage of the entire portfolio, leaders should explicitly and transparently acknowledge these changes.

Set the level of interaction between the director and the deputy. An almost constant flow of communication between the director and the deputy is necessary. To establish a culture of communication, consider these moves:

- Institute daily stand-up meetings with, at a minimum, the director, the deputy, and the chief of staff.
- Rearrange offices to ensure that the director and the deputy (and their staffs) maintain close physical proximity to facilitate informal discussions.
- Establish an open-door policy under which the director and the deputy can enter each other's offices anytime, even during meetings.
- Use a platform (such as text messages or an internal messenger system) for fast informal communication.

Build a trusting relationship beyond the front office. Genuine trust is consistently cited as the most critical factor underpinning successful director–deputy pairings. Spending time in the trenches together generates camaraderie that often makes the director and the deputy feel more confident about each other’s judgment and actions. Directors and deputies can also build trust by implementing transparent policies (such as open-door communication and transparent calendars) and by extending their relationship beyond the office (for instance, family activities or exercising). Such efforts—trivial as they may seem—to establish, then solidify, the foundations for a trusting relationship were emphasized as crucial difference makers by a variety of former front-office leaders.

Create a culture that encourages new ideas. To serve as an effective complement to the director, the deputy must feel comfortable posing new ideas,

even if they challenge the director’s thinking. However, the deputy must also recognize that the “final say” lies with the director. If such a culture is created appropriately, the additional input and constructive challenging of ideas strengthens the strategies of the front office and positions the deputy to execute them more effectively and with a deeper understanding.

A great front office is critical for effective governance, but significant policy and organizational challenges complicate efforts to create one. Take care to invest in your team early and to ground the work of the front office in clearly articulated operating principles. These will be the first—and among the most important—steps toward having a successful tenure in office.

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