

McKinsey Center for Government

Navigating the first 100 days: Lessons from former US cabinet members

Five management steps can help new US executive federal appointees ensure a successful first 100 days in office.

This article was a collaborative effort by Scott Blackburn, Anita Dutta, David Markman, Jesse Salazar, Steven Smith, and Catharina Wrede Braden.



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Franklin D. Roosevelt delivered his first inaugural address as the 32nd president of the United States on March 4, 1933, from the east portico of the US Capitol in Washington, DC. Committing to push for “measures that a stricken nation in the midst of a stricken world may require,” Roosevelt promised to act quickly to address the myriad challenges of the Great Depression. Within three months, he passed more than a dozen proposals into law, addressing priorities such as banking stability, employment, and welfare programs.¹ In a radio address on July 24, 1933, Roosevelt underscored the importance of an administration’s early days, coining the phrase “first 100 days.”

The first 100 days remain an important benchmark for demonstrating leadership capacity and impact. Private-sector managers usually take at least six months, on average, to achieve real impact, according to our research.² By contrast, US cabinet secretaries, who serve for just less than four years,

on average, need to get a quicker start. “When you go into public service, your time is limited. I felt very much like I was on a sprint, not a jog,” one former cabinet secretary told us. As compared with the decisions facing private-sector leaders, public-sector management can be much more complicated and difficult to navigate efficiently, given political considerations that former business leaders may not be accustomed to, as well as other factors such as how budget decisions are made, agency history, and congressional oversight.

To help government leaders navigate the first 100 days, we spoke with 11 former US cabinet members (see sidebar “A panel on transitions”) to understand what they did in their first 100 days, including the challenges they faced and what they learned. We also compiled input from federal appointees and best practices from our decades of experience in supporting federal- and state-government transitions.

Based on these insights, we’ve identified five steps newly appointed US leaders can take to navigate common management challenges in their first 100 days. Cabinet-level leaders must first prepare for the role, before confirmation, by solidifying their purpose and mission; then it’s a matter of understanding agency context, establishing important relationships, assembling the right team, and taking action while mitigating risk. A focus on these five points can help new executive federal appointees (including cabinet secretaries, under secretaries, and deputies) achieve success and tangible impact in their roles as public servants.



Prepare for the role

“The first thing that I did in preparing to lead the organization was to make sure I reflected upon what the organization was about, what its mission was, and who [we] were serving.”

A panel on transitions

McKinsey interviewed the following former US cabinet members; they spoke with us in a personal capacity and not as representatives of any agency or department:

- **Steven Chu**, former US secretary of Energy
- **Arne Duncan**, former US secretary of Education
- **Dirk Kempthorne**, former US secretary of the Interior
- **Gary Locke**, former US secretary of Commerce
- **Karen Mills**, former administrator of the US Small Business Administration
- **Janet Napolitano**, former US secretary of Homeland Security
- **Mary Peters**, former US secretary of Transportation
- **Susan Schwab**, former US trade representative
- **David Shulkin**, former US secretary of Veteran Affairs
- **Margaret Spellings**, former US secretary of Education

¹ Adam Cohen, “Franklin D. Roosevelt: The first 100 days”, *Time*, June 24, 2009, content.time.com

² Hortense de la Boutetière, Carolyn Dewar, and Scott Keller, “It really isn’t about 100 days,” November 29, 2017, McKinsey.com.

The average time between cabinet nomination and confirmation is approximately 40 days (exhibit). In those vital few weeks, new leaders should conduct a “personal due diligence process” to prepare for their role.

Start with the mission

It may be tempting to dive right into briefing books, confirmation protocols, and team building. But we recommend first focusing on the mission—doing so will support appointees’ ability to act with a motivating purpose. As they prepare their leadership agendas, appointees should begin by reflecting on the core mission of their organization and its contemporary relevance. They should

consider ways to connect their own experiences to the mission and clarify the unique attributes they bring to the role, as well as potential areas for growth. From this introspection and reflection, two or three policy priorities should emerge.

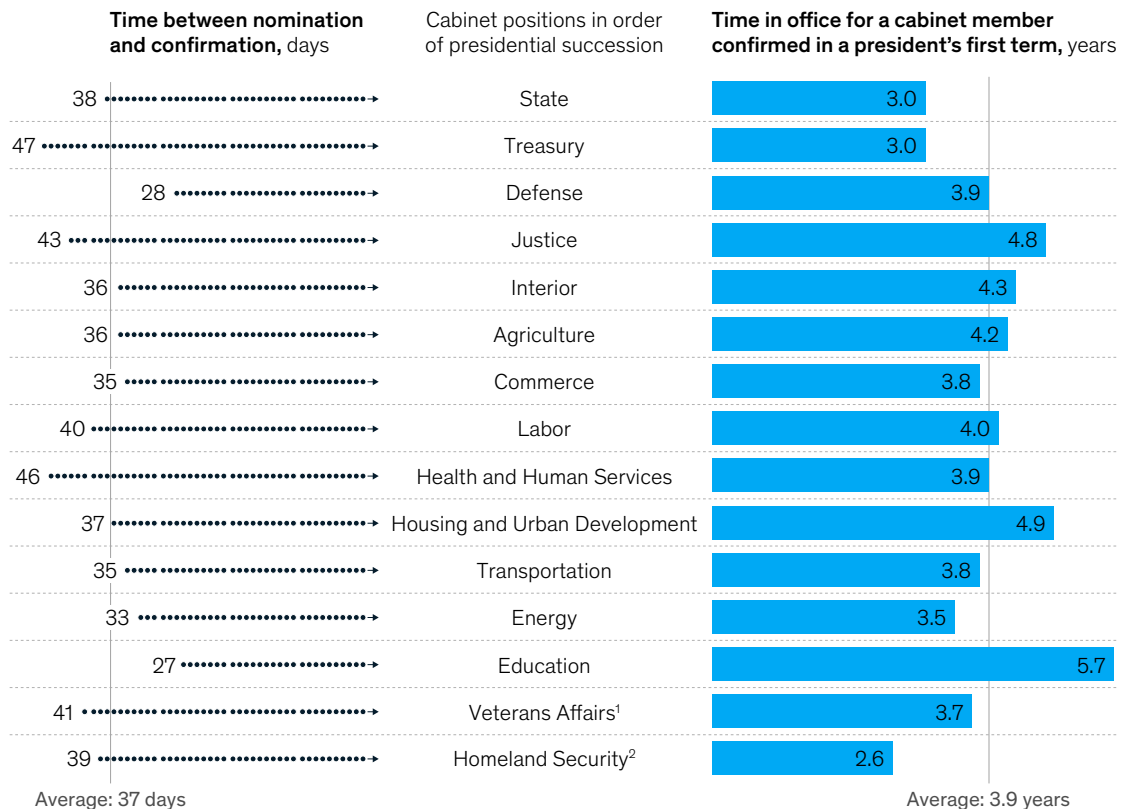
Seek out knowledge

During federal transitions, new appointees typically rely on agency-review teams to provide briefing books with the critical information they need on department history, structure, legal responsibilities, key milestones, and political considerations. During our conversations with former cabinet secretaries, many emphasized how critical these briefing

Exhibit

US cabinet appointees have less than 40 days on average to prepare to lead—and once they’re confirmed, their average tenure is less than four years.

Averages for first-term confirmed appointees, Reagan through Trump administrations



¹The Department of Veterans Affairs became a cabinet-level position in 1988; the first time a director was confirmed in a president's first term was in 1989.

²The Department of Homeland Security was created in 2002; the first time a director was confirmed in a president's first term was in 2009.

Source: United States Senate; current as of December 2020

books were as they prepared for their confirmation hearings. Just as important to them, however, was speaking with their predecessors and hearing firsthand about former leaders' experiences and insights. The cabinet members we interviewed found significant value in connecting with former secretaries of their departments between the time of their nomination announcement and their confirmation.

Cultivate ethical values and behavior

A range of ethics laws, regulations, and customs apply to government service, and leaders bear a responsibility to understand the ethical landscape in which they are operating. The US Office of Government Ethics provides training, resources, and education programs on these issues throughout the federal government. Transition teams should develop and provide appointees with detailed information on ethics, including standards of conduct, conflict-of-interest restrictions, and financial disclosures. Because many roles hold specific responsibilities around properly functioning ethics programs, new appointees should seek to understand these early and well.

2

Understand key context

“Every cabinet secretary should not be afraid to ask dumb questions. Do not hesitate to go out and seek answers to things that [you] don't know. You shouldn't have to try to figure this out on your own.”

Federal executives must navigate a maze of structures, precedents, stakeholder needs, and internal considerations in order to achieve their policy agendas. New cabinet appointees can improve their odds of success if they understand the contextual nuances of government leadership, such as their agency's prior initiatives, decision-making processes, and resources. One former cabinet member told us that meeting with his predecessors was one of the smartest things he did, because it uncovered an important issue that wasn't the focus of transition briefings: a history of racial discrimination and prejudice that revealed the department's deeper cultural issues. This

former cabinet member was then able to prioritize a “significant cultural transformation within the department.”

Continue learning about, and from, prior efforts

Although leaders develop significant knowledge during the confirmation process, prudent leaders will recognize what they still don't know and create a “knowledge agenda” to fill remaining gaps. Appointees should be fluent in an agency's exigent issues, past efforts, and prior outcomes and pay close attention to institutional strengths and weaknesses. Multiple initiatives are likely already under way; understanding their origin can help new appointees determine if they remain relevant. Civil-service staffers can provide additional context to help appointees save some time and energy. Appointees should actively probe potential flash points, such as agency-related anniversaries or reauthorizations for specific initiatives, policies, or budgets.

Clarify decision-making processes

Government agencies are often plagued by fuzzy decision-making processes. Formal and informal decisions are stymied for a number of reasons, including unclear roles, responsibilities, and decision rights. What may seem like a routine choice can require dozens of signatures to get approved.

To avoid decision bottlenecks and unnecessary rework, appointees should determine their own place within the broader agency and administration, and then clearly outline and communicate team responsibilities and decision rights. Longtime staffers and civil servants have the institutional knowledge to help new leaders understand roles and can provide invaluable clarity on decision making.

Take inventory of available resources

Some of the biggest questions for federal appointees in the first 100 days are related to resource allocation. Is it better to undo existing initiatives or improve upon them? Appointees' resources, especially time, are limited, and course corrections can be costly.

Becoming familiar with the lengthy and complex federal budget process—especially its restrictions around allocated versus flexible funds—can help

appointees make judicious trade-offs among time, money, and political capital. Appointees must acknowledge that the current state of play reflects decisions made 12 to 24 months ago by predecessors. It can be difficult to get quality information on resource trade-offs, due to the complex structuring of federal expenditures. They should collaborate with civil-service colleagues to understand near-term opportunities to reinvest funds from lower- to higher-priority areas. But a clear understanding of the depth and breadth of the resource pool can help appointees determine which new or existing initiatives to carry forward, and which to leave behind.

Go on a listening tour

Only some of a cabinet leader's staffers, stakeholders, and congressional members are going to be located in Washington, DC; many may be scattered nationwide and even in global bases or offices. It is therefore important for new federal appointees to be intentional about visiting non-DC-based colleagues and stakeholders in person whenever possible, or through video calls, within their first couple of months in office. Appointees who embark on such a listening tour—whether physically, or as many have during the COVID-19 pandemic, virtually—can absorb multiple perspectives on agency history, looming issues, potential improvements, and exciting possibilities. It's also an opportunity for the new leader to build a diverse sounding board to test ideas or hypotheses.

3

Establish key relationships

"Your success is going to be dependent on building strong relationships with what is generally an amazing career staff: working with them, learning from them, partnering with them to get the real work done."

The work of the federal government is animated by an array of internal and external stakeholders that have significant influence on the work of an agency through their expertise, experience, and representational authority. If federal leaders want to achieve ambitious goals, they should

consider developing relationships with advocacy organizations, unions, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) as meaningfully as they do the US Congress, civil service, and other administration officials. Meeting invitations and inclusion in important events, among other engagement methods, can gradually open new avenues for impact and help appointees develop awareness of stakeholder priorities and concerns. Appointees should connect with this ecosystem before confirmation and throughout their public service—but especially in the first 100 days, since they can make, break, or delay agenda items.

US Congress: The 'first set of responsibilities'

New executive appointees will benefit from a deep understanding of the priorities of congressional members, committees, and staffers. One former US cabinet member told us that developing relationships with Congress should be every new executive's "first set of responsibilities," since Congress sets the executive branch's policy and provides funding. Appointees can start to get a clear understanding of congresspeople's priorities during the confirmation process. After that, regular meetings with the right committees and appropriators can foster a good working relationship, in which both sides understand one another's priorities and have opportunities to quickly address any points of friction. Multiple former agency leaders we spoke with recommended visiting Capitol Hill to regularly meet with representatives in their offices, and also taking time to stop by informally to spend time with committee staffers who are working on relevant issues.

Civil-service employees: The lifeblood of federal agencies

Civil servants are the lifeblood of all federal agencies; they tend to outlast most cabinet appointees, so they are in a unique position to carry on initiatives across administrations. They can also help shape the inevitable "talk of the town" that occurs during federal transitions. In their earliest days of leadership, appointees should assemble civil-service leaders to address knowledge gaps, recognize potential contributions, and learn about how the civil-service employees envision the relationship working. Some appointees institute brown-bag lunches, agency town halls, office

hours, weekly newsletters, and other forums in which civil servants can share their expertise and institutional knowledge. Additionally, new leaders can demonstrate respect for career colleagues and build team camaraderie by including civil servants in ceremonial administration events—for example, a White House tour. The heads of relevant public-sector unions can provide some guidance on employee priorities, morale, and talent management; indeed, a solid relationship between federal appointees and employee unions can mollify future issues.

Other federal-agency appointees: Leading by example

In many ways, new appointees across various agencies can function as a start-up within the larger bureaucracy; the overall culture is strengthened when these individuals create an innovative and collaborative atmosphere. Appointees should work to create a harmonious and positive dynamic in the first 100 days. Team-building events, such as open monthly strategy meetings, inclusive problem-solving sessions, and social gatherings, can pay dividends long into the term by improving morale and helping to reduce attrition. There is no one right way to make this happen: some appointees worked from the same room for an hour, others hosted connectivity events, and still others paired junior and midlevel appointees with more senior sponsors. In all cases, they set up meaningful discussions to reinforce camaraderie and motivate teammates.

Administration and White House appointees: The ‘guiding star’

Every move an administration makes can affect every agency, and White House leaders will expect cabinet members to effectively break down silos to achieve the administration’s goals. But the former cabinet members we spoke with said that interdepartmental outreach is often neglected. They said they regretted not engaging other departments and agencies early enough. One

noted there is truth to the phrase, “Out of sight, out of mind.” Agency leaders do not enjoy the same physical proximity to the White House, which can hinder collaboration and discussion of priority agenda items.

Given that there are more than 4,000 federal appointees³ and more than 400 White House staff, new leaders should target their valuable time on building the right relationships within the administration. Some good places to start? The Domestic Policy Council is essential for guiding the president’s agenda. The Office of Management and Budget plays a key role in the budgeting process.

External stakeholders: Government of the people, by the people, for the people

NGOs, businesses, philanthropic leaders, and members of the public care deeply about the work of the federal government. All these constituencies, at various times and in various ways, engage with government personnel to influence their policy agendas. Appointees must identify and actively work with influencers in these communities to broaden their perspectives and to build support for and pressure-test ideas. One important external stakeholder group, for instance, is the veteran community, and nonprofit veteran-service organizations (VSOs) play an important role in the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). VSOs support and assist veterans with services such as claims submission, employment, mental health, medical services, and homeownership. It is critical, then, for new appointees to the VA to engage with leaders at the VSOs regularly in order to coordinate funding and other support for such services—intentional communication is required, and the sooner after the confirmation, the better. Appointees may accept or reject the views of external stakeholders; ignoring them, however, may jeopardize an agency’s effectiveness or create greater risk. Just as the civil service can make or break agendas, so can nongovernmental stakeholders.

³ *Policy and supporting positions: Committee on homeland security and governmental affairs*, US Government Publishing Office, US Senate, 114th Congress, December 1, 2016, govinfo.gov.

4

Build your team

"[It's] important to build a team that is not divided into fiefdoms but that has a common purpose and a good set of communications."

Former cabinet members we interviewed rejected the approach of forming a team of rivals. They instead emphasized the importance of developing a harmonious team with a shared sense of purpose. Our analysis of public-sector organizations shows they have weaker organizational health, on average, than the private sector.⁴ The public sector especially struggles with coordination, culture, and strategic direction.

Given the hierarchical nature of government organizations, it is important to avoid a sycophantic culture in which colleagues feel uncomfortable expressing contrarian or dissenting views. Good leaders create space for the best ideas to surface, even if they come from earlier-career or lower-rank colleagues. Appointees should ensure that colleagues feel safe enough to take measured risk by speaking openly about their own missteps and acknowledging lessons learned, especially from failed efforts. One former cabinet member said that it was important to celebrate those who attempted challenging initiatives, even if they failed to achieve the desired outcome.

Pinpoint strengths and fill gaps

It is important for appointees to think through the skill set the team needs to be successful, including individual strengths and weaknesses. If an appointee joins from the private sector, for example, they may want to recruit staff with strong connections across the administration. If an appointee has an extensive federal background but less experience in managing a large bureaucracy, they may want to hire experienced staff who can help translate priorities into concrete actions that will move the agency in the right direction. As appointees build their team, they should bring in

surrogates who know the appointees' background and values, can represent the leadership, and will amplify the agency's message. All appointees may be asked to serve as the public face of an agency, so they should seek the appropriate media training.

Clarify decisions and communicate them clearly

Members of the team, staffers and leaders alike, can become confused if decision rights are not clearly delineated. Private-sector research⁵ indicates that fewer than half of organizational decisions are timely, and that a majority of employees say that half the time spent making decisions is ineffective. Leaders can make better, faster decisions by spurring productive debate, understanding the power of process, and making empowerment a real part of the culture. Leaders don't need unanimous agreement but benefit from shared commitment once decisions have been made.

Empower teams and staffers

New appointees will be responsible for maintaining and improving team culture and norms. A key element of this effort is trust. Early on, appointees should develop a plan for disseminating core principles of good culture and demonstrating what they look like in action. This might include a regular celebration of or reward for good performance across the agency, recognizing behind-the-scenes contributions, or devoting budget to staff training. Simultaneously, it is critical for new executive appointees to take care of themselves to ensure they can effectively empower others (see sidebar "Personal tips from former US cabinet members").

5

Take action and mitigate risks

"What is the important versus the urgent? How will you make room in your day and your agenda to focus on strategic priorities that you have instead of just reacting?"

⁴ Martin Checinski, Roland Dillon, Solveigh Hieronimus, and Julia Klier, "Putting people at the heart of public-sector transformations," March 5, 2019, McKinsey.com.

⁵ Aaron De Smet, Gregor Jost, and Leigh Weiss, "Three keys to faster, better decisions," McKinsey Quarterly, May 1, 2019, McKinsey.com.

Personal tips from former US cabinet members

The former US cabinet members we interviewed shared the following advice for maintaining energy and enthusiasm while serving in public office:

- **Engage with peer leaders.** “It can be lonely at the top,” said one former US cabinet member. Regularly network and seek downtime with peer leaders throughout the administration to share lessons, discuss ideas, and solve management challenges.
- **Protect family time.** Some former cabinet members reported being away from their families for long periods of time while working late nights or traveling. Your direct reports, scheduling team, and advance team should help ensure that family time gets protected.
- **Involve your family.** Cabinet roles often include a variety of ceremonial engagement. Bringing your family can build family closeness and memories that will far outlast your time in office.
- **Model balance.** Employees look to senior government executives for signals about workplace culture. Encourage colleagues to take time for family, friends, and themselves. By taking time yourself, you will signal to others how to find balance and still get the job done.
- **Schedule time for physical fitness.** Cabinet secretaries receive hundreds of meeting requests a week. To prevent burnout, carve out daily time for physical fitness to recharge as well as to have personal reflection and distance from the office. One cabinet member said, “You don’t let me work out, you’re going to see the uglier side of me.”
- **Dedicate time for mental fitness.** Having time to think about topics outside your agency is key to maintaining perspective and sanity. One former leader would purposefully set time aside by always having her staff sit separately from her on commercial flights to allow precious time to disconnect and refocus while in the air.
- **Request briefing books early and reserve time to read.** Any given day brings loads of information to digest quickly. Cramming at the last minute for a big meeting is not ideal.
- **Get briefings on topics that interest you.** Secretaries can request briefings on many important topics. One former cabinet member told us that he loved learning detailed information on niche topics within his department, and he found that his interest in the details boosted team morale.
- **Minimize the commute.** One former cabinet member recommends minimizing the commute as much as possible. He said, “Appointees have to be very cognizant of the physical toll that commuting has on your ability to function and focus.”
- **Regularly eat in the cafeteria.** Eating in the cafeteria is a great way to meet people and develop a positive presence.

- **Have fun.** “We’re definitely here to do serious work,” one former cabinet member said. “But you have to exude lightness and fun. Carry that through your whole management of an organization, or no one will want to show up.”

These tips may not apply to all agencies, especially those affected by “stay at home” orders related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the first 100 days, appointees should define what success looks like for their tenure.

Once appointees have formulated their plans and had them approved by relevant colleagues and stakeholders, they will need to execute quickly. A range of stakeholders will push for fast results; a clear plan and stakeholder-engagement strategy can hold potential criticism at bay. We encourage new leaders to familiarize themselves with our research on the management demands of a public-sector transformation.

Define success

In the first 100 days, appointees should define what success looks like for their tenure. An appointee's objectives will typically involve some combination of policy goals (such as the execution of an executive order), political goals (such as the fulfilment of the president's campaign promises), and personal goals (such as strengthening relationships with other top officials). These goals will inform the leader's day-to-day priorities and can serve as the "North Star" for the team. The new leaders should first link metrics to these core goals; the priorities should then be cascaded across the agency through managers and reinforced in internal communications and town hall meetings.

Generate momentum

An appointee's quick wins can stimulate additional goodwill, resources, and organizational buy-in. Crucially, early wins beget more opportunities for transformational change by making it easier to get backing for future decisions. However, there is peril in moving too quickly, because early failures from reckless or hurried decisions can define a legacy. Leaders must thoughtfully balance the urgency of the job with the diligence needed to get things right.

Not all momentum is generated through new policy initiatives; sometimes appointees achieve momentum

through stewardship. In the case of security, law enforcement, or health and safety, appointee success may be "measured by what doesn't happen on [their] watch as much as what does happen." Pressure testing can ensure that systems are maintained in an orderly and effective manner.

Beware of risks that could derail the agenda

Government agencies have not historically created a comprehensive crisis preparation and response team. Indeed, several former cabinet members told us that crises often derailed their efforts and kept teams from executing on priority initiatives. Mitigating and isolating the effects of a crisis can ensure that the ship stays on course—which is why the appointee should consider instituting a leadership role within their office focused on crisis management, similar to those in most large and mature businesses.

Former cabinet members encouraged future leaders to be mindful of several practices, as not doing so could derail their agenda. These practices include emphasizing kindness in lieu of "showing everyone who is boss." They also suggested keeping an open mind to new ideas, approaches, or ways of working without making assumptions or constantly letting everyone know how much better something worked in another organization. They cautioned against throwing out everything a predecessor did, as there was frequently a rationale that may not immediately be apparent. Last, they advised incoming executive appointees to remain mindful of how small a big federal agency really is, and how fast word and reputations travel.

The first 100 days of a new federal executive's term are crucial. Actions taken during this time will be heavily scrutinized throughout the government and in the media and, most important, looked upon by agency and administration colleagues, stakeholders, community leaders, and US citizens as an indication of what to expect and how best to partner with the

appointee. Understanding the full context, building strong relationships, and assembling a trusted team while taking action will provide new leaders a strong foundation upon which to build impact on behalf of the country.

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Scott Blackburn and **Catharina Wrede Braden** are both partners in McKinsey's Washington, DC, office, where **David Markman** is a consultant and **Jesse Salazar** is a communications expert; **Anita Dutta** is a consultant in the Stamford office; and **Steven Smith** is a consultant in the Austin office.

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