

## Governor's Office Onboarding Guide: Agency Liaison

### ***Introduction***

As chief executive officer of the state, the governor has the opportunity to develop an agenda that identifies policy priorities and the outcomes the administration desires. These policy priorities and outcomes will guide the administration and provide a framework for managing state agencies that report to the governor. A governor's success will be determined by the quality of this agenda and his or her ability to secure its implementation. In addition, state government is a major provider of services critical to citizens' health, safety and well-being. The governor generally is held responsible for the quality and effectiveness of those services. Accordingly, success also will be determined by the degree to which the ongoing functions of state government are perceived to operate in an efficient and effective manner.

The agency liaison function facilitates interactions between the governor and his or her staff and state government agencies. The agency liaison function generally covers three separate but closely related activities: policy development, cross-agency coordination and oversight of government operations. The governor's ability to develop good policy, effect sound implementation and ensure solid management depends on his or her ability to communicate and interact effectively with state agencies. A successful agency liaison process will specify what is expected, monitor performance and assist in resolving problems or issues. It begins with the clear definition of the respective roles of the governor, the governor's staff and state agency heads. It identifies who will make key decisions. It also defines how decisions will be conveyed to affected parties and what systems will be used to monitor the implementation of those decisions.

The governor's personal style and management approach will have a significant impact on developing positive relations with key appointees and agency staff. To be effective, the cabinet must feel like part of the governor's team and be able to translate this involvement into effective agency management. The agency liaison process can help make this team concept a reality.

In addition to building a team and motivating state government personnel, a successful agency liaison process will ensure the governor has access to the facts and opinions needed to make appropriate policy and management decisions. The process will facilitate necessary interagency communication and cooperation and provide early warning of developing problems and issues.

### ***Organization and Staffing***

The agency liaison function can be organized and staffed in different ways. Regardless of the model chosen, however, individuals in the governor's office must work together closely to ensure they are sending consistent messages on behalf of the governor and minimize overlap and duplication of effort.

### ***Organizing the Agency Liaison Function***

In many states, the governor has created an in-house policy unit that plays a major role in agency liaison. The in-house policy unit often is responsible for developing policy, coordinating the work of state agencies and overseeing government operations. In a few states, separate units are responsible for policy development and government operations. In other states, tasks related to policy development, cross-agency coordination and oversight of government operations are handled by the governor's chief of staff or distributed among various senior staff with related responsibilities. Separate units in the governor's

office often are charged with coordinating communications, legislative relations and constituent services.

## **Dedicating Staff to the Agency Liaison Function**

The allocation of staff to policy development, cross-agency coordination and government management depends on different factors, including reporting relationships between the governor's office and state agencies, the scope of the governor's agenda and the degree to which the governor intends to monitor and oversee the activities of his or her appointees.

The number of staff members dedicated to the agency liaison function will vary depending on the number of agency heads reporting to the governor. Often a single gubernatorial staff member is given responsibility for a cluster of agencies. In addition, staffing related to the agency liaison function will depend on the governor's policies and procedures regarding:

- The process for individual meetings with the governor and the degree to which the governor collects policy input from the cabinet;
- Coordination of activities and advance work for scheduled public appearances by the governor and the agency head;
- Approval of correspondence generated by the governor's office including letters to be signed by the governor and the agency head; and
- Approval of policies governing press releases, public announcements and press conferences.

The staffing of the cabinet, subcabinet agencies and policy task forces—as well as the degree to which the governor seeks to monitor the performance of gubernatorial appointees and progress toward achieving priorities and outcomes—also affects agency liaison staffing.

## **Cabinet and Subcabinet Staff**

An active cabinet likely will increase the need for gubernatorial staff or the delegation of some staff functions to agency personnel. If efficiency in government and management improvement are to be major initiatives, agency coordination will be a more active part of the governor's daily activity and require more staff time. In states where no formal cabinet exists or the governor has not developed a performance management system, agency liaison strategies may not demand a large staff component.

## **The Executive Branch Team**

Building an executive branch team can be a challenge to any administration. A well-defined relationship among the governor, his or her staff and agency heads enables the governor to focus attention on his or her priorities while ensuring that the ongoing functions of government are being carried out in an effective and efficient manner. A well-functioning cabinet can be a tremendous resource to the governor in developing policy and managing the state.

Governors increasingly are seeking to hold their appointees accountable for specific performance measures or outcomes. Many agency heads find such a system helpful in focusing their agency's attention on gubernatorial priorities and minimizing misunderstandings and clarifying expectations. The agency liaison process can provide a mechanism for developing and overseeing a performance management system.

Serving as agency liaison is more difficult when the governor's responsibility for executive branch agencies is constrained by the delegation of some executive responsibility to other elected officials or when agency heads are selected and serve at the pleasure of boards and commissions whose members have not been appointed by the current governor. Although the nature of the agency liaison function may vary considerably in these cases, the success of the governor's agenda may also depend, to some degree, on the cooperation of these officials. Consequently, the governor may want to consider a special process for interacting and communicating with them.

## ***Roles and Responsibilities***

The agency liaison enables the governor and the governor's staff to relate to the cabinet and the operating agencies of state government. These relationships are strongly influenced by the legal and constitutional powers of the governor and agency heads.

In some states, operating agencies are headed by other elected officials. In other states, cabinet appointees serve fixed terms or are appointed by boards or commissions not under the direct control of the governor. In still other states, the governor may have very limited appointment power for subcabinet officials. In each of these cases, an activist governor may seek to influence agency policies not under his or her control through an intense public information campaign or cooperative efforts with a supportive agency head.

Relations among the governor, his or her staff, cabinet members and other agencies also will be shaped by how the governor delegates authority and communicates decisions. Finally, the roles assumed by the governor, senior staff, cabinet and cabinet/subcabinet working groups will influence working relationships and intragovernmental leadership and cooperation.

## **Delegating Authority**

Structuring the agency liaison process begins with developing answers to three questions related to delegation of authority:

- What types of decisions does the governor want to make personally?
- What types of decisions will the governor delegate to staff or central management agencies?
- What types of decisions will be made by line agency heads?

## **Communicating Decisions**

Structuring the agency liaison process involves answering questions related to how communications

will be handled among the governor, his or her office and staff and state agencies. These questions include:

- When the governor chooses to make a decision or has delegated the decision-making authority to a staff member or central management agency, how is input from agency heads gathered and how will that decision be communicated to agency heads?
- When the governor has delegated authority to others, how will the governor and the governor's staff be informed of major issues so they can provide input if they desire to do so?
- How will the governor or the governor's staff be kept informed of decisions made by others?

In answering these "how" questions, it is important to consider the governor's decision-making style and personal preferences. Some governors like to use an open consultative process and will be comfortable discussing policy and management issues with their cabinet. Others may prefer a more structured process using cabinet or task force working groups to prepare briefing materials or decision memoranda. Still others may choose to rely on their own staff for these functions.

## **Monitoring Cabinet Agency Performance**

In many cases, the agency liaison function will go beyond delegation of authority and decisions about communication to focus on developing a process for monitoring agency performance and holding agency heads accountable for specific outcomes. Some governors choose to rely on relatively informal means of accountability, while others establish formal performance management systems.

## **Defining the Roles of the Governor and Senior Staff**

The roles governors play in managing their policy agenda are influenced in part, by the institutional constraints facing each governor. They also are determined by the governor's personal style and preferences. No single role or style is best. The contributions of others in the administration to helping manage the governor's policy agenda must be tailored to and complement the governor's preferred

roles and style. The location of a policy unit and the use of other means of managing the policy agenda also must fit gubernatorial roles and style. Any configuration of gubernatorial staff can serve the governor well in helping to manage the governor's agenda. It is important to clearly define the roles of agency liaison staff and communicate those roles to all.

Certain distinctive roles typically are expected from senior staff. The governor's chief of staff often plays a strategic role in reviewing proposed policies and political implications. The press secretary or communications director generally is called on to interpret the policy agenda for the media and public and anticipate their reaction to the plan. The governor's legal counsel and legislative relations liaison can play an informal advisory role, and both will help manage the legislative portion of the governor's agenda.

Agency liaison staff help mesh agency agendas with the governor's agenda. Agency liaison activities are by nature process driven. To the extent the governor's staff members deal with agencies in their daily activities, they are performing the agency liaison role. Agency relations can include advising agency heads, resolving problems that involve more than one agency and serving as a conduit between the governor and agency officials.

Other staff with agency liaison responsibility include the governor's chief of staff, deputy chief of staff, legal counsel, legislative director, appointments director, constituent services director, and communications director or press secretary.

## **Defining the Roles of the Cabinet and Working Groups**

While some governors rely heavily on individual contacts between their offices and agency heads, others also make extensive use of their cabinets and cabinet/subcabinet working groups to address issues of policy development, cross-agency coordination and government management.

Where the governor makes use of these mechanisms, management responsibility often will rest with the same gubernatorial staff assigned internal responsibility for agency liaison. Staff responsibilities can include developing agendas, preparing briefing materials and following up on action items and assignments.

## ***Techniques and Tools***

Although few governors have developed comprehensive statements of their approach to agency liaison, several individual decisions will define a framework for agency involvement in policy development and implementation and for the governor's and staff's involvement in the oversight of government operations. These decisions likely will address issues such as:

- The manner in which agency heads will report and be held accountable for individual employee and agency performance;
- The agency head's role in developing and implementing a management agenda;
- The agency head's role in developing policy or in working with gubernatorial staff or a gubernatorial policy unit;
- Determining the agency head's role in making appointment decisions;
- Reviewing and approving procedures for agency correspondence and cabinet secretaries' speeches and public announcements; and
- Establishing a management approach to the cabinet, subcabinets and other cabinet sub-groups.

The result of these decisions is a generally understood statement of relationships and gubernatorial preferences on agency liaison. Although separate discussion is appropriate, it also is important to look at the cumulative effect of agency liaison activities. A governor who holds personal staff members accountable for specific program details may expect similar preparation from agency officials. Similarly, a governor who has no procedures to resolve disputes or air differences can expect long-developing

conflicts to surface among cabinet members. In addition, cabinet members should be integrated into the policy process. A governor can expect the cabinet to participate actively in formal policy development processes only if it is clear the real decision-making or communication operates within established processes.

## **Setting Ground Rules for Access and Accountability**

The governor's personal preference must be established for daily management of the cabinet and the degree of formality he or she wants to pursue in dealing with the cabinet. Another important consideration is the degree of independence agencies will have from the governor's office.

For information to flow smoothly, communication channels need to be developed among the governor, the governor's staff and state agency heads. To avoid friction, the following questions should be considered:

- Do agency heads have direct access to the governor when they call, or do they talk to the chief of staff or an assigned member of the governor's staff?
- Do agency heads meet with the governor only in cabinet meetings?
- Is managing the cabinet a job delegated to the chief of staff, or will the governor convene frequent meetings with individual cabinet secretaries?

The governor also needs to clarify expectations to ensure accountability is established for each agency head. Considerations include:

- Ground rules for daily operation between the governor's office and the agency;
- Conditions for hiring agency staff;
- Performance measures on which the agency head will be reviewed;
- Degree of autonomy the governor expects the agency head to pursue in public appearances, relations with the legislature, etc.; and

- How the agency head's performance will be reported to the governor and communicated back to the appointee.

Settling these matters early in the administration will enable greater cooperation between the governor and agency appointees. In addition, the agency head who understands the governor's expectations and his or her own role in state government will be confident in the execution of state policies and programs under his or her authority.

## **Building the Cabinet as a Team**

Some type of formal cabinet structure exists in most states. States vary, however, in the composition of the cabinet and its involvement in developing policy and providing gubernatorial advice. In several states, certain cabinet posts are elected positions and, therefore, not under the direct control of the governor. In some cases, the cabinet serves at the governor's pleasure, but cabinet meetings are infrequent and simply window dressing for policymaking that occurs in the governor's office with little input from agency heads. In other states, the cabinet serves as an active part of the governor's team and maintains a vital role in state government.

Cabinet members typically welcome policy and political guidance from the governor and the governor's senior staff. The governor also should be receptive to ideas from the cabinet. By consulting the cabinet, decisions receive the benefit of maximum input and advice. Using an agency head to promote program goals in speeches, travels with the governor and other public forums can be very useful.

## **Cabinet Retreats**

Activities such as cabinet retreats and management workshops, along with a genuine team-building effort by the governor, can improve the productivity and cooperation of high-level appointees. These management approaches can lessen conflict among cabinet members and improve communication between appointees and the governor. It should be clear to prospective appointees that the governor expects the candidate to be part of the team, and employees need to feel they belong to a larger effort.

The governor can use a retreat as a valuable tool to test new ideas and receive input on the governorship from the group. He or she also can gain insight from the cabinet on areas of friction and areas in which management could be improved.

## **Overseeing Government Operations**

It is important for the governor's office to place a high priority to the oversight of state government operations. Governors should ensure agency heads are complying with existing management systems (procurement, personnel, auditing, etc.) and also operating in the most efficient, effective and customer oriented manner.

## **Formal Management Agendas**

In some states, governors are creating management agendas to address issues such as workforce reform, agency reorganization, enterprise-wide services and economic and efficiency initiatives. These initiatives can involve the governor directly or be part of an articulated management agenda. They also can be limited to staff-led activities or tasks that agencies are expected to address individually. In some states formal management agendas that focus on improving the efficiency and effectiveness of state government have become one of the four or five priorities of a gubernatorial administration. Responsibility for coordinating these initiatives is a component of agency liaison and can require the attention of the chief of staff, the governor's policy advisor or a central management agency others.

## **Promoting Interagency Coordination**

Central to the agency liaison function is the development of mechanisms to coordinate the activity of executive branch agencies. The governor's staff need to monitor the progress agencies make on individual policy issues. On the staff level, developing an informal channel of information can prove very valuable.

## **Subcabinets or Cabinet Clusters**

Establishing cabinet councils on cross-cutting issues can be an effective way to foster interagency coordination. These standing cabinet councils, sometimes called subcabinets or cabinet clusters, are

organized by the governor to include agencies that often face common or cross-cutting issues. For example, a children's welfare group could include the heads of the health, education, human services and juvenile corrections agencies. The cabinet council can be chaired by an agency head or one of the governor's staff. A gubernatorial policy staff member usually serves on the cabinet council or sits in on its meetings as a liaison with the governor's office. The policy staff member can then bring issues to the council's attention and/or take from the council ideas for further development by the policy unit.

## **Developing Policy for the Executive Branch**

A primary objective of the governor's office is to affect policy issues related to the operation of state government. The mechanisms for identifying operational problems and developing policy directions to remedy the problems can range from exclusive use of the governor's senior staff to use of a large office of policy development that is an adjunct to the governor's office. The policy vehicle the governor chooses may depend on the size of the state, the size of the governor's staff and the governor's leadership style. Built into the policy development format must be some procedure for input from agency heads. Cabinet officials are on the front lines of agency issues and can be a valuable resource to the governor.

The governor's options for dealing with his or her cabinet members vary in terms of the operating autonomy granted to agencies, the frequency with which the governor seeks advice, the number of people with whom the governor meets, the formality of the procedure used to solicit their views and the way agency heads are included in policymaking decisions. Regardless of how agency heads are used in the policy development process, a framework needs to be created for decisions the governor delegates to agencies.

## Governors' Options to Use the Cabinet for Policy Development

Governors can involve agency heads in policy development in various ways, including:

- Regular solicitation of policy ideas;
- Required consultation between policy staff and agency heads before proposals reach the governor;
- Use of the cabinet or subcabinet working groups to develop programs and proposals; and
- Use of agency heads as a sounding board for policy options the governor is considering.

### Task Forces or Study Groups

One approach for developing policy is to use task forces. Task forces or study groups are organized by executive order or appointed by the governor informally to develop a policy response to a specific issue. Although it may take more time to issue an executive order, this formal mechanism can be used to lay out the charge to the task force and set a time limit for a response. The executive order also gives the task force higher visibility. These groups can include members of the legislature, the judiciary, the private sector and local government, as the issue requires. Sometimes it is best to include all the players, so the entire range of viewpoints can be expressed, and consensus can be achieved.

### Steering Groups

The governor also can create a policy agenda steering group. This group is used to gather policy recommendations from the executive agencies and other sources, perform a preliminary analysis of the proposals and evaluate their feasibility. A steering group can be a formal group composed of agency heads and senior staff who develop administration priorities, contribute their advice to the governor's decisions and help agencies develop their policy agendas.

In other states, less structured steering groups are used. Informal consultation among members of the

governor's senior staff or regularly scheduled meetings with the governor can provide the means to discuss and evaluate policy proposals and agency activities. Similarly, the governor can use cabinet meetings or retreats with staff to help direct agency and administration policy priorities. Once the governor has decided to include a policy initiative in the agenda, it is usually the policy staff who must take that initiative and develop it into a strategic plan that can be implemented. This is especially true of solutions to cross-cutting issues, which tend to be difficult for any single executive agency to address.

### Developing the Executive Branch Budget

When policy agendas are set, budgets must be developed to translate policies into quantitative terms. One of the governor's most powerful tools is control of the budget process. Formal budget-making procedures usually are set by legislation. However, a key aspect of a governor's relationship with agency heads will be the less formal mechanisms used to resolve budget conflicts between an agency and the budget director or among agencies competing for funds. The governor and budget director should develop procedures for agency involvement in the budget process.

The cabinet also can be used to communicate the governor's budget decisions to state government. To do this effectively, budget decisions need to reflect agency input. The governor should make clear how agency heads can address disputed budget decisions. However, in the final analysis, the governor will determine which budget decisions will be made personally and which decisions will be delegated to the budget director.

The governor also will need to establish guidelines concerning an agency's role in lobbying for the governor's budget and responding to legislative efforts to change the executive budget.

## **Conducting Legislative Relations**

In most states, agency heads play an active role in legislative relations through interactions with key stakeholders—and the legislative leaders and committees responsible for their programs—on agency budgets and proposed changes to authorizing legislation. Agency legislative activities should be coordinated to ensure consistency with the governor's own legislative positions and avoid interagency conflicts. In addition, the agency heads appointed by the governor can play a significant role in legislative relations by helping to develop and promote an administration's legislative package and to evaluate legislation developed outside the executive branch. Although the governor's use of his or her agency heads in legislative policy development is largely a matter of choice, an active and well-directed cabinet can be effective in furthering the governor's legislative goals. However, the degree of agency involvement varies greatly, as do the processes for securing this involvement.

In many ways, the relations between the governor and the cabinet will depend on the degree to which the governor develops the capacity of his or her own staff to handle legislative issues.

Procedural guidelines must be developed to ensure that activity by agency officials is not at odds with any of the governor's other legislative or policy initiatives. At a minimum, the governor's staff needs to make certain that public positions taken by agency heads

on any legislative proposal do not conflict with the governor's own positions. Areas in which guidelines need to be developed to govern agency involvement in the governor's legislative relations strategy fall into four basic categories:

- **Developing legislation.** Agency heads will play this role as they generate proposals for the governor's legislative package;
- **Selling the package.** This involves the role agency officials will play in lobbying the legislature on behalf of the administration's proposals;
- **Managing legislative relations.** This involves the role agency officials will play during the legislative process in interacting with the legislature and key stakeholders on legislation not part of the administration's proposals;
- **Reviewing bills.** This includes the role agency officials will play when they evaluate legislation and make recommendations for the governor to sign or veto legislative proposals.

## **Making Agency Appointments**

The authority to make appointments has long been considered one of the governor's principal powers, but this authority also is a key management tool. A careful match of a job with an individual results in a better managed agency. In many states, the governor maintains legal or customary authority to make subcabinet appointments. The governor's cabinet and subcabinet appointments send important signals about how the governor will run state government. The manner in which the governor exercises this authority is important, because these appointments can affect the loyalty of the staff selected and the degree to which an agency head can hold his or her subordinate staff accountable.

In some states, the responsibility for appointing agency heads or establishing agency policy may rest with boards and commissions whose members are appointed by the governor. As a result, the agency liaison function will need to encompass processes for working closely with those boards and commissions to communicate or enforce gubernatorial priorities.



## **Coordinating Media Relations**

Individual agencies and cabinet officials are often the focus of considerable press attention. State agencies also are the source of much news that can reflect positively or negatively on the governor. Coordination and control over agency activity with respect to speeches, interviews, press conferences and public announcements are important parts of any agency liaison and communication director's strategy. Agencies also can be made an integral part of a broader communications strategy that supports the administration's priorities and objectives.

## **Referring and Monitoring Casework and Correspondence**

Every governor's office receives a large volume of correspondence and casework requests concerning the operations of executive branch agencies. In most states, the governor's office sends much of this workload to agencies for evaluation and response. Procedures need to be developed for the correspondence routed from the governor's office for disposition by the agency. Implicit in this process is a routing procedure that ensures timely responses by agencies and is reinforced by gubernatorial direction.

The governor needs to communicate the priority status of correspondence and casework. A reporting system may be part of the governor's correspondence control, regularly informing cabinet secretaries and the governor of outstanding correspondence. This alerts responsible parties to incomplete mail that should receive immediate attention. The disposition of casework can be made a part of agency performance evaluation to provide greater incentive for its timely completion.

Agency liaison staff often will be expected to play a role in the correspondence and constituent services functions. They can be asked to help develop responses, review more complex agency-generated responses or monitor and enforce compliance with processes and deadlines.

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