

GETTING THE RELATIONSHIP RIGHT: EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT WITH MINISTERS ACROSS THE POLITICAL/ ADMINISTRATIVE INTERFACE

What's the secret to building and maintaining great relationships with ministers? What can public servants do to effectively support ministers as they navigate both the political landscape and bureaucratic hurdles?

Liam Russell reports on the key takeaways from a recent panel discussion jointly hosted by IPANZ and the Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG), where a former prime minister, a current minister, a chief executive, and a former prime minister's chief of staff reflected on the drivers of a good relationship – and shared their advice and insights on managing stresses and strains and building an enduring foundation of trust.



Liam Russell

Facilitated by Sally Washington (ANZSOG Executive Director, Aotearoa), this panel featured:

- Sir Bill English KNZM – former prime minister and minister of finance
- Carmel Sepuloni – Minister for Social Development and Employment, Minister for ACC, Minister for Disability Issues, and Minister for Arts, Culture and Heritage
- Wayne Eagleson – former chief of staff to prime ministers Sir John Key and Sir Bill English
- Peter Mersi – Chief Executive of the Inland Revenue Department (IRD).

Professor Ken Smith AO (ANZSOG Dean and Chief Executive) and Dr Kay Booth (IPANZ Executive Director) delivered introductory and closing remarks.

Any experienced professional will tell you that nothing is more true than that age-old saying – “great relationships are key”. For the public sector, no relationship is more pivotal than the relationship between official and minister.

The minister–official relationship, like any other, is not without its challenges.

Competing priorities and perspectives, power imbalances, turnover of ministers and officials alike, and the effects of political and other external factors can all create fractures in the relationship. Building a strong foundation of trust and mutual respect is crucial for mitigating the effect of these stresses and strains.

Senior officials carry the weight of this relationship – but public servants at all levels contribute to its overall success.

Senior officials may lead the agency's policy development and present the product, but every public servant plays a part in that journey from policy to delivery – and ultimately, in achieving the minister's goals.

It's all about knowing (and remembering) the fundamentals. Whether you're a new grad or a chief executive, a 30-year public service veteran or private sector alumnus, the same fundamentals apply.

Some of these things may seem obvious.

But even “old dogs” can learn new tricks, and we all benefit from a refresher every now and again. For those who are newer to the public sector or to working with ministers, these tips offer some useful tools to add to your kete.

So how do you get the relationship right? What are the building blocks to success?

1. Don't expect your minister to understand everything immediately.

Most ministers come into the job with little to no experience working in the public sector. They might not have been a minister (or even an MP) before. Most won't have a deep knowledge of the substance of their portfolio.

However, a new minister's unfamiliarity – with the agency, the sector, or even the machinery of government as a whole – can be a strength.

New ministers bring a fresh perspective – they have new ideas and approaches, question assumptions and the status quo, and challenge officials to think differently.

2. Work together to establish good foundations.

For officials, this means nailing the first meeting. Be flexible and available up-front. Go to where they are, literally and figuratively, when you introduce yourselves, your agency, and your mahi for the first time. Help your minister to learn who the people they need to know and work with are, and who is doing the mahi behind the scenes. Invite them into your space. Listen intently and learn about their background, their ideas, and their priorities – and most importantly, ask them how you can best support them.

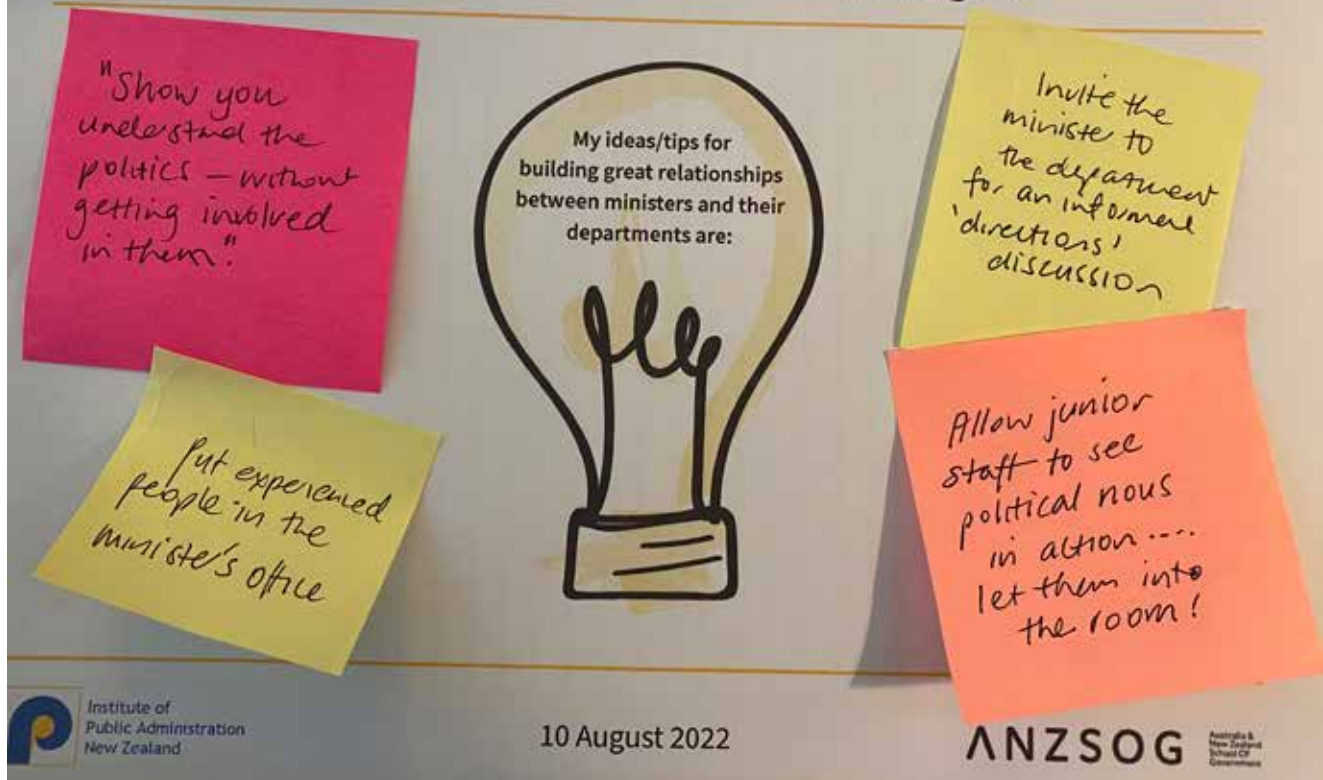
Invite them to ask questions – about anything – and encourage them to be honest about what they don't know. There is no space for hubris if you want to work together effectively.

A key to supporting a new minister is helping them to build a strong and experienced office. A UK Institute of Government report based on exit interviews with former ministers stressed the importance of a well-functioning ministerial office. Where ministers are less experienced, seconding experienced departmental staff as private secretaries – people with political nous, who know their agency and the machinery of government inside out – can help bring a minister up to speed and help them settle into the role.

3. Understand the environment that your minister is operating in.

Ministers and Officials

Getting the Relationship Right



Ministers work under intense pressure and scrutiny – from the opposition, the media, their constituents, and other stakeholders – and will all be ambitious to “make a difference” and to make a name for themselves. Officials need to understand the environment that their minister is operating in – including the political landscape – and how this may influence their decision making.

Political nous is a primary competency for all senior officials. This is integral to producing good, tailored advice. Officials at all levels should learn their minister’s interests, their place in the party and Cabinet hierarchy, and their ambitions and level of engagement with the portfolio. Look to speeches and manifestos for information on policy goals and intent.

“Public servants cannot, and should not, avoid politics ... It is vital that officials understand how to operate within a political system without operating politically.”

How can officials develop political astuteness? Senior officials can coach junior staff to help them develop their political nous. Help them to seek out opportunities to sit in on discussions where they can see political nous in action, and where they can enrich their understanding of the political/administrative interface. “Post-mortems” of meetings with ministers that went well – or poorly – are opportunities for junior staff to learn.

4. Understand each other’s roles, responsibilities, and remit – and stick to them.

Ministers are responsible for deciding the “what” – the priorities, initiatives, and government policy related to their portfolio. Officials are responsible for developing the “why” and the “how” – working to bring shape to the minister’s ideas, to act on the minister’s priorities and objectives, and to implement the minister’s initiatives and agreed work programme.

Officials need to remain cognisant of their role as “policy-takers not policy-makers”. It is not their job to set the direction, regardless of their experience or expertise – but that doesn’t mean they can’t have influence.

Officials can (and should) advise when ideas might not work, provide evidence to support their assessment, and suggest alternative approaches. Delivering that advice, in a free, frank, and palatable way, is the key to having influence.

Political advisors are key players in the relationship between ministers and officials. The relationship works best when they act as a bridge, not a barrier. Things come unstuck when they attempt to overrule or block the advice of officials. Ministers should hear advice in parallel from officials and political advisors – and each should help their minister to understand what levers they can and cannot (or should not) pull to achieve

their objectives, whether those levers are political or policy based.

What can officials do to build trust with their minister?

- **“Start from a position of respect.”** Officials may not always agree with or even like their minister. Remember that ministers have been elected by the public, and they have a challenging role working in the service of the public – and their commitment and resilience deserves respect.
- **“Provide advice fearlessly and implement enthusiastically.”** It takes time to build trust. To help with this process, officials should show their minister that they are listening and helping them to achieve their priorities – cognisant of (but not unduly influenced by) the political landscape.

How can officials manage strains in the relationship?

- **Openness and transparency are key.** This involves more than just taking a “no surprises” approach. Keep the minister informed early and often as policy is developed and services delivered. Monitor and mitigate the risks. This will help to retain the minister’s confidence in the agency and its leadership, even when things go wrong.

“Don’t hold back any information ... bad news should travel faster than good.”

- **Work to have a great relationship with the minister's office.** When problems arise, you can collaborate quickly to resolve the issue. The agency's connection to the minister's office, and relationships with private secretaries and political advisors, are crucial and are a key part of the relationship with the minister.

What are some common mistakes – and can they be avoided?

- **Don't take everything literally.** Ministers are normal people – they absorb and process information at different rates, communicate in certain ways, and have good days and bad days.

That 5 a.m. conversation in the Koru Lounge about options for addressing a particular issue doesn't necessarily mean they are commissioning advice or demanding action – it may just be a tired brain exploring an idea or processing information from a briefing read the night before.

- **Don't try to be a "minister-whisperer".** The raised eyebrow or pursed lip while reading your briefing should not be construed as a comment on the quality of your advice. Subtle signals or off-the-cuff conversations should not be taken as indicative of a minister's decision.
- **Learn your minister's preferences – and tailor your engagement accordingly.** Every minister has different work styles. Ask them how they like to receive information – don't just make assumptions based on how previous ministers operated – and seek feedback on whether the content and format of your briefings are meeting

the minister's needs. Tailoring your language, tone, medium, and level of detail to suit your minister's individual style goes a long way. Remember that each minister is unique, so it may take some time to find the approach that works best.

- **Accept that you won't always agree.** Officials shouldn't take it personally if their advice is not accepted – ministers weigh up advice from a wide range of sources when making decisions, and they also have campaign promises and party manifesto commitments to abide by. Even high-quality, evidence-informed policy advice is still just advice – the decision to act on that advice is the prerogative of the minister.
- **Don't fear political advisors – work with them.** Political advisors and departmental officials both have important roles to play in supporting ministers. Work together at every step along the way – not doing so prevents the minister from getting the advice they need to make good decisions.

Training public servants is all well and good – but do ministers need training too?

Some commentators, such as Sally Washington from ANZSOG, have posed this question, noting that in some overseas jurisdictions, current and prospective ministers (MPs with potential) have access to formal training.

This panel said no to ministerial training – on the grounds that the relative "freshness" of a new minister is an advantage and that learning on the job is far more effective than any formal training could be.

It was noted, however, that ministers do get some induction support from central agencies on key aspects of their ministerial role, and that more experienced ministers sometimes mentor their junior colleagues. Officials and ministerial staff also help "train" ministers to perform their roles effectively and help them to learn the skills they need to be successful.

Summary

Ministers are normal people. The beauty of a democratic system is that ordinary people can be elected to make decisions for their country – however, they face extraordinary challenges in the process. When they come into the role, they are often unfamiliar with government, not used to working with the public service, and not well-versed in bureaucratic jargon and processes. They are reliant on advice and support from officials and ministerial staff to navigate the complex machine that is Aotearoa's government.

Trust, respect, openness, and transparency need to be at the heart of the minister-official relationship. Both parties need to be good listeners, learn each other's ways of working, understand the responsibilities and boundaries of each other's roles, and be adept at exercising situational awareness and political nous. These foundations allow ministers to make good decisions that benefit the public, which both ministers and officials serve. Without these foundations, the relationship will falter, and ultimately, fail.

Liam Russell is a member of the IPANZ New Professionals leadership team.

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