

Table 3.7 Building trust with ministerial staff

Good relations with the minister's staff are important but not always easy. I learned from my early experience with Brian Howe's staff that, as secretary, I needed to invest more of my own time in the relationship.

I had some concerns about his staff relating in particular to the level of intervention down into my (small) department and the lack of clarity about responsibilities in the office (indeed, there was frequently disagreement among his staff and competition to gain his ear). Given the chief of staff seemed to have limited authority over the other advisers, I chose to raise my concerns with the minister himself, but only after I felt confident of our own performance in serving him and addressing his policy priorities. This proved at least partially successful (see also Chapter 7), but ran the risk of openly challenging people with a very longstanding and close personal relationship with the minister.

With Michael Wooldridge's office, I used a different tack, which I think is generally the better one. I worked hard on my own relationship with the chief of staff, Barbara Hayes (and later Ken Smith). We arranged to meet every month or so over a glass of wine in my office. We would each draw up an agenda, which, while dominated by issues of policy or program substance, usually included a few incidents between the department and office causing one or other (or both) of us concern. The informality allowed us to talk frankly about the department's performance or an adviser's overstepping the mark, including incidents involving either of us personally. It did not resolve everything, but it diffused many situations that might otherwise have escalated into a brawl requiring ministerial involvement.

Control of communications similarly can present a two-edged sword. Good control can help build confidence in the relationship between ministers and the Public Service (nothing so quickly destroys trust as leaks or other failures in communications management). Excessive control, however, can inhibit the release or even the preparation of information, such as research and statistics, which is in the public interest.

Trust, relations and confidence are put under greatest pressure during political crises. I have experienced my fair share, learning the importance of keeping open channels of communication with the minister and office while taking responsibility for project management of the crisis within the department, ensuring timely collection of information, preparation of useful briefs, and so on. I was not always successful in this (Table 3.8).

Table 3.8 Managing political crises: the ‘scan scam’ and kerosene baths

The years 1999 and 2000 were particularly difficult for me and the department, as well as for my two ministers, Michael Wooldridge and Bronwyn Bishop. Administrative weaknesses in the department contributed to incidents that spiralled into political crises colloquially known as the ‘scan scam’ and the kerosene baths case. Years later, I might be able to convince some people that, in both cases, despite the immediate failures, the underlying programs and initiatives were achieving substantial improvements in the quality of care, and in a cost-effective way. At the time, however, we were all in the bunker under continuous attack by the media, interest groups and the Opposition.

An interesting side to this was the different approaches taken to managing the two crises—one effective, the other not.

During the magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) crisis in 1999, we established a small team in the department to coordinate support for Wooldridge. The team met in my office briefly each morning and we would have a short teleconference with the minister’s chief of staff to discuss the latest media stories, the information needed to respond, the likely tactics in Parliament (for example, Question Time, Matter of Public Importance debate, censure motion). My officers would then seek out the necessary information and draft some briefs. Late in the morning, we would meet again in my office, go through the material, send it to the minister’s office and have a further teleconference to test if we had covered what was needed and to discuss further the tactics the minister might prepare for. The minister’s office would then take over control, turning the briefs into speeches and so on, liaising with the Prime Minister’s Office and the minister representing in the Senate. Most days, I spoke to the minister late in the day to review the situation.

For a time, relations between the minister’s office and the department were understandably fraught, but I rang the chief of staff advising him that whatever their criticisms of the department, the minister and I (and he) needed to keep the lines of communication between us open, every day. This we did, and it helped enormously.

The aged-care crisis in 2000 was inherently more complex (new claims were being aired about nursing homes around Australia each day), but it still was not managed nearly as well as it should have been. First, despite my objections, the head of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Max Moore-Wilton, instructed me to work from Bishop’s

office. This confused my role and the office's role. We set up a team in the department under the deputy, but control there was made more difficult by pressure on me to intervene continuously when briefings were late. Briefings were constantly late, as we attempted to get the facts on every claim from around Australia by lunchtime, rather than prioritise and insist on extra time to investigate details. The department was also struggling to get its state offices to appreciate the importance of the crisis and their responsibility to respond more quickly and clearly.

The office was not operating smoothly either, with the Prime Minister's Office constantly intruding to criticise the department ('You need a baseball bat, Andrew, to take to the department') and insufficient attention was paid to ensuring the minister representing Bishop in the Senate (Amanda Vanstone) was properly briefed. Support from the portfolio minister's office was offered but not taken up. Everything was done on the run, with much blame and insufficient cooperation.

The only one I felt could hold their head up for performing well was the deputy secretary, Mary Murnane, who was calm in the crisis and accepted the second-best management approach, performing as leader of the team back in the department and at times providing some of the personal support for the minister that should have come from the office.

Postscript: some light relief

Twice during the kerosene baths crisis, while in difficult meetings with Bishop and her advisers, I was called away to answer an urgent phone call from the portfolio minister, Wooldridge. While each time there was some point of substance to the call, the main purpose was: 'I thought you might need a break, Andrew.'

Lessons for successfully supporting the minister

Among the lessons from my own experience are the following.

- Notwithstanding the benefits of supporting processes and mechanisms, the secretary must have regular, direct contact with the minister, initiating that contact as well as responding to requests.
- Where there is more than one minister in the portfolio, it is helpful to assign a deputy to each junior minister or parliamentary secretary, to provide dedicated support. This does not entirely replace the need for the portfolio secretary to be available to support the non-portfolio ministers, but it does spread the load effectively and meets most requirements for secretary-level support.
- Ministers rely heavily on secretaries for advice on due process. In the early days, some diplomatic teaching of a minister by a secretary is required.

Courage might be needed at times in giving advice on due process, but most ministers appreciate it in the longer term.

- Secretaries are also almost always expected to be able to add value to policy advice. This does not require constraining advice from departmental experts, but guiding that advice and helping to identify alternative options and take into account wider issues and context.
- Strategic planning, directly involving ministers, can help build the necessary relationship. Strategic plans focus on 'why' and 'how', complementing policy platforms, charter letters and portfolio budget statements that determine 'what' achievements are expected and the resources involved. They can be regarded as high-level agreements between the minister and the department and should be formally endorsed by the minister. The minister is never, however, the department's 'primary customer'; the minister is the boss.
- Setting a day aside, at least once a year, for high-level discussions with the minister on longer-term policy issues and directions is enormously helpful in ensuring policy coherence and understanding of the evidence behind the department's policy advice.
- While never replacing direct meetings, emails and phone calls with the minister, the secretary should arrange regular meetings with the minister's chief of staff. Informal discussions covering agendas drawn up by both parties can help to diffuse misunderstandings, focus attention on matters of importance to the minister and clarify the basis of 'frank and fearless' advice that might be causing unease.
- Such contacts are even more important in times of political crisis when there might be tension between the minister and the department.
- Encouraging the chief of staff to clarify the division of responsibilities among ministerial staff can serve to limit miscommunications between the department and the office and to enhance the relevance and timeliness of advice.
- Departmental liaison officers should be high-performing officers with a lot of potential for more senior roles in the future. This demonstrates to the minister and ministerial staff the calibre of public servants in the department, reduces the risk of an 'us and them' mentality developing and provides excellent training opportunities for future public service executives.

Photo acknowledgments

Michael Wooldridge when Minister for Health and Family Services (photo by kind permission of the Parliamentary Library)

Brian Howe when Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Housing and Regional Development (photo by kind permission of the Parliamentary Library)