



Leading a ministerial team



“ We had weekly team meetings involving ministers and parliamentary private secretaries and special advisers... We got one of the ministers each week to talk about something they were doing and that’s really useful and important, for people to hear what else is going on in the department. ”

Nicky Morgan

Secretary of state for education and minister for women and equalities (2014–16)

What does leading a ministerial team involve?

As the head of a department you are in charge of the ministerial team, which could include anywhere between two and eight other ministers. Building strong working relationships, where ministers feel empowered and able to communicate with you, will help get things done. You may not have picked the members of your departmental team, but you will still need to decide how you would like to work with them.



Ministers have taken different approaches in the past – you will need to find the way that suits you best. Generally, the prime minister decides portfolios when appointing ministers, but this does not mean a secretary of state has no say over how ministers in their department work together. You can choose the frequency and catalyst of meetings, the division of work in parliament, and define how you work together to lead your department.

Leading your ministerial team effectively

1. Build your team

You should decide at an early stage how you want to work with your ministerial team. For instance, you may prefer to have regular one-to-one meetings with your junior ministers, with whole-team discussions less often, or vice versa. Whatever approach you take, establishing frequent contact will help you to monitor how their work is progressing, address problems as they arise and keep your junior ministers informed about how their portfolios fit into the bigger picture.

You will also be able to develop a sense of individual ministers' strengths, skills, interests and ambitions. This is not only useful information when dividing work, but can boost morale by helping junior ministers to feel that their boss is interested in and encouraging of them.

 **As a junior minister you've only got partial sight, you've only got partial influence and actually sometimes, you just really need to understand what your role is in the team.** 

Kitty Ussher

Exchequer secretary to the Treasury (2009)

2. Delegate as much as you feel comfortable with

Junior ministers are the 'workhorses' of departments. Delegating areas of policy or legislation to members of your ministerial team – and then trusting them to get on with those projects, rather than being tempted to micromanage – means that you can make progress on a wider range of priorities than if you try to take the day-to-day lead on everything.

“ A good secretary of state will bring out the best in their ministers and enjoy their success. A poor one will be a control freak who tries to hog everything for themselves and in the end they are resented, of course. ”

Alan Duncan

Minister of state for international development
(2010–14)

3. Keep communications open

As secretary of state you will be extremely busy, and it can be hard to make the time to catch up with the other ministers in your department. But taking a few minutes to check in with them and talk about what they are working on can help reinforce a team spirit. It can also help identify and solve problems before they become too serious.

You will be involved in more conversations at the top of government than your departmental ministers, so keep them up to date with key debates – many ministers value an update from cabinet discussions, for example.

And encourage your special advisers to work closely with the other ministers in your department – they can help reach agreement on policy decisions and manage media handling if you are too busy with other issues.

“ Matt [Hancock] would have a weekly team meeting after cabinet, that’s how he liked to do it. He would like to have a team meeting where he would say: ‘This is what’s happened in cabinet’, and then we’d talk about the department. ”

Steve Brine

Parliamentary under secretary of state for public health and primary care (2017–19)

Questions to ask yourself

To ensure you are able to lead your ministerial team as effectively as possible, consider the following questions:

- Are you in regular-enough touch with your ministerial team that you feel up-to-date on their work?
- Do junior ministers have access to you when they need it?
- How is the distribution of policy and legislation responsibilities across the ministerial team working? Would you be able to make more progress if this was adjusted, or if you delegated more or less to individual junior ministers?
- Have you established a way of keeping your team in the loop about key debates and how their work fits into the bigger picture – in the department and in government more widely?

Find out more

If you would like to discuss any of the above in more detail, or to talk about potential training we can offer on this topic, please get in touch via ifgacademy@instituteforgovernment.org.uk.

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