



Working in a ministerial team



Often the best and fastest way of dealing with things... is to do that minister to minister.

John Healey
Minister of state for housing and planning (2009–10)



Every department consists of a team of ministers, led by the secretary of state. Junior ministers have distinct but interrelated policy portfolios. The secretary of state has overarching responsibility for everything the department does, as well as specific responsibilities of their own.

How well a ministerial team works depends greatly on the secretary of state. They control how the team works together: they may set up regular meetings as a ministerial team, or one-on-one conversations with individual ministers, to discuss departmental business, as well as more informal catch-ups. The relationships between ministers are hugely important: while you do not necessarily choose your colleagues, you need to be able to work with them to make progress on your objectives.

As well as the personal relationships you have, there are others involved in supporting the ministerial team to work together. A lot of ministers' communication with other ministers in the department, as well as with other departments, goes through private offices. For instance, private secretaries will exchange submissions marked with the views of different ministers and seek to establish an agreed position.



Working well as a ministerial team

To work effectively within their ministerial team, there are four key things junior ministers should do:

1. Know everyone's role

Clarifying your portfolio when you are appointed, including raising any overlaps with other ministers, can help you understand your role in the ministerial team and where any points of conflict may occur.

Good ministerial teams also benefit from ministers who understand their relative strengths and where they can add value. Junior ministers are the “workhorses of the department”, doing the majority of everyday work, while secretaries of state are required to have a more bird’s-eye view. Prioritising this everyday work – like dealing with the details of legislation in parliament, or building relationships with key businesses and other stakeholders – will allow the secretary of state to focus on the bigger picture.

 **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. Find your priorities

While junior ministerial roles can be less glamorous than cabinet jobs, they do allow time for you to pursue specific priorities. When you're appointed, take some time to explore your brief and identify what you want to achieve, taking advantage of the knowledge your civil servants will have on the topic. Once you've decided on your personal priorities for your role, try to get the secretary of state's blessing on these. This can give you a sense of purpose and independence in your role that is distinct from, but complementary with, the rest of your team.

 **The route to enjoyment as a junior minister is to find an area where you can drive forward the policy and where you're not always having to report to the secretary of state.** 

Andrew Mitchell

Minister of state for development and Africa (2022–)

3. Make use of your colleagues

Good ministers learn from each other. If this is your first ministerial role, your ministerial colleagues may well have more experience than you, and can be a useful sounding board for ideas, advice on thorny problems, or just on how to balance your ministerial responsibilities. They also may have more of a political overview, especially the secretary of state, who will have special advisers. You shouldn't be afraid to lean on them for help or advice.

 **Everything you do is achieved through teamwork.**


Margaret Beckett
Secretary of state for environment,
food and rural affairs (2001–06)



4. Work with the secretary of state – but accept that they're the boss

The secretary of state is your boss, so your best bet is to work with them closely and win them over by being open and helpful. Persuade them of your views if you feel strongly, but remember that they are ultimately able to overrule you, and that having a good relationship with your secretary of state is essential.

Cabinet ministers will take credit for the whole work of the department – even when you have done the hard yards. This can be frustrating, but ministers need to remember that the whole team shares the same goals and the public benefit from a successful ministerial team.

 **[One of my secretaries of state] would largely let me get on with doing my own thing and then, just at the point something was getting exciting and ready to be unleashed upon the general public, they'd then take it [as their own], and I would get none of the credit or excitement for any of the good stuff.**

Caroline Dinenage
Minister of state for social care (2018–20)



Questions to ask yourself

- Are you clear on your brief, and how it differs from those of other ministers?
- Are you clear on your and the secretary of state's priorities for your area? Are there any differences between them?
- Do you have a vision for your portfolio, which your secretary of state is happy with?
- How often do you want to meet other ministers? Are you making the best use of those meetings, and the support you can get from your fellow ministers?

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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