IfG ACADEMY

Working effectively with ministers as a special adviser

> **[Special advisers are] your personal appointments and therefore you've got a closeness to them and a faith in them, a confidence in them that is crucial in this cold, harsh world that you're dealing with. You trust them.**
>
> **Alan Johnson**
> Home secretary (2009–2010)

As a special adviser you will play a crucial role in supporting your minister to deliver on their priorities. You add value by providing political support and advice that would be inappropriate from the civil service. It is this political perspective that makes you well-placed to contribute towards shaping policy ideas or communicating the minister's vision to the media. In time, you will act as the voice of your minister in the department – former schools minister David Laws told the IfG how his spads "knew my mind and were therefore able to work for me when I wasn't in the department."

The relationship between you and your minister is based on trust and mutual understanding: you need to know what your minister wants and how they think, while ministers need to be able to trust you to represent them and their interests so that they are not too thinly stretched. This does not happen overnight – one former spad told the IfG that it took nine to twelve months to feel that they knew their minister's mind. Building a strong foundation will help you better support your minister.

1. Identify what your minister's priorities are and use these to guide your work

As your minister sets out their priorities, you can contribute an important perspective on their political feasibility – what can be achieved within political timescales and how does this fit into the government's overall objectives? You can provide a useful link to the centre by reaching out to No.10 spads to sense check how much support there is for your minister's priorities and how likely they are to progress. This will help calibrate priorities and help generate an achievable policy platform.

Once key priorities have been set, use them to guide your work – who are the stakeholders that need to be engaged and what submissions need to advance to drive progress? You can draw on knowledge of parliament or of the party to fill the political gap absent from official advice. And as your minister's voice, you can project their priorities to the wider department. Former spads have told the Institute how the reactive element of their work sometimes took over. Your minister's priorities are your priorities – make sure that they do not get lost in the day-to-day.

2. Clearly define what your role will be with your minister and with other spads

Special advisers work as part of a team – often with responsibilities divided between policy, media and communications, and parliament., The role lacks definition and no two spads are the same – your exact role will be bespoke for your minister and should reflect their needs. It is important that spads meet with their minister to define their areas of responsibility and ensure that this is clearly communicated to private office as well as other officials, journalists and stakeholders.

Of course, you'll still be working closely together, but clarifying the divisions between your roles will stop you from stepping on one another's toes and contribute to the smooth running of the team and the department. Regular communication with spads in other departments – and in No.10 – is also key, to keep them in the loop and to support one another in your work where you can.

3.Be prepared to deliver difficult messages to your minister and to disagree with them when necessary

Ministers will be keen to learn about potential problems or risks to delivery of their policy priorities sooner rather than later. As a special adviser, you bring an important political lens to bear on policy. Particularly, you will be able to access another layer of relationships above the official level that will provide you with a better understanding of political risks. You can draw on your experiences and relationships beyond the department – with external stakeholders, parliament and spads elsewhere in government – to test policies and help identify practical or political risks.

While officials should be able to have open and frank conversations aimed at highlighting and resolving problems, because of the close relationship between you and your minister, you will be well-placed to land particular messages.

This means that civil servants and others will sometimes look to you to act as an intermediary and to deliver difficult news or to provide some constructive pushback. However, it is important to remember your role and accept when a minister is not going to change tack.

4. Think about how you can support other ministers within your department

You will also work with junior ministers in the department. This relationship will be shaped by your secretary of state's approach – but in some departments, the special adviser can act as a bridge between the different ministers in the department and ensure they are all working towards the secretary of state's priorities. Former public health minister Steve Brine used spads in the Department of Health and Social Care to establish his priorities, asking them, "what should be at the top of my in-tray?"

Departments work best when there is a cohesive ministerial team and when spads take an active role in supporting junior ministers. Developing such collaborative relationships can also ensure that junior ministers are able to raise issues with the special adviser team early on and resolve them before they reach the secretary of state's desk.

> **"I think I always had a good relationship with all of my secretary of state's special advisers... where there were things that I thought the secretary of state was likely to be interested in, I would work with them."**
> – Jacqui Smith, home secretary (2007–09)

Questions to ask yourself

- Can you clearly communicate what your role is and what other spads' roles are in the department?
- Do you have a clear idea of what your minister's priorities are and how you can best work towards achieving them?
- Do you know what junior ministers in your department are working on in their day-to-day and can you identify areas they may need support on?

Find out more

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

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