

Supporting politicians to lead in government

Insights from the Institute for Government, 2008-15

Nehal Davison



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Foreword

Supporting the development of politicians has been an important theme of the Institute for Government's work since our foundation. Many ministers, civil servants and commentators have talked about how important it is for MPs and peers to be prepared for office and supported while in post, especially when many have little or no experience of executive positions or of working in large organisations. Such training and development is normal elsewhere in the public and private sectors. But translating aspiration into action has not been easy or straightforward.

Many leading politicians, especially those at the top, only pay lip service to the need for such work, or regard it as desirable for other people but not themselves. So it has required persistence and allies to achieve what the Institute has done since 2008. Zoe Gruhn was the pioneer in this work, notably in the development of 360 degree appraisals for ministers. The Institute has been working with leading politicians both in Opposition and Government, and is continuing to do so.

This thorough report by Nehal Davison brings out the lessons, and, crucially, the complexities and challenges involved in working with politicians. The Institute is committed to carrying forward this work and is currently doing so with new ministers since the general election. This is not just about induction but is a continuing process of support, appraisal and development. And, as the report says, there is still a long way to go to make greater preparation and development the norm for politicians.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "PJR Riddell" followed by a horizontal line and two dots.

Peter Riddell

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About the author

Nehal Davison (née Panchamia) is a senior researcher at the Institute for Government, where she led the design and development of the Institute's programme of support for current, and potential, ministers in the run-up to the 2015 election. She has also managed research on public services and civil service reform. Before joining the Institute in 2012, she worked in PwC's government and public sector advisory practice, then at Demos and the British Council. She holds an MPhil in International Relations from the University of Oxford and a BA History degree from University College London.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks go to colleagues, past and present, who have contributed hugely to the Institute's programme of work with politicians since our establishment in 2008. Zoe Gruhn, formerly the Institute's director of learning, deserves special mention for her pivotal role in pioneering 360-degree appraisals for ministers. Thanks also go to Nicola Hughes, who contributed insights from working on 360 reviews and now leads the Institute's post-election support for ministers; to Peter Riddell, Julian McCrae, Tom Gash, Dr Catherine Haddon, Keith Ruddle, Liz Carolan and Jill Rutter for providing constructive challenge on drafts of this report; to all of the above and Emma Norris, Jen Gold, Gavin Freeguard, Josh Harris, Jonathan Pearson and Marc Kidson for their role in designing, delivering and facilitating sessions; to Kerry Burkett and Justina Razac for providing invaluable logistical and events support; and to Matt Ross, Nicole Valentinuzzi and Andrew Murphy for managing the communications and publication process. Finally, special thanks go to all of the politicians and advisers who were involved in the programme, whether through 360s, seminars or workshops. Without their candour, openness and insights the programme would not have been possible.

Introduction

'On 2 May 1997, I walked into Downing Street as Prime Minister for the first time. I had never held office, not even as the most junior of junior ministers. It was my first and only job in government.'

Tony Blair, *A Journey*

'There can't be many more daunting challenges than becoming a secretary of state. You rarely get any notice and yet you immediately have to give interviews, make speeches and make decisions – quite possibly without any real idea at the outset of their consequences or importance, let alone knowing which ones could mean life or death to your career.'

James Purnell and Leigh Lewis, *Leading a Government Department – the First 100 Days*

'I do not recall ever being given any indication of what was expected of me on being appointed to any political job.'

Michael Heseltine, *Life in the Jungle*

Winning an election is hard enough, but leading effectively and getting to grips with governing is a whole other challenge – one that can require a completely different set of skills to those used on the campaign trail. Many new ministers adjust remarkably quickly and achieve great things in office, but are nonetheless struck by the enormous challenges the jobs brings: 'Nothing really prepares you for the rough and tumble, the weight of responsibility, the media pressures, and the range and diversity of roles and responsibilities.'¹ However, there is remarkably little support and advice in place to help ministers navigate these roles and perform them effectively.² Induction, ongoing development and regular appraisals – now the norm across the public, private and voluntary sectors – remain rare in Westminster.³

The Institute for Government was established in 2008, and part of its mission is to support current and future ministers from all major parties to better prepare for and perform leadership roles in government. In practice, this involves offering ministers structured self- and team-development opportunities – such as 360-degree appraisals and team away days – that help them to reflect on how they are doing the job.

This experience has given us unrivalled access to a range of politicians, an unusual perspective about the world in which they operate and some interesting reflections about what works when it comes to running a programme to support ministers develop in their roles. This paper seeks to share some of these insights and stimulate a conversation about how ministers can be better supported in meeting the challenges of office. It is organised around the following four sections:

1. Why is there a need for more support for ministers?
2. How have the Institute, and others, gone about supporting ministers develop in their roles?
3. What have we learnt about what works?
4. Where next?

The primary audience for this paper is anyone interested in supporting ministers to lead effectively, including those who work closely with them on the political or civil service side. It will also be particularly useful to those active in the coaching, leadership and continuing professional development (CPD) world who are thinking of broadening their offer to politicians and advisers.

¹ Foreword in Riddell, P., Gruhn, Z., and Carolan, L., *The Challenge of Being a Minister*, Institute for Government, 2011.

² *Ibid.*

³ However, as outlined in a previous IfG report, *Transitions: Preparing for changes of government, 2009*, the Civil Service does undertake extensive preparations for a change in government. These include, among other things, the preparation of briefs about departmental activity for either an incoming or returning government, and (primarily for a new prime minister) significant issues requiring immediate attention – usually of a security, defence and economic nature. In addition, all new incoming ministers are briefed on the nuts and bolts of the department.

This paper is not intended to be an evaluation of how successful our activities have been so far in improving the effectiveness of the ministers we have worked with, though we do outline our objectives and some proxy success indicators in the section 'What have we learnt about what works?'. Nor is it intended to be an in-depth analysis of the Westminster political system – something we have covered in various ways elsewhere.⁴

⁴ See the following IfG publications: *Transitions: Preparing for changes of government*, *Westminster in an Age of Minorities*, *Year Five: Whitehall and the Parties in the Final Year of Coalition*, *Accountability at the Top*, *Endgames: Lessons for the Lib Dems in the Final Phase of Coalition*, *Supporting Ministers to Lead*, *Shuffling the Pack*, *A Game of Two Halves*, *Party People*, *One Year On*.

Why is there a need for more support for ministers?

The sheer weight of responsibility, 24-hour media scrutiny and competing pressures on a minister's time can threaten to overwhelm. Ministers are constantly expected to juggle multiple roles and responsibilities – none of which are clearly defined or explained. In *The Challenge of Being a Minister*, we outlined what some of these meant in practice:

- **executive and policy** – leading their departments, making all key decisions and approving public statements; developing and setting out policy objectives; driving forward reform programmes; monitoring progress
- **collective government and party role** – participating in collective decision making by the Cabinet and cabinet committees
- **departmental advocate** – negotiating with others on behalf of their department, including for resources, in the Cabinet, its committees, within Whitehall and with the Treasury, as well as in Brussels and other international bodies
- **public advocate** – presenting and defending policy, their departments and themselves to the media⁵
- **parliamentary** – answering questions; making statements on new policy initiatives and urgent issues; appearing in front of select committees; speaking in debates; taking legislation through Parliament
- **constituency** – handling correspondence and casework, visiting constituencies regularly and holding surgeries.

Ministers are constantly pulled in different directions by different people. Trying to satisfy party colleagues, civil servants, constituents, stakeholders, the media and the public – while getting on top of their policy brief – is incredibly challenging. This is made more difficult by the fact that ministers are often overloaded with information from the start, but do not always have the data they need to make crucial decisions – for example, on how departments are structured, the work their teams do and how much resource is available to drive policy priorities.⁶ Amid all of this, ministers naturally want to make time for themselves and their families. A recurring theme in Chris Mullin's diaries is his dogged determination to keep his weekends free; his refusal to take his red boxes and BlackBerry home was, however, a perennial source of friction in his private office.⁷ Achieving a balance between different commitments and prioritising effectively was a central concern for the politicians we engaged with.

Some rise to these challenges quickly – indeed, being a member of Parliament prepares you for much of what ministerial office requires. But one of the most striking transitions for a new minister is the assumption of leadership responsibility for a government department. Even those who have previously been a minister in the department, or worked in it as a special adviser, may find it has changed beyond recognition within the space of a few years. There is limited support available for those entering office, regardless of their experience, and almost nothing in place when they are in post – inductions, training and appraisals are non-existent. As one senior minister admitted: 'I had no idea of what was involved. I had to learn to be a minister, moving from decision to decision, seeing how they get made.'⁸ Getting to the top with hardly any experience or continuing development is virtually unheard of in other fields. Indeed, local government has long been active in preparing councillors.⁹

⁵ Riddell, P., Gruhn, Z., and Carolan, L., *The Challenge of Being a Minister*, op. cit., p. 11.

⁶ Special adviser.

⁷ Mullin, C., *A View from the Foothills: The Diaries of Chris Mullin*, Profile Books, 2010.

⁸ Quoted in Riddell, P., Gruhn, Z., and Carolan, L., *The Challenge of Being a Minister*, op. cit., p. 43.

⁹ Spending on the training and development of government ministers between May 2010 and August 2011 totalled £77,932 (just under £840 per minister). In contrast, councillors of Exeter City Council have access to a development budget of up to £3,125 per member. Cited in Carolan, L., 'Minister training should be welcomed – despite the cost to taxpayers', *The Guardian*, 15 August 2011. See also Local Government Association, *Highlighting Political Leadership: The LGA Development Offer*, May 2014.

Outside the UK, Australia and New Zealand have developed performance management systems for ministers,¹⁰ and in the corporate world, continuing professional development is the norm for chief executives.¹¹

The solution is not of course to replicate these models directly in Westminster. We fully recognise the limitations of training per se in preparing ministers for the realities of office, but have consistently argued that some form of preparation and continuing development is essential.¹² The first few months for a minister are vital – first impressions count and it is in this initial period that ministers set the tone for the rest of their time in office.¹³ Clearly communicating priorities, forging relationships and building well-functioning teams is crucial. Preparing for this means much more than attending ‘training and induction’ courses, and can include seminars and discussions, mentoring or leadership coaching and regular appraisals and feedback.

It appears, however, that politicians have fewer incentives than leaders from other sectors to make time for this support and development. Managerial skills – that is, how effective they are in getting the best out of their junior ministers and staff – count for little when it comes to promotion. As Jonathan Powell, Tony Blair’s chief of staff, put it: ‘The appointment of a Cabinet is politics, not HR.’¹⁴ Ministers then only have an average of one year and nine months to do a single job,¹⁵ which unsurprisingly encourages them to be reactive and focused on short-term considerations. A reshuffle can occur at any point and is ultimately dependent on a minister’s relationship to the prime minister, informed partly by media and parliamentary colleagues. What inevitably matters therefore is how effective ministers are in building allies, presenting themselves and handling the media.¹⁶

A widespread view is that this automatically makes ministers highly individualistic and competitive by nature and, thus, uninterested in cultivating a team dynamic and getting the best out of colleagues.¹⁷ However, we found that this is far from the reality: there is a latent appetite among politicians for some form of support in developing and honing their leadership skills – indeed, many recognise that it is in their long-term interest to invest in this. Working effectively with those around them – whether junior ministers, advisers, civil servants, cabinet colleagues, backbench MPs or, in recent years, coalition partners – is essential to getting legislation through Parliament and driving through ambitious policy priorities that deliver real changes on the ground. The challenge lies in knowing where to go for this type of support and finding the time for it. Given the multiple demands made of them, we found that many ministers felt unable to invest as much time as they would have liked in their personal development or that of their team.

Being an MP in opposition is naturally different to being in government – for one, there is no executive or departmental role to fulfil. However, this doesn’t seem to lessen the demands on shadow ministers’ time, primarily because they have a fraction of the resources a government minister has – and no civil servants to help them manage, implement and forward plan. As a result, many are constantly grappling with the challenge of balancing various commitments – and in particular reactive activity (e.g. responding to and attacking government policy in the media) – with longer-term planning (e.g. developing policy proposals of their own).¹⁸ We observed a clear appetite for some form of support in managing this dynamic so that they could hit the ground running on entering office. However, as is the case with government ministers, day-to-day pressures can prevent this.

<http://www.local.gov.uk/documents/10180/6204572/Highlighting+Political+Leadership+for+the+web/1c64a523-151a-4bb4-8b8d-d3ebc49add7f>

¹⁰ Paun, A., and Harris, J., *Reforming Civil Service Accountability: Lessons from New Zealand and Australia*, Institute for Government, November 2012.

¹¹ For example, see Friedman, A., *Continuing Professional Development: Lifelong Learning of Millions*, Routledge, March 2013.

¹² *Being an Effective Minister*, Institute for Government briefing note, March 2015.

¹³ Purnell, J., and Lewis, L., *Leading a Government Department – the First 100 Days*, Institute for Government, 2012.

¹⁴ Powell, J., *The New Machiavelli: How to Wield Power in the Modern World*, Vintage, 2011, p. 25.

¹⁵ Institute for Government Whitehall Monitor analysis: average tenure of a government minister between 1997 and 2015.

¹⁶ Riddell, P., Gruhn, Z., and Carolan, L., *The Challenge of Being a Minister*, op. cit., p. 12.

¹⁷ For full analysis see *ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

¹⁸ Observation based on our development activities with shadow teams pre-2010 and pre-2015.

How have the Institute, and others, gone about supporting ministers develop in their roles?

There has never before been a systematic attempt to offer this type of support to ministers in the UK on an ongoing basis. The Institute for Government was established in 2008 and one of its key goals has been to address this need: we have been active in providing a range of development opportunities to support current, and potential, ministers govern and lead more effectively. We have also done some work with special advisers, who perhaps receive even less support than ministers, though they are not the focus of this report.¹⁹

This strand of work is central to our charitable mission of improving government effectiveness for the benefit of the public and on a non-party political basis.²⁰ In line with this, we provide support free of charge to politicians who are (or are likely to become) ministers, regardless of their political party. We are in a particularly strong position to offer this type of support – our neutral position, experience and research expertise mean that we offer an independent viewpoint about how ministers can effectively deliver their policy commitments and improve their performance. In practice, this involves supporting them in the process of clarifying and communicating their priorities, getting on top of their departmental brief, forging strong relationships with those around them or building an effective ministerial and private office team.²¹ A minister's role is, of course, far wider than this – including, for example, campaigning and constituency responsibilities – but this is outside our remit.²²

The earlier ministers prepare for government, the better. Some of the early challenges faced by both the Thatcher and Blair governments stemmed to some degree from insufficient thought given to how government works and the reality of implementation.²³ The handover process in the UK is swift, and opposition parties would benefit enormously from preparing their shadow teams for office much more thoroughly.²⁴

Indeed, before the 1997 election, Jonathan Powell was keen to address the problem that virtually none of the Labour shadow cabinet had had any experience in government. To this end, some sessions were run by Templeton College, Oxford, to get people thinking about what being a minister involved and the challenges of running a Whitehall department. However, many shadow ministers were 'cynical about the exercise', which prevented more preparation being undertaken at the time.²⁵ A parallel exercise was run by the Fabian Society, which focused on the nuts and bolts of Whitehall, including how a private office is run and the nature of a public spending round.²⁶ In the run-up to the 2010 and 2015 elections, the Institute for Government worked with the Conservative, Liberal Democrat and Labour front benches, as appropriate, to help them become better prepared for a potential transition to government and the realities of office.

¹⁹ See Hillman, N., *In Defence of Special Advisers: Lessons from Personal Experience*, Institute for Government, 2014.

²⁰ See 'About us', available at: <http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/about-us>

²¹ *Being an Effective Minister*, op. cit.

²² Given the Institute's charitable purpose and non-partisan remit, we have always been clear that we can't advise politicians on campaigning tactics, the merits or contents of particular policies, or on fulfilling their constituency responsibilities.

²³ Riddell, P., and Haddon, C., *Transitions: Preparing for Changes of Government*, Institute for Government, November 2009, p. 9.

²⁴ Riddell, P., Gruhn, Z., and Carolan, L., *The Challenge of Being a Minister*, op. cit., p. 54.

²⁵ Powell, J., op. cit., pp. 22-23.

²⁶ Riddell, P., and Haddon, C., *Transitions*, op. cit., pp. 15-16.

During the past seven years, our approach has evolved significantly: from providing ad-hoc networking opportunities for ministers and special advisers, to focusing heavily on structured individual and team development and, more recently, to encouraging a more rigorous approach to policymaking and prioritisation ahead of the 2015 election. Since then, we have run induction sessions for new ministers. Below are some examples of the types of programme we have run:

Seminars including an external speaker (former minister, adviser or civil servant) and/or Institute for Government presentation on:

- building relationships with civil servants, private offices and departmental boards
- understanding departmental budgets and resources
- getting to grips with the departmental machinery
- developing policy in ways that make successful implementation more likely
- managing the challenges of governing in a coalition.

Interactive workshops with ministerial teams on:

- building effective team and support structures around secretaries of state
- turning policy priorities into changes on the ground.

360 reviews with individual ministers:

- multi-source feedback process followed by one-to-one coaching sessions.

In total, we have run 45 seminars, workshops or 360 reviews, with 23 different lead stakeholders and, through this, engaged approximately 275 politicians and advisers²⁷ across the three parties at various levels – secretaries of state, junior ministers, advisers and parliamentary assistants. The Institute is committed to carrying forward this work, and is currently doing so with ministers appointed after the general election.

There is, of course, no objective way to assess how ‘effective’ these ministers have become as a result of our support, so we developed a set of proxy indicators that focus on participants’ reactions rather than behaviour change or performance outcomes.²⁸ These included:

1. How many people we were able to successfully engage.
2. How many people came back for more sessions or referred colleagues on.
3. How many people felt the sessions were a valuable use of their time.

In many ways, we exceeded our expectations against all three criteria – not only did we engage a range of politicians and convince them of the value of taking up our offer (indicator 1), we also developed an ongoing relationship with many of those we worked with (indicator 2). Feedback was positive: something that came up time and again was the value of a safe space to discuss, share experiences and reflect on issues that would otherwise get little attention (indicator 3). Some examples include:

- 360 review: ‘I have felt very privileged to have had this opportunity and only wish that this had been earlier in my career.’²⁹
- Policymaking workshop: ‘A really good exercise in helping us to understand the need to prioritise. We are now more aware how to use time and to focus on how we deliver priorities in government.’³⁰
- Seminar: ‘This was the single best use of two hours I’ve had in a long time. So much practical and useful thought on what we should be doing!’³¹

Time spent on development activities can understandably get squeezed out by the significant day-to-day pressures politicians face. The next section covers how we went about managing this, and some of the choices and trade-offs we faced along the way.

²⁷ This includes those who attended seminars or team workshops as well as interviewees for the 360 reviews.

²⁸ Based on the Kirkpatrick model of training evaluation. See <http://www.kirkpatrickpartners.com/OurPhilosophy/TheKirkpatrickModel/tabid/302/Default.aspx>

²⁹ Government minister.

³⁰ Shadow secretary of state.

³¹ Political adviser.

What have we learnt about what works?

Over the past seven years, we have accumulated a breadth of knowledge, experience and insights about how to run a programme to help ministers develop in their roles. These have been distilled down to seven stages – many apply equally to any other executive development programme, but the real insight lies in the detail of how we went about achieving each one in the context of Whitehall and Westminster. These lessons have informed the Institute’s post-election activities with new ministers and advisers, but we hope they will also be useful to others involved in supporting politicians to fulfil leadership roles in government. The seven stages are:

1. **Clarify programme goals.**
2. **Stimulate interest.**
3. **Generate buy-in.**
4. **Tailor the intervention.**
5. **Ensure attendance on the day.**
6. **Encourage reflection.**
7. **Invest in aftercare.**

It’s worth stressing that some of the choices were made to specifically maintain the non-partisan, charitable status of the Institute for Government and may be less relevant to those working on the political or civil service side, or in a commercial organisation. We hope therefore that our experience can offer some interesting insights to reflect on, but also stimulate a conversation to allow our model to be adapted and improved by others.

Clarify programme goals

The starting point for developing a leadership programme for ministers is, like any other programme, to articulate exactly what it is for. However obvious this may sound, it is all too easy to underestimate the importance of setting overall objectives and ambitions. Some useful questions to consider early on are: how can ministers be better supported in achieving their policy priorities? What sorts of skills, knowledge and behaviour might they appreciate support in developing, while maintaining their own style, expertise and approach? Where could you add value?

In the Institute’s case, we found it helpful to frame individual interventions around a small number of learning objectives. We started off with relatively modest ambitions: offering networking opportunities for ministers and special advisers and a ‘feel’ for what the job involves, but with little focus on developing specific skills or changing attitudes.

Over time, our programme evolved to include structured development activities, such as 360 reviews and team away days. Rather than rely on generic leadership models, our existing research on ministerial effectiveness – based on extensive interviews with ministers, civil servants and experts – provided a strong starting point for thinking through the collection of skills, qualities and behaviours we wanted to support.³² This informed the bespoke questionnaire we developed for our 360 reviews of ministers, which aimed to build self-awareness of the effect they had on others – whether civil servants, external stakeholders or fellow politicians – and, in particular, their individual leadership strengths and weaknesses.

Our team away days focus on the team as a whole and ways of building well-functioning support structures around current, and future, secretaries of state. While objectives naturally varied according to the interests of different teams, there was always a strong emphasis on working intensively together to address specific issues. Some common themes included:

- clarifying team roles and responsibilities in order to avoid duplication
- improving coordination between different offices (ministerial, parliamentary and constituency)

³² Riddell, P., Gruhn, Z., and Carolan, L., *The Challenge of Being a Minister*, op. cit.; Gruhn, Z., and Slater, F., *Creating an Effective Ministerial Team: Ministers and their Special Advisers*, Institute for Government, 2012; Gruhn, Z., and Slater, F., *Special Advisers and Ministerial Effectiveness*, Institute for Government, 2012.

- delegating effectively and getting the most out of staff and volunteers
- encouraging better time management and prioritisation
- balancing long-term planning with reactive activity.

In the run-up to the 2015 election, we built more of our interventions around particular Institute research that we felt was both relevant and timely for current and shadow ministers – for example, on leading Whitehall departments,³³ preparing for a potential transition to government³⁴ and driving successful policy implementation.³⁵ Our policymaking and implementation workshops aimed to equip current and potential teams with the knowledge, experience and tools to stress-test policies and anticipate implementation issues. In practice this involved helping teams to think through how they might:

- clarify policy goals
- prioritise and sequence different policy agendas
- signal intentions to civil servants and others
- build productive relationships with those critical to implementation
- work across departmental silos.

In summary, being absolutely clear on what precisely you are aiming for and where you can add value from the outset is crucial to informing decisions around whom to target and what development areas to focus on.

Stimulate interest

Stimulating interest in the first place presented the Institute with challenges less likely to be faced by other executive leadership programmes. Most large organisations will have a line management and appraisal system, which can help individuals better understand their strengths and development areas, as well as trigger a desire to address them, because of the expectation that improvement will be rewarded.³⁶ Leadership teams and/or human resources functions are therefore often on the look-out for potential training, development and coaching support that can help nurture and develop the talent within their organisations. This gives a provider a ready-made set of potential ‘clients’.

However, the relative absence of formal line management, HR and appraisal systems in UK politics means there is no obvious person or function that can act as a client in the same way. Identifying those who may be interested, making contact and stimulating demand in the first place is a big job in itself.

So how did we go about this? It would have been impractical to reach out to every minister, adviser or backbencher; we therefore adopted a targeted but flexible approach. In the case of 360 reviews, we sought out likely early adopters – those who were willing to take a step forward and galvanise others. Such people usually had a background in the private sector and an understanding of how some form of development support could hone their leadership skills. Importantly, these were people with credibility in their party who could position 360 reviews as something strong leaders did, rather than as a remedial activity because they weren’t ‘up to the job’. In the case of team sessions (either seminars or workshops), we initially prioritised up-and-coming ministers, including shadow ministers, who had little previous ministerial experience and were therefore likely to benefit most from support.

After this, we faced a couple of choices and our decisions helped, but also hindered, our ability to stimulate demand on a wide scale. First, we decided to approach individuals directly rather than via the formal machinery on the civil service (i.e. the Cabinet Office and Civil Service Learning) or political side (i.e. party leadership), primarily because of the potential risks around branding and control. It was essential that those we approached knew this was the Institute’s programme and not someone else’s. However, we made the

³³ Page, J., et al., *Transforming Whitehall Departments: Leading Major Change in Whitehall Departments*, Institute for Government, 2012; Pearson, J., et al., *Leading Change in the Department for Education: First Report on Progress*, Institute for Government, 2013.

³⁴ Riddell, P., and Haddon, C., *Transitions*, op. cit.; Haddon, C., *Pre-election Contact between the Civil Service and the Parties: Lessons from 2010*, Institute for Government, 2014.

³⁵ Rutter, J., Sims, S., Marshall, E., *The ‘S’ Factors: Lessons from IfG’s Policy Success Reunions*, Institute for Government, 2012; Norris, E., Kidson, M., Bouchal, P., and Rutter, J., *Doing Them Justice: Lessons from Four Cases of Policy Implementation*, Institute for Government, 2014.

³⁶ Either in terms of greater responsibility, personal satisfaction and development and/or financial reward.

party leadership aware of our general activities and, in some cases, senior party figures were hugely helpful in encouraging those with less ministerial experience to get involved.

The lack of formal avenues meant that personal connections were essential to getting a 'foot in' and opening the door to individuals. This naturally limited the number of people we could reach out to across the three parties, but in many ways helped us to build more meaningful, trusting relationships with individual politicians – which lie at the heart of this type of work. At all times, the focus was on triggering the individual's own appetite for development rather than adopting a mandatory approach.

Second, we decided to keep the relationship strictly private and confidential. This was hugely helpful in building trust, but limited our ability to publicise our work – we naturally couldn't talk about what we were doing, with whom and how it was supporting them. We therefore relied on ministers themselves spreading the word. For instance, Francis Maude, then Minister for the Cabinet Office, told an audience at the Institute in October 2012:

We should all be doing 360-degree appraisals these days. I've just undergone one, undertaken by the IfG, which was an interesting experience and a good one, actually. It was very good. So these things ought to be done, need to be done, quite rigorously.³⁷

However, public endorsements like these were rare, given the reticence some feel about openly talking about their involvement in development activities. Private endorsements were more common, which sometimes led to us being approached by those who had heard of our work (or experienced it in some way, either by participating in a team-development session or being interviewed for another colleague's 360) and were keen on some form of support for themselves or their teams.

At all times, we took advantage of ad-hoc opportunities to work with ministers and teams we hadn't initially targeted, if it would help us achieve our overall objectives. Interestingly, there was more demand than expected from experienced ministers, who understood first-hand how essential it was to get to grips with Whitehall and recognised the expertise we could bring to supporting the development of their junior ministers and staff.

In sum, careful choices have to be made around whom to target, and how to go about this, but it is always useful to retain some flexibility to capitalise on opportunities that help demand to snowball.

Generate buy-in

Stimulating interest in our work was never enough to guarantee commitment to a particular development activity. There were a few occasions when a minister (or shadow minister) would initially agree to a 360 review or team away day, but then have to pull out midway through the process because of the many other pressing demands on their time. A written contract or verbal 'contracting' arrangement would not necessarily have prevented this, especially as they were not paying for the service. Instead, we relied on the following objectives to generate long-term buy-in and commitment:

- Build relationships
- Understand mindsets
- Get close to the gatekeeper.

Build relationships

Building and sustaining relationships is essential to developing trust and goodwill, so that someone willingly makes the time to engage with you. Sustaining this type of relationship with individual politicians is not straightforward – given the multiple demands on their time, you rarely have more than 30-45 minutes at any particular point to show not only that you're there to support them (and not working on behalf of anyone else's agenda), but that you have the ability to do so. In the Institute's case, we found that our promise of

³⁷ See Institute for Government public event 'Creating Better Public Services: What can the UK learn from New Zealand (and vice versa)?', available at <http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/events/creating-better-public-services-what-can-uk-learn-new-zealand-and-vice-versa-0>

confidentiality, the reputation of the organisation and our research expertise – especially our unrivalled insight into how Whitehall operates – helped build our credibility.

Understand mindsets

A major part of the relationship-building process is getting into the politicians' mindset and understanding where they are coming from: what exactly are they interested in? What concerns or challenges do they face? What is underlying this?

Those we worked with in government were often motivated by a desire to set an example to their juniors and peers. In the case of 360s, many had a genuine interest in constructive feedback that would give them a more nuanced understanding of themselves than they might otherwise get through media analysis or the rough and tumble of parliamentary life. In the case of team workshops and seminars, many valued a 'safe space' to share experiences, network and reflect, away from the fast-paced, reactive world of Westminster.

For those we worked with in opposition pre-2010 or pre-2015, there was a clear recognition of the hugely different demands government would place on them and thus the value of support – whether it was getting a team working effectively for them, hitting the ground running and making a strong start with policy priorities, understanding where the 'banana skins' were in the department, or getting civil servants and others on side.

This interest sometimes manifested itself in a desire to gather information. Shadow ministers were particularly motivated by external speakers – former ministers, civil servants and advisers – who had first-hand experience of how to get things done in Whitehall, as well as the Institute's research expertise on how to lead government departments effectively.

Others were looking for more than just information – for example, support in asserting their leadership over the team, cultivating a team spirit and encouraging greater professionalism and drive among staff and junior ministers.

Understanding these motivations and picking up on relevant signals helped us to identify those areas of overlap where individuals were keen to have support and the Institute could add value. Managing individual expectations around what can (and cannot) be offered is central to this process and may require continual negotiation.

Get close to the gatekeeper

Getting time in the diary with the minister (or shadow minister) in the first place is tricky. It could take weeks, only for the meeting to be cancelled and shifted at the last minute because of other important commitments – in one case, six times within the space of two days! This reflects the reality that politicians are of course incredibly busy, meaning that time spent on developing themselves and their teams can often get squeezed out by the other pressing and reactive demands of the job.

There is no magic fix for this issue. However, we found it helped significantly to get close to key 'gatekeepers', reminding them of the value of support for the minister to achieve their goals. The main route to a government minister is through their private office, and specifically their principal private secretary. It took us a lot longer to identify who the relevant gatekeeper was for a shadow minister, primarily because different offices tend to be run along different lines. For instance, in some cases our main point of contact was the shadow minister's political adviser, whereas in others it was the parliamentary researcher or diary secretary.

Building these relationships was sometimes made more challenging by frequent changes in ministerial teams (both in opposition and in government). The private office structure of government helps to ensure that there is some continuity as staff come and go. But in opposition, we found that there was rarely a handover process and thus no guarantee that even if a key gatekeeper had been successfully engaged, the relationship would carry over seamlessly to the new one. This underlines the point that the relationship is usually with an individual rather than an organisation – and, if things change (as they often do), you essentially have to start the process again.

Therefore, time taken to organise basic logistics – such as getting dates in the diary for meetings and workshops – shouldn't be underestimated. This can be hugely aided by ensuring sufficient resource is

allocated to the programme. At one point, we had three directors and facilitators maintaining relationships with various senior politicians; two full-time members of staff designing sessions and leading on day-to-day relationships with gatekeepers; and PA support to coordinate diaries.

Tailor the intervention

After generating buy-in and commitment, the next step is to design an appropriate intervention. As our approach evolved, we sought to develop a core set of interventions that focused on those areas relevant to a minister's departmental, executive and collective government role where we could bring specific expertise – for example, understanding the Whitehall machinery or driving successful policy implementation. The intention was to roll these interventions out to various individuals at different points in the political cycle and take them through a structured leadership development programme.

This rarely worked, however. Although there was clearly a stock of common issues and challenges that all politicians and teams were grappling with (naturally varying according to whether they were in government or in opposition), we found it difficult to use the same intervention more than once without extensively tailoring it first (the exception being the 360 review). All those we worked with naturally had very different leadership styles, came to the job with different sets of skills and were often at completely different stages in their thinking. In order to retain their buy-in and commitment to a particular development activity, we ended up going for a far more tailored approach, designing one-off, bespoke interventions that suited different leadership styles, skills and needs.

This naturally introduces a set of trade-offs that are useful to consider early in the programme's development. While developing a set of core interventions that can be used time and again requires a large upfront investment, it is less resource intensive in the long run and ultimately gives you more ownership over content, design and delivery. The big risk, however, is the potential for irrelevance and low take-up. A more tailored approach is far more resource intensive overall because of the time it takes to customise an intervention for each team, but can make more of a difference in terms of changing attitudes and behaviour. Deciding which approach to take naturally depends on the resources available – but also, crucially, on your objectives, and how far you are able to meet the needs of a particular individual and/or team.

Essentially, as with any other executive development programme, we recommend the following when designing and tailoring an intervention:

- Make it practical and relevant
- Choose an appropriate delivery model
- Test it in advance.

Make it practical and relevant

The more practical, relevant and timely you can make the intervention, the better. Indeed, our most effective interventions were those that gave people the tools, information and space to work through real on-the-job challenges that they were grappling with. For example, our workshops help teams understand how to approach policymaking and how to apply our research insights to a real policy that is still in the early stages of development, while giving participants the space to work through one or two particular issues (e.g. clarify the goals of the policy or stakeholder management).

Achieving relevance wasn't always easy, and the timing had to be just right – neither too early nor too late in the political cycle. In short, the issue had to be seen as 'hot'. Given the reactive world of politics, this could change rapidly over the course of a few months – the length of time it generally took to get a session in the diaries in the first place and design a high-quality intervention. There were a few instances in which priorities, and people, shifted rapidly, meaning that a session was no longer relevant, and we had to make careful judgements around whether to shift the focus and reschedule, or pull it altogether.

What we therefore did was anticipate potential hot topics in advance, as far as this was possible, and remain flexible enough to adapt and respond to new opportunities. In hindsight, certain topics worked better at some points in the electoral cycle than at others.

For instance, in government, the first few weeks and months are a key transition period – people, especially those new to ministerial posts, will be adjusting to the world of Whitehall and coming to terms with the

realities of office. This is when they are most eager to understand the basics of how things works, how they can build relationships quickly and get off to a good start. In particular, they are keen to hear from politicians and/or special advisers who have once been in their shoes. However, overloading new ministers with information on the nuts and bolts of government is unlikely to get traction at this stage; arguably this approach is better adopted six to 12 months into the cycle of a new government, when ministers have had some time to get to grips with their brief. We also found that this period is a good time to offer 360 reviews, as relationships have begun to form and those around a minister can provide constructive feedback on their leadership style. Finally, there seemed to be an increasing appetite for problem-solving workshops in specific areas midway through the electoral cycle, when people were in the thick of grappling with major challenges and valued some time and space away from Westminster to take stock.

From our experience of working with the opposition between 2010 and 2015, we found that time available for development activities is low or non-existent during the first couple of years after a general election, when the prospect of being in government seems far away. However, a couple of years into the parliament, there may be an increasing appetite for team-development away days that focus on getting the very basic team structures, processes and relationships in place. In the second half of the electoral cycle, there is likely to be a real gear shift, with more and more people in opposition keen to 'sound like a government'. This is the best time to offer support in relation to clarifying policy priorities and getting to grips with Whitehall.

Understanding how interests change with the political cycle, and gathering intelligence around what is likely to get traction at various points, is therefore critical to making the session as practical and relevant as possible.

Choose an appropriate delivery model

Identifying an appropriate delivery model for an intervention is as important as getting the content and timing right. We primarily used a small suite of models – seminars, workshops and 360s – which were tailored in terms of content, style and format. We found the following considerations useful in choosing the appropriate model:

- Who are you designing the intervention for?
- What are they looking for? Information, accessing former civil servants or ministers, or developing their team and collectively working through problems?
- What are the nature of team relationships and dynamics?
- Where can the Institute add most value?
- Who are the most credible voices in the field and for the particular audience?

This helped us to tailor the intervention appropriately. The table below outlines the potential risks and benefits of the models we used.

Table 1: Delivery models

Model	Potential benefits	Potential risks
Seminar	A seminar is suitable for current, and potential, ministers seeking candid advice and information about how they can perform effectively in their role. The most effective seminars involve short presentations from a former minister, special adviser, civil servant and/or research expert followed by a facilitated discussion that encourages participants to reflect on what they might do differently in light of what they have heard.	A key risk with seminars is reliance on an external speaker who lacks the relevant expertise and/or credibility with the audience. In addition, the speaker may not stick to agreed topic areas, which could lessen the influence you have over the messages disseminated. Another risk to consider is overloading participants with information without providing them with the tools to think through how they might act on it. The impact on actual attitudes and behaviour is therefore likely to be lower than would be the case with a workshop.
Workshop	A workshop is suitable for those politicians seeking to work through issues as part of a team. The most effective workshops have encouraged teams to reflect while tackling a 'live' problem. For example, our policymaking workshops help teams to stress-test a policy that is in the early stages of development and work through one or two practical issues. The emphasis on providing practical tools and approaches that can be applied 'on the job' has proved a valuable way of encouraging people to shift their thinking and actions.	Workshops work best when the team is small and cohesive, and there are high levels of trust between participants. It is therefore important to recognise that not all ministers and teams will be open to this approach – some may only be interested in accessing information and speakers, for example, and thus better suited to a seminar. Meetings with the minister (or shadow minister) in advance are useful for gauging the team's comfort levels with a more participatory approach and how this should be adjusted to individual leadership styles and team dynamics.
360 reviews	The 360-degree process gives ministers feedback that they would rarely get through other channels (i.e. the prime minister, media and parliamentary colleagues). As in any other coaching intervention, a key benefit lies in providing the time, space and permission for the participant to reflect on their individual leadership strengths and weaknesses and how they might act on these.	Given the many other pressing demands on ministers' time, a 360 may be seen as a one-off exercise rather than part of a broader coaching relationship. A major risk here is that the feedback doesn't therefore prompt any real changes in behaviour, and may be sidelined in favour of prime ministerial and media opinion, which ultimately matter most for advancement.

Test it in advance

Finally, when convening workshops or seminars, we found it was always helpful to test the proposed intervention with the minister/shadow in advance to give them an opportunity to suggest alterations. For the team-development away days, we also spoke to all team members (shadow junior ministers, advisers and researchers) in advance to get their take on how the team functioned and the areas that would be worth exploring and discussing. This helps not only to build buy-in, ownership and commitment, but to guide the tailoring process so that you can make it as relevant as possible to the individuals involved.

Ensure attendance on the day

However well-tailored an intervention is, the most important thing is that people attend and want to be there on the day. Paying careful attention to the different routes by which this can be achieved is essential. For us, the following guidelines helped get an audience for our sessions, but also introduced another set of trade-offs:

- Avoid timetable clashes
- Secure a credible sponsor
- Think carefully about location.

Avoid timetable clashes

This is a relatively simple point: avoid days (and times) where ministers are likely to be busy fulfilling their other duties – whether parliamentary, constituency or ministerial. For instance, we avoided holding sessions on Thursdays and Fridays (constituency days for most), during summer, winter and conference recess, on Wednesday afternoons (Prime Minister's Questions) or near 'big' announcement days (e.g. the Autumn Statement or Budget). As campaign activities gathered pace in the six months leading up to the election, it was unsurprisingly difficult for politicians to find the time for any sort of development-related activities – some also seemed to fear that any public hint of such preparations would be seen as presumptuous and counterproductive electorally. Being aware of all these clashes naturally limits the number of potential slots, but is hugely helpful in ensuring that people are able to turn up on the day.

Secure a credible sponsor

Finding the right person to help convene the session can also significantly affect attendance. Often engaging with the 'centre' of a political party (for example, the party's chief of staff) can be crucial in getting an audience and providing access to individuals you don't already have a relationship with. However, the major risk here is that people may only be attending because it is seen as mandatory, which can make it difficult to tap into genuine desire for development and improvement. Therefore, wherever possible, consider how sessions are 'advertised' and whom they are seen to be for – in general, ensure all invites and agendas come from a respected individual or the lead minister in a team, who can 'sponsor' the session and galvanise others. For example, we found that if the secretary of state was keen to attend, others would almost always follow suit.

Think carefully about location

When it came to choosing the location for a session, we faced a delicate balancing act. On one hand, there was value in holding them off-site, but close enough – at the Institute for Government, which is a short walk from Parliament and most departments. Many ministers and teams seemed to really appreciate the space to escape the pressing demands of the day job, while being able to get back to their office quickly when needed. On the other hand, sessions on-site secured higher attendance rates, but in some ways affected our ability to create a 'safe space' – away from government and Parliament – that could allow people to switch off and reflect on issues that would otherwise receive little attention. It is therefore worth thinking carefully about the location and how it might affect overall learning objectives.

Encourage reflection

On the day, when running workshops or seminars or delivering 360-degree feedback, we recommend striking a balance between putting people at ease and encouraging them to reflect proactively on issues that they may have given little prior thought to. The following can help achieve this:

- Create a permissive environment
- Think carefully about language
- Combine ‘activity’ with ‘discussion’.

Create a permissive environment

The most effective facilitators take command of the day and process, but focus on putting people at ease, creating a permissive environment in which they can stand back and reflect on challenges. In the case of 360s, a key objective of the one-to-one coaching sessions was to provide individuals with the space to reflect on feedback, as well as on what they might do to act on it. In team-based interventions, it is good practice to allow the minister to exert their leadership, set out their expectations for the team and lead on discussions. At the same time, care must be taken that more junior members of the team do not feel marginalised.

Think carefully about language

At all times, we endeavoured to use appropriate visuals and communication styles that resonated with politicians’ interests and experiences. This included, for example, reframing a standard 360-review template used for leaders across different sectors around the language ministers and their colleagues use themselves when describing their roles. Likewise, when running a seminar or workshop, we aimed to bring research insights to life by using anecdotes and stories that were personalised around a minister’s goals and challenges. This approach helped our messages resonate and made participants realise that it was in their self-interest to act on some of the issues raised – for example, by showing how better communication can help motivate junior colleagues and civil servants to deliver policy priorities.

Combine ‘activity’ with ‘discussion’

In line with facilitation best practice, we aimed to strike a careful balance between structured activity and free-flowing discussion that would allow new topics and conversations to emerge organically. This approach worked well in terms of focusing participants and encouraging them to discuss how they might address some of the issues raised. For example, during our policymaking workshops, we have designed an exercise to prompt consideration of the links between different policy agendas (in terms of objectives, resources and people), which has helped to inform thinking about how best to prioritise and sequence these agendas. This is followed by a plenary discussion about what steps the team might then take to address any potential issues or challenges.

However, only so much can be achieved by any single intervention. It was difficult to move individuals and groups to translate ideas into action – in team-based sessions this was primarily because of the larger group size (which meant it naturally took more time to reach consensus on key points) and the hierarchical dynamics between secretaries of state, junior ministers and advisers, which inhibited people from speaking on behalf of others.

Deciding where exactly to strike this balance – in favour of more activity or more discussion, as well as how far to go down the action-planning route – will naturally depend on what the individual is looking for and the team dynamics (see Table 1). Meetings with the minister in advance are useful for gauging their comfort level with a more interactive approach and where the balance should be struck.

Invest in aftercare

Getting the first session or 360 was often the hardest task; many participants soon began to recognise the ongoing value of development and resisted pressure to sacrifice this amid other demands on their time. We kept the momentum going by holding follow-up sessions with notes of key discussion points and actions, offering continued support and, in some cases, arranging a ‘feedback’ call with the director of the Institute to stimulate further engagement. This helped to remind people of the Institute’s value, encouraging further sessions or requests for one-to-one meetings to discuss specific areas.

Where next?

It has been seven years since we first began delivering support to politicians. During this time, we have made significant progress in developing an ambitious programme to help them to perform more effectively in their roles. In particular, we have focused on helping individuals better understand their leadership strengths and weaknesses, get to grips with Whitehall, clarify their policy agendas and build relationships with those around them. Last but not least, we have offered political teams a rare opportunity to spend time as a group and work intensively together on 'live' issues away from the rough and tumble of political life.

However, the process of stimulating demand for, and designing, a programme of support for politicians has been challenging. Extensive time and energy went into identifying those who might be interested in the first place, making a connection and building trusting relationships in order to encourage take-up of our support offer. People, priorities and interests sometimes shifted rapidly, which understandably limited the time politicians had to invest in developing themselves or their teams. Among leading politicians, advance preparation and continuing development therefore remains patchy and uneven.

Being carefully attuned to the context in which politicians operate, and adapting accordingly, has been crucial to the success of our most effective interventions. In practice, this requires getting to know your audience – where are they coming from, what type of support are they after and how might you be able to help? Ensuring that the interventions were timely, practical and relevant was central to retaining buy-in and maximising our ability to support politicians.

There is still a long way to go in making greater preparation and continuing development the norm in political life. The Institute is committed to carrying forward this programme of work and is doing so with new ministers. But we also hope that this paper provides some useful context and tips for others planning to support politicians to perform leadership roles in government – whether from a political, Civil Service or commercial organisation. Finally, we hope this paper stimulates discussion about the wider range of approaches that can be used to support politicians in honing their leadership skills, qualities and attributes in order to achieve their priorities, while retaining their individual styles, strengths and expertise.

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