



Opinion

Advice for political staffers: whatever desk you're in, treat it like YOU.inc

Remember there's no job security. The next election is always around the corner. Enjoy every moment. In the end, it's not the desk you held, but how you held it.

Jacquie Larocque



Parliament gets a restart this week, and returns to what is highly likely to be an uncertain session as parties negotiate their priorities and figure out how to conduct legislative business. As a former trade communications director to Jim Peterson in Paul Martin's minority government from 2004-2006, something is—eerily?—familiar to me as Parliamentarians “return” to the Hill and their staff hastily get briefings and notes together.

Many things have changed in the life of a ministerial staffer in a decade and a half: social media did not dictate the news cycle, not all ministers used their smartphone let alone tweeted about public policy, and caucus meetings weren't done over Zoom. But there are many things that haven't changed—the long, arduous hours obsessing over the right word to put in a press release, making sure there were no international incidents with hot mics and attending a minimum of

10 meetings a day with journos, stakeholders, public servants, and other colleagues.

Being a senior staffer was one of the best educations I got in my entire career, and despite the obvious demanding role, it was one of the best times of my life. I've taken what I learned during this time into every job I've had since—including as a small business owner, entrepreneur, lobbyist, and as a mentor—and to find the common good in public policy for Canadians.

Engaging daily with today's competent staffers, it's hard to think about what I could teach them, but since Kate Malloy asked, I humbly give you the following six things I've learned about surviving the political staff life.

Never forget you're in the people business

Everyone matters. Empathy and building relationships is foundational. Those who came before you and those who will inevitably come after are in it for the same reasons as you: they want what's best for Canada. While it's perfectly fine and expected to disagree or have a bad day, it's not okay to make everything about you. Try not to burn bridges.

Work collegially with departmental officials. Be respectful of their role in advising the boss, but also be clear about the minister's wishes. Officials need your minister to succeed just as much as you do.

Show empathy to your colleagues, bosses and stakeholders and try to understand their circumstances or viewpoints, too. Picking up the actual phone to resolve an issue is often more effective than sending faceless texts or emails that everyone will regret later.

Relationships are two-way streets, so make sure to return phone calls. It's one of those things people don't forget and you won't

be in this job forever.

You're in public service, but whatever desk you're in, treat it like YOU.inc

From junior staff in backbench MPs' offices, to chiefs of staff in ministers' offices, it doesn't hurt to treat your role and purpose as you would in a business. The approach you take today will follow your career for a long time, if not forever.

How do businesses succeed or fail? They succeed with strategic planning, by collaborating with smart people who can contribute to the broader objectives and not being afraid to take risks and learning from them. You're serving the country, but you're also building your career for the next 20 years, not just for the political cycle. Goals are important.

On social media, assume you will read your posts 10 years from now—you want to be proud of what's there.

And, find a mentor. I am fortunate to have had some and grateful to be working alongside several today.

Know your files and anticipate your boss' needs

It's so important to be prepared—for internal and external meetings. Know your files so that you can help your boss when they need it. At the same time, learn your boss's strengths and weaknesses and provide support accordingly. Pay attention to the details. It's not an exaggeration to keep a large copy of your minister's mandate commitments on your wall (at the office and possibly even at home). All things being equal, this is the lens through which the PMO and your colleagues are assessing you.

Oh, and has your boss eaten today? It's not your job to pack their lunch, but a power bar or glass of water five meetings in while on the road might be appreciated.

Always a reflection of your boss and party, being prepared also means never going into a stakeholder meeting cold. You will learn a lot from stakeholders about where there is alignment or unintended consequences. But take 10 minutes before each call to be ready and where necessary ask for a briefing note so you can actually *get into the details*.

Don't be afraid to give the fearless advice that's needed—and to say “I don't know”

Politics is about individuals coming together to contribute to a bigger dialogue. Staffers get mired in the day-to-day routine because the job requires that, but it sometimes comes at the expense of keeping the big picture in mind. Fight for your boss's views, but you need to bring your own voice into the job too. I was lucky in my day that Jim Peterson allowed it to happen, but it was unconventional at the time. I had respectful clashes with others, but it also resulted in better public policy—or at the very least, a necessary debate.

The flip side, however, is also never be afraid to say you don't know. As my fellow former ministerial staffer and current colleague Ken Polk would say, “Having no answer is better than having the wrong answer.”

Don't only be defined by political affiliation

It's easy to drink the Kool-Aid and nothing else, especially in today's #cdnpoli, made even more

partisan through social media. As cliché as it is to say everyone needs to work together, it's 100 per cent true in a minority Parliament. It's also 100 per cent doable. Logistically, working within a minority Parliament was sometimes a challenge at a department like International Trade but, thankfully, my boss was always quite inclusive and it taught me a lot.

The bigger issue is you won't always be on the Hill. You will work in other settings or industries that also require working with people and stakeholders that don't necessarily align with your politics. You have to choose who you're going to be and be mindful of your brand and the kind of approach you want to be known for.

Carve out some time for yourself

Two years in a position doesn't sound like a long time, but when it's an all-consuming, fast-paced, and high-stressed job it's critical to take time for yourself to decompress. I previously wrote that empathy for others is key, but empathy for yourself is also mandatory.

Day-to-day political life is a giant conspiracy against being organized. No one will organize your workload. You have to do it for yourself. You never know when the minister will ask you about something you have let slip amid the chaos. Building in even a small take-a-breath moment each day will go a long way to keeping your sanity. Build parameters. Make friends off the Hill, too.

It's not the desk you held, but how you held it

As old-fashioned as it sounds working for the people of Canada is an extreme honour. The work you do is extremely important regardless of which side of the aisle you're on. But remember there's no job security—the next election is always around the corner. Enjoy every moment. In the end it's not the desk you held, but how you held it.

Jacquie LaRocque is the founder of Compass Rose in Ottawa. She's happy to say that since she left politics in 2006, she has not taken a media call in her sleep.

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