How to Succeed in the Senior Civil Service

Part 1. Your Responsibilities

1.1 Introduction

The Senior Civil Service (the SCS) offers a wonderfully interesting, challenging and rewarding career. The SCS is, after all, collectively responsible, with Ministers, for the proper and effective government of the United Kingdom.

But it can be difficult to transition into the SCS whether on promotion or from outside the civil service.

The vast majority of the adult population work within well-established rules, guidelines and protocols. You can't have every single person asking questions. Decisions have to be made and implemented. But the SCS is quite different.

Unlike more junior officials, individual members of the SCS have a duty to address weaknesses in policy and practice. Nothing is "above their pay grade". They cannot claim that they are powerless to act, that responsibility and accountability lies elsewhere. They may not simply shrug their shoulders when they see unfair, unethical or inefficient practices - inside and outside government. They have an absolute duty to draw noisy attention to them. And they are not just empowered to 'speak truth to power'. They are under an absolute duty to do so. [1]

This can come as quite a shock to those newly promoted into the SCS, especially as this promotion can often be accompanied by the assimilation, for the first time, of significant management responsibilities.

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[1] But you need to speak truth in a way that ensures you are heard. There is some excellent advice in Part 3 of 'How to Succeed ...'

Meanwhile, those entering the SCS from other careers encounter a bewildering mixture of rules and procedures - and political constraints - whilst at the same time they find it very difficult to obtain basic advice about how to do their job. There is some great advice in *How to be a Civil Servant*[2] but new entrants to the SCS face an additional set of problems.

New entrants to the SCS inevitably and quickly hit obstacles: unsympathetic or distracted managers, resource constraints, a weak team, politics, outdated legislation. Ministers may well have 'interesting' views on how to improve things in their area. Some obstacles may seem insuperable. But successful senior officials learn how to overcome them. They understand how organisations really work. They learn how to speak truth to power - and to be heard by power, which is not the same thing. They become great leaders and managers and they know how to react sensibly to a crisis.

Those who have successfully managed the transition were inevitably helped by their more experienced colleagues who offered real world advice which cannot, by its nature, be included in ministerially-approved training[3]. I have sought to summarise this advice and experience in this publication. Here is a brief summary of its contents:

1.2 Contents

Part 2 - **Understanding Organisations** - explores corporate behaviour and examines why larger organisations often behave in unpredictable, illogical and unethical ways.

Part 3 - **Speaking Truth to Power** - examines why it is so hard to get senior people to listen to your advice and act on it. It lists nine techniques to help you be heard, and to help you learn how to offer and receive challenge.

Part 4 - **Leading and Managing Policy Teams** - recognises that policy-making is a complex activity in today's fast-changing world. Managers need to develop strategies, aims and objectives which inspire those who work for them. This part of the book will bring together a wide range of practical leadership and management advice from experienced policy professionals.

Part 5 describes the six key strands that are typically found within the **Policy Design** process - and discusses how they might best be deployed by policy teams.

Part 6 offers important advice about effective **Consultation.**

Part 7 - **Managing Crises** - looks at policy- and decision-making under pressure and include detailed advice from those who have gone before, including examples from the Government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Part 8 - **An Introduction to Regulation** and ...

Part 9 - ... **Competition Policy** offer beginners' guides to the advantages and disadvantages of competition and its associated policy tools.

Annex A1 will help you **Understand the European Union.**

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[2] https://www.civilservant.org.uk/richborne_publishing.html#HACS

[3] And there is your first lesson. Ministers do not, of course, actually approve all training material but many will quickly prohibit the publication of any controversial material which is drawn to their attention.

Annex A2 lists and discusses the question to be considered when reviewing **the Effectiveness of Regulators.**

Annex A3 will help you incorporate advice from their **scientist and statistician colleagues** when preparing papers for ministers and other decision makers.

Now, before you investigate these specialist texts, here are some things that you must do day to day. It may all seem rather obvious but you would be surprised how many senior officials fail to operate in this way.

1.3 Openness to Ideas

Lord (Peter) Hennessy once suggested that the Civil Service might be likened to a sump into which the all-too-difficult problems fall - problems which the private sector and anyone else won't touch. But you will not find the answers to those problems in the Whitehall/Westminster bubble.

You will not have been selected to join the SCS if you did not enjoy debate, analysis and clear communication. Especially if you have been promoted from withing the civil service, you will be comfortable working at a desk, crafting an elegant submission or Cabinet paper and then networking with other senior officials. But this is dangerous. It is too narrow a world where your most important information comes only from colleagues.

So ...

You must deliberately avoid routine. Get out of the office! Get out of London. Meet new people. Novelty stimulates new ideas. Distance helps get everything into perspective.

Make sure, in particular, that you frequently talk to companies in your field, benefit claimants, teachers, nurses etc.. Do you understand the pressures they are under? Camilla Cavendish (ex-No. 10) reported that she had met health department officials who had never been inside a hospital or care home. Do not be one of those people!

More generally, the 2024 fuss over the PM's Chief of Staff's £170,000 salary highlighted the gulf between those who work in London and the majority of the population. Here's Simon Kuper:

> Keir Starmer earns £167,000. MPS get £91,346 - not much, in their London. But to almost all Britons outside London, these are fortunes. The average salary in most British regions is a bit over £30,000. The average single pensioner lives on £267 a week. It's not simply that ordinary Britons can't afford to live in London. Lots can't afford to eat dinner there. They feel like unwanted paupers in their nation's capital.

It's worth remembering, too, that only 20.2% of eligible voters voted for Labour MPs in the 2024 'landslide'. You may find that your ministers and Spads need to be gently reminded that the other 80% might be slightly less receptive to their policies than they might assume.

Do you have a good, instinctive feel for the risks that lie within your area of responsibility - and effective plans to respond to them? Sensible leaders prevent a chronic problem reaching its acute stage. They do not assume that a long period without a fire, crash, bank failure etc. means that there are no serious potential problems. As one commentator remarked about civil servants'

monitoring of the Post Office during the Horizon/Postmasters scandal: 'You can have all the heat maps and risk registers you want, but if you fail to spot the big Kahuna then either your systems are not up to the job, or you aren't.'

Do you also understand how your sector really works, and where power lies? Outsourcing, for instance, has created subcontractors who have become estranged from the central purpose of their customers so their only incentive is to make money. This encourages suppliers to become evasive if not dishonest. You need to be able to spot problems like this and adapt your policies accordingly.

Those you meet will of course want to influence your thinking. Senior officials are seen by those outside government as the embodiment of the Government's policies. It is no longer enough to be a subject specialist. You need to be a good listener, to understand the Government's policies in the round, and to be able to explain and defend them in conversation.

You should behave, at all times, in ways that show that you are trustworthy. You should not need to ask "How do I get them to trust me?".

1.4 Relationships with Colleagues

Make sure, when you change jobs, that you get thorough introductory briefings both from your predecessor *and* their boss *and* their direct reports, plus key stakeholders including those elsewhere in the same department or wider government. It is always very tempting to cut this short given the excitement of starting a new job, and the accompanying pressures. But it is vital.

Something has gone wrong if you begin to see colleagues or other departments or your stakeholders as adversaries. British decision-making - in Parliament and in the courts - uses highly adversarial systems. But government works best through consensus.

Always remember, though, that you are never on your own. Colleagues will certainly help you, if approached in the right way. Try, also, to identify those whose behaviour you can admire, and analyse it. Why/how does it work? What do they <u>not</u> do?. Then try it yourself, again and again, until it works.

Equally, though, be prepared to point out problems even if it risks upsetting a colleague. One newly appointed Permanent Secretary remarked that she feared she had joined a club whose rules were that you couldn't criticise the club once you were in it. Let's hope that she chose to disobey that particular injunction.

1.5 In the Office

Listen to your staff. Be concerned if you sense that that are uneasy or unhappy.

Look around you, too. Is everyone sensibly employed, within their capabilities, on worthwhile work? Are they spending money sensibly and communicating effectively with others? Can you easily navigate the websites that your team expect the public to use? Can you understand the detail of their guidance material?

You should of course defend your team and your policies if wrongly criticised. But you should accept justified criticism, correct any errors, make sure it won't happen again, and move on. A cover up appears much worse than the original error. Belated apologies will appear insincere.

Wrongly convicted of rape, Andrew Malkinson was spot on when criticising the head-in-the-sand attitude of the Criminal Cases Review Commission:

> "When you are truly sorry for what you have done, you respond immediately and instinctively; it wells up in you."

If you have any nagging doubts, or concerns that there may be real problems in your policy or management area, then it is for you to investigate and ensure that something is done about it. It is no longer someone else's problem - unless they clearly agree to take it on, and you are sure they will take it seriously.

- You do not want to be one of those officials who ignored the concerns of sub-postmasters such as Alan Bates. There had in this case been plenty of warning signs, ably reported in Computer Weekly and Private Eye, supported by MP James Arbuthnot. Questions were put to the Post Office but nobody spoke to the complainants. They should have been taken more seriously.
- You do not want to be the person who receives news of a very dangerous new Coronavirus having failed to rectify known weaknesses in the country's preparations for the next pandemic.
- You do not want to be the person who wakes up one morning to hear that inflammable cladding, about which your team has been warned, has killed 72 people.

1.6 Focus on Results!

You are too senior to be described as a manager or organiser. Ministers will expect you to understand their objectives (this might require some gentle interrogation) and energetically seek to get them to their chosen destination. If their objectives conflict with those of their colleagues, it is your job to help your minister resolve that conflict.

Something is going badly wrong if you are spending a significant proportion of your time in steering boards, budget meetings, monitoring expenses claims, servicing advisory boards that have outlived their usefulness, and generally micro-managing your staff. A little bit of time should of course be set aside for each of these, but they should not dominate your professional life.

And do you have the necessary financial and human resources? If not, you must say so - perhaps quietly, certainly politely and definitely persistently. You may need to plan quite carefully how to explain that you really do need more than two (or twenty) staff. But you must never pretend that that your objectives are realisable when you know that they are not.

Martin Stanley