

Improving Interoffice (District/State–DC) Relations & Communications

Obstacles to Creating Good Interoffice Relations

The challenge of creating strong working partnerships between the Washington office and the district/state offices is routinely cited by congressional offices as one of the most troubling problems they face. It is also one of the most difficult to solve because offices are frequently unclear about the cause of the problem. Members are often bewildered and disappointed that their staff don't get along well and allow matters to slip between the cracks due to breakdowns in communications. The assumption is that smart, mature and committed people with shared goals (promoting the interests and agenda of the Member) should be able to develop good working relationships and solve questions concerning jurisdiction or information-sharing. What is lost in this analysis are the three fundamental obstacles to creating effective interoffice communication and coordination between Washington and the district/state:

1. Distance
2. Different core functions
3. Drive for efficiency rather than effectiveness

Unless these problems are addressed directly, they are unlikely to go away.

The first and most obvious obstacle is that the Washington and district/state offices tend to be physically far apart, and for that reason have minimal face-to-face contact. The second obstacle is that the offices generally work on different functions (casework and outreach in the district/state vs. legislation and constituent mail in Washington). Frequently, they feel they share little in common with their colleagues in the "other" office.

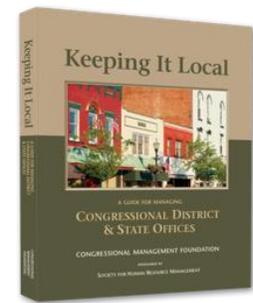
Given these differences in geography and function, the inclination of most congressional staff and their managers is to operate independently. It is much easier to make a decision in Washington than to coordinate and conduct a meeting with some of the state staff to make sure they agree with your thinking. . . and vice versa. Most people have a strong inclination to want to work efficiently. They want to get their work done as simply and with the least amount of time and energy as necessary to do a good job. Thus, the drive for efficiency is the third obstacle to good interoffice relationships. Coordinating work long-distance with colleagues who frequently have a different perspective can be time-consuming and frustrating.

Not surprisingly, many well-intentioned offices find that simply getting the work done is hard enough. Including staff from the other office into the decision-making process, or even taking the time to share what has been decided, becomes difficult. As a result, offices tend to develop work routines and patterns that exclude, rather than include, the other office, creating problems that undermine the entire office operation, including mistrust, resentment, concealing of information and poor communications. Attempts to alter these independent work patterns are often viewed as making trouble, unnecessary micro-management, "power grabs" or unrealistic and unnecessary demands.

Efficiency, however, does not always equal effectiveness. Congressional offices work most effectively when Washington and the district/state offices are working in unison. But this coordination of work takes time — the scarcest resource in Congress. So, many offices choose instead to only coordinate projects that absolutely require coordination, and share information only on a need-to-know basis.

Interestingly, CMF's survey of District and State Directors reveals that, in far too many offices, interoffice communication problems exist but are generally tolerated. A majority of House and Senate respondents was either "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the communication and cooperation between Washington and district/state operations.

Yet, "breakdowns in communications among staff" were the top choice for both the House and the Senate respondents when asked about the greatest source of problems and tensions between DC and district/state offices).



Excerpted from Chapter 3, "Reaching Goals Through Coordination and Teamwork," *Keeping It Local: A Guide for Managing Congressional District & State Offices*, © Congressional Management Foundation.

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This data suggests that while most managers are well aware of communication problems, they've resigned themselves to endure them. They may doubt whether significant improvements in communication are possible. And, even if they want to make improvements, they aren't sure how to go about it.

Techniques for Enhancing Interoffice Communications and Coordination

What can be done to prevent falling into this trap? What can a Chief of Staff or District/State Director do if independence from, and resentment of, the "other" office has already begun? The following practices can enhance office communications and improve interoffice relations

1. **Conduct annual planning sessions.** Gathering all of the personal staff together in either Washington or the district or state to develop an office-wide plan is an excellent vehicle for developing a common sense of purpose and teamwork within offices. While the main purpose of most staff planning sessions is to generate a strategic document, they are also invaluable for developing good rapport with staff from the other office. Annual planning sessions are also a prime opportunity to identify sources of communication breakdowns and develop solutions to avoid them in the future.
2. **Ensure a good Chief of Staff and District/State Director relationship exists.** There is no substitute for a solid partnership between the CoS and the DD/SD. CMF's experience and surveys of congressional offices show that many poor Washington–district/state office relationships can be traced to mistrust between their senior managers. According to the House and Senate offices that reported they have a "good" or "excellent" working relationship between the CoS and DD/SD, the keys to building trust are: (1) mutual respect and (2) open, honest and frequent communication, particularly through telephone calls. The ability to have open and ongoing dialogue is particularly important when discussing and clarifying each person's assumptions and expectations and is another critical step for preventing conflict between these two. This also will influence and help persuade the respective staffs in each office to do likewise. Other mechanisms used to clarify roles and ease communication between the CoS and DD/SD include: weekly conference calls between the Member, CoS and DD/SD; regular meetings between the Member, CoS and DD/SD management team; and establishment of joint procedures for hiring and terminating staff in Washington and the district/state.
3. **Demonstrate that the Member highly values the work of each office.** Lack of appreciation can breed resentment. Given the amount of time DC staff see the Member, a stop-by to the district or state office to express appreciation for hard work, or a job well done, and to meet with district/state staff is always helpful to morale and communication. Member visits to the district/state office may be more feasible for House offices than Senate offices, whose Members may visit home less often and usually have a larger area to cover.
4. **Ensure clarity of staff responsibilities and duties.** Lack of clarity regarding the responsibilities of staff can lead to unnecessary tensions and staff conflicts, staff uncertainty about their responsibilities and important matters falling through the cracks. Office-wide clarity about individual duties can prevent these problems. Take the time to establish clear position descriptions, resolve questions that arise regarding staff responsibilities and provide opportunities for routine review and clarification.
5. **Encourage regular staff communication and interaction.** This is critical not only for managing the overall strategic plan and large events, but for implementing routine office activities. Members and top managers in both offices should not only set an example through frequent daily communication, they should also encourage staff to do the same by identifying opportunities for staff to collaborate. For example, an LA who handles banking reform should provide all relevant congressional information to the Field Representative who meets with constituent bankers, other industries and consumer groups affected by reform. Washington staffers need to receive information on the positions of constituent groups, especially when these groups travel to DC to meet with legislative staff.

Some congressional offices follow a system in which only the DD/SD or the CoS contacts the other office for requests. In CMF's experience, this practice weakens bonds between the two staffs. One reason these offices follow such a needlessly restrictive system is that they haven't distinguished a communications channel from a command channel. While orders from one office to another should indeed follow prescribed chains of command, simple requests and information exchanges can suffer from such formality.

6. **Set expectations for and recognize staff collaboration.** If managers are consciously trying to promote an office culture that encourages staff collaboration, there must be rewards for supportive behavior and disincentives for unsupportive behaviors. For example, staff should know that their ability and willingness to "collaborate with other staff" and to "respond promptly to internal staff requests" are not only expected but important components of their jobs. Recognize and counsel staff regarding collaborations appropriately. Staff should know that collaboration and responsiveness are

part of the criteria used when evaluating all staff performance and determining promotion, raises and bonus pay. Better yet, include these criteria in all office job descriptions, the office policy manual and in annual staff performance goals. It speaks convincingly of the office's commitment to working as a coordinated team rather than independent offices and staff.

7. **Communicate often through a variety of means.** Balancing the push-pull of information in a congressional office is a commonly-cited challenge to good communications. However, most offices with good DC–district/state relationships err on the side of communicating too often, rather than not often enough. E-mail is most commonly used and is critical for keeping staff informed about the office's activities. However, offices shouldn't over-rely on any single communication method and should instead utilize whichever communications vehicle is most appropriate for the situation and desired outcome. For example, while efficient, e-mail can be misread or taken out of context due to its impersonal nature, so it is difficult to have an effective discussion through e-mail. Additional formats for communicating to and with staff include in-person meetings, conference calls, videoconferences, messaging (text and instant) and intranets. Items to communicate include the Member's schedule; updates on meetings held in DC or the district/state; press releases and op-eds; *Congressional Record* statements; replies to constituent letters on breaking issues; mail and casework reports; office planning documents; and other valuable information routinely needed by staff. Making this information accessible to all office staff should significantly reduce the volume of staff requests for information, increase the flow of critical information and free up time to discuss important matters rather than simply providing information.

Tapping Into the DC Pipeline

There is an abundance of resources — mostly online — to help Members of Congress and their staffs do their jobs better. For district/state staff, familiarizing themselves with the legislative and policy resources used by the DC staff is an invaluable way to stay informed of the latest happenings on the floor and around Washington. Listed below are some of the most popular and helpful resources.

Internal, Congressional Staff Only:

HouseNet (the House intranet) — <https://housenet.house.gov>
Congressional Research Service (CRS) — <http://www.crs.gov>
Legislative Information System (LIS) — <http://www.congress.gov>
Leadership and party officials, as well as officers of the House — various sites, easily accessible from the House intranet or the public site: www.house.gov.

External, Publicly Available:

Congressional Quarterly (CQ) — <http://www.cq.com>
National Journal — <http://www.nationaljournal.com>
Politico — <http://www.politico.com>
Roll Call — <http://www.rollcall.com>
The Hill — <http://thehill.com>
The Washington Post — <http://www.washingtonpost.com>
The Washington Times — <http://www.washingtontimes.com>

8. **Create interoffice teams to implement goals.** Washington and district/state staffers often work on similar issues: veteran's health care; infrastructure improvement; immigration reform or the environment, to name a few. How can staff maximize the impact of their work toward common or related goals? It can be accomplished by creating interoffice teams to work together throughout the year on achieving office-wide goals and coordinating their goal-related activities.
9. **Encourage cross-promotion of staff between the Washington and district/state offices.** Sometimes, a staffer in the district/state is interested in pursuing a position in the DC office, or a Washington staffer is interested in moving back to the district/state. Having DC staff with experience in district/state operations and district/state staff with firsthand knowledge about how Capitol Hill works can improve the relationship and communication between the offices. Managers should encourage their staffs to consider these options when assessing their personal and professional growth in the office. Such a move could more accurately align the staffer's position with their interests and skills, while the office benefits from the staffer's knowledge and perspective.
10. **Foster personal relationships between offices.** Good communication is built upon frequent *informal* communication. Consider this scenario:

You work in a district office and you need information on a veteran's claim from the Legislative Assistant (LA) who deals with Armed Services matters in your Member's Washington office. The LA has worked there six months and you've never met him; you've only spoken with him on the phone. In the past three days, you've called him twice,

but he hasn't returned your call. You can't help thinking that he's ignoring you and he doesn't appreciate the importance of your work.

or

You've known the LA for several years. He's originally from the state and drops by your office just to say hello whenever he visits his parents. Two years ago when you visited Washington, you got to know each other over lunches. You touch base by e-mail on issues that come up in your shared areas of expertise and now you have a good rapport. When he hasn't returned your second call in three days, you're more likely to wonder whether he's all right rather than to resent him for ignoring you.

Efforts to help Washington and district/state staffs get to know each other informally and build relationships with one another will pay off when the time comes for them to interact professionally. The resulting trust and respect are especially important given that this is a *long-distance* relationship. Ensuring coordination of day-to-day matters requires some additional practices designed to reduce misunderstandings and information gaps. The Member and top managers can encourage and create opportunities for staff interaction and communication beyond the formal annual retreats through:

- **Interoffice staff exchanges.** When establishing the annual budget, provisions should be made to cover the costs necessary for personnel to spend a week or two in the other offices shadowing various staff members while they do their jobs. The visiting staffer should be given tasks specific to that office so they understand what it's like to be a part of that environment. For example, a caseworker visiting the Washington office might be assigned to draft responses to legislative mail. This work will provide them with a better sense of the processes that go into answering mail in DC. An LA visiting the district or state office could also conduct intake interviews with constituents, or review the files of all recent cases in their issue area and identify patterns that need legislative oversight. Washington staff who aren't originally from the Member's district/state can particularly benefit from this sort of work exchange.
- **Non-working visits.** Washington staff from the district or state should be encouraged to pay an informal visit to the district or state office when they visit home. Likewise, Washington staff should enthusiastically welcome district/state staffers who visit the DC office and the nation's capital. Staffers visiting the other office can also serve as informal ambassadors, identifying and communicating concerns to their colleagues back home or in Washington.