

Government and business management

When I was first appointed a Minister I had to resign that day from Chairman of a substantial quoted industrial group of companies. The contrast between managing the one and other was extreme.

As company chairman I was conscious that I had the power to hire and fire, to reward and to promote anyone in the organisation. I was careful in anything I said to distinguish between statements of policy and company values on the one hand, and the many comments, questions and suggestions I needed to make to explore options, mentor senior managers and encourage others to take decisions. There was plenty of power to get change, with a team willing to implement when I did make decisions. The danger was someone would take an offhand or provisional remark and see it as law for the company.

As a new Minister who had the good fortune to take on a role I understood and had experience in I discovered my decisions and statements of policy and values were often in the early days taken as some kind of invitation to a debate or seminar. I always tried to be courteous to my officials. I recognised that I had no power to sack or promote most of them and anyway as in business I thought please and thank you are undervalued ways of getting things done. I saw that now I was in office I also needed to be in power. I needed to get the machine to see I wanted change in how we did things and change would produce better results.

Some thought they could get away with simply ignoring an instruction. I needed to follow up and require data to see implementation. Other times they would tell me what I wanted to do was not government policy. I would explain that I was making it government policy. As a junior Minister I had of course always checked through informal discussions with the Secretary of State that he was happy for me to do that or that I had the delegated power. Sometimes officials would then seek to force me to take a policy I thought was clearly within my power to consultation with other departments, probably hoping that in the write round I might be prevented.

The first thing I always did as a new Minister in a department was to exercise the one Ministerial freedom to choose my own Private Secretary from those available from civil service sources. In each case I found an excellent person who worked well with me and helped me get my proposals through the machinery of government. When I was concerned about the quality of an area of the work and the vulnerability of the first department I was in I took the matter privately to the Permanent Secretary. I explained the defects as I saw them, showed how if I was right and the faults caused problems there would be serious implications for him in his role as Accounting Officer for the Department as well as for me as Minister. He then made his own decision to change and strengthen personnel in the area concerned.

As a Minister I never felt short of staff or money to do what needed doing. It was always difficult to get government to close down old initiatives, discontinue out of date policies and free the resources for something else.

There was a wish for new additional money and staff for everything. There was a reluctance to conduct running audits of effectiveness and value for money. There was an unwillingness to make named senior officials responsible for specified programmes or policy implementation in the way I was used to doing in business. Officials were changed far too often, undermining their ability to advise based on experience and the development of a wide range of contacts in their area of work.