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Training / mentoring / coaching session(s) for State Secretaries (StS) – Advise from Practice

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Training / mentoring / coaching session(s) for State Secretaries (StS) – Advise from Practice

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1. Introduction

- Specificity of the position and role of state secretaries in the public administration (StS as highest ranking civil servants, StS role as managers of ministries)
- Examples of state secretaries counterparts in European countries (regulations and practice)
- Why to introduce the functions and ethos of senior civil servants in public administration from the perspective of new and old democracies
- Poland, Hungary, Germany, France

2. Problems & dilemmas and how to solve them – practical experience and examples

Between the reality of the civil service regulations and real politics

- Political influence on the selection process (...and the always possible premature termination of the mission)

As civil servants we would very much like our fate to be independent of the politics and only regulated by the civil service law. But the reality is different. It is quite easy to understand that the minister responsible for their ministry wants to exert influence on the choice of the top management. From this point of view the StS with their special competencies (taken over from the ministerial level) in the HR and financial sphere is a very important asset that is expected to play in the same team. A StS that is not accepted by the political management is almost always sentenced to an earlier than expected termination of their mission. In addition the way its mission will be prematurely terminated - in accord or in conflict with the minister – will very probably determinate their further professional carrier. For many StS this evidence becomes apparent when it is too late.

- Establishment of a “proper relation” between the state secretary and the political management of the ministry

Many StS are subject to the “Highlander-syndrome” (reference to the famous movie with Ch. Lambert). The syndrome is manifested by the conviction that

being selected in an exhaustive and complicated procedure – often among several candidates – for the highest and unique civil servant position they are not only the best qualified for the job (“there can be the only one”), but also untouchable if not immortal. Self-confidence is obviously very important in a demanding environment. Sometimes it is good to think like this about ourselves but to demonstrate this conviction to the public, especially at the very beginning after appointment exposes the StS to an almost “deadly” risk to be disliked not

only by the political management (that has been “chosen by the people” voting in elections) but also by your own staff. It is always very difficult, not only in professional life, to obliterate the first negative impression.

- State secretaries as scapegoats of mismanaged actions and situations

In comparison to the political management that is usually only the subject to political responsibility the StS have – as civil servants - very precisely defined tasks they are responsible for. This responsibility has i.e. disciplinary or financial character. It is very easy to commit a minor offense that may be a pretext for dismissal, especially in case of bad personal relations between the StS and the political management. StS are often used as scapegoats by the political management when i.e. sensible information about the ministry appear in the media. Because of the wide range of attributed competencies including financial and personal management of the ministry the StS is the ideal candidate to be blamed for every mismanagement.

- Involuntary spokesman of the ministry (government) in public situations

StS are very often put in a situation where they have to explain or even to justify to the public (parliament, media, non-governmental organizations) political decisions, activities of the ministry and the political management that they sometimes do not accept as civil servants. This might be the case of “justifying” spending of public money on strictly political aims. Ex. a) during the budgetary procedure – when Parliament is debating/accepting the realization of the budget of the last year, b) political management asking/authorizing StS to provide to the public responses to delicate/sensible issues that explained by a high ranking civil servant should lose at least a part of their political connotations.

- Encountering political and “unfulfillable” expectations

This is the usual, normal experience of every StS that is expected to take especially financial or personal decisions/activities (and risks) that are not illegal (this is a separate category) but difficult to justify taking into account the tasks of the ministry and available legal instruments/conditions as defined in respective regulations. Politicians usually do not accept the feedback that their expectations are not realisable. In situations like this, which unfortunately are never identical, you need a special sense of how to proceed. Sometimes a good

legal justification prepared by the relevant department is sufficient. However saying always “not possible” inexorably decreases your term of office.

- Directors – “allies” or “enemies” in relations with the political management?

StS very often tend to perceive other directors if not as enemies then as obviously lower ranked civil servants that do not deserve to be treated as equal partners. Demonstrating this “inferiority perception” exposes the StS at two important risks. First: to turn the lower management against him in their reciprocal business relations – a situation that might lead to the (almost collective) rejection of (almost) every ideas/projects, event those intended to improve the functioning of the ministry. Second: to (involuntarily) incite some of the directors to complain directly to the minister (political management) about the “alleged mismanagement” of the StS. StS often underestimate the fact that directors have better – closer and more regular – contacts with the political management than themselves.

- When the new minister and/or government comes....

According to the Ukrainian regulations a StS can be dismissed or released only for disciplinary or criminal reasons. It is unknown what it will look like after the coming to power of a new government (or the new minister), it is unknown because no one has practiced this yet. But there is no doubt that StS will be perceived – by the new government, new ministers – as representatives of the previous “regime”. It concerns especially those who switched from the political deputy ministers position into the civil service. To accept and further develop the righteous idea of state secretaries requires time, political culture and wide spread social conviction about the honesty of competition proceedings. Achieving this in one government term is unfortunately not possible.

After the coming into power of new government StS are being often subject to specific “loyalty tests”. It consists in the expectation of providing information compromising predecessors and/or dismissing civil servants (or moving them to usually to lower positions) with whom they have worked in past years. Being put in this kind of situation – apart from dilemmas they may cause – you should always keep in mind the you might be the next (...).

One must also remember “the principle of the mirror”, meaning posing yourself the question whether I will be able to look at me tomorrow, and also that your adventure with the administration does not end with this episode.

- Loneliness of a state secretary

Due to the fact that there are no other civil servants assuming similar position in the ministry – in comparison to deputy ministers, DGs, chiefs of expert groups – for the StS it is difficult to find somebody inside the office (usually his closest collaborators are his deputy and directors responsible for legal and financial issues) with whom he could discuss all the problems and dilemmas he is encountering. He can always try to find this kind of support among other StS

but usually only if the reciprocal relation goes beyond simple professional contacts.

State secretaries as “pressure group” to solve common problems and influence expected regulations

- How to find the necessary balance between concurrence and cooperation?

It is natural for StS to compete with each other in ways they develop their offices, but in their own interest lies the need for a healthy competition. The previous recommendations on how to make no enemies for no reason remain valid also in this respect.

- Necessity of regular exchange of information and promotion of best practices among state secretaries - common challenges and common answers

It is highly recommended to regularly exchange information, ideas on how to solve common problems, respond to new expectations of the SCMU, government, Ministry of Finance and to share best practices. Not just because it is easier to find solutions to common problems or to even challenge sometimes controversial ideas of the political management of the ministry. This should also be done, given that ministers sometimes exchange information about their StS. You can then, by surprise, be asked by your minister: "I heard that StS in the Ministry of X is doing such cool stuff, why do not we have it?". It is often difficult to answer this question right away and the next opportunity cannot always be made as quickly as expected.

It is also important to use mutual contacts to help good employees who have burned out in the current workplace to find a new job as well as to learn about the real competencies of job candidates wishing to move from other ministries.

- Creating “team spirit” and avoiding “natural” (reflecting political and substantive position of the ministry) tendency to divide colleagues in “more” and “less” important ones

Among the StS you can often observe the tendency of poorer treatment of colleagues from theoretically “less important ministries”. First observation: there are never “less important ministries”, second: such upward view on others is, of course, improper. Besides, it may happen that at the least expected moment you will need mutual solidarity in difficult situations. Finally, StS from non-mainstream ministries sometimes have more time to develop solutions and best practices that can be used by others 😊

- Establishing effective communication and articulation channels

It is very important to StS to regularly exchange information and ideas on how to solve common problems. Such meetings should also serve to formulate common expectations concerning i.e. trainings, changes in legislation or financial matters to be addressed to governmental institutions. It is worth

thinking about a common online forum where you can exchange information i.e. about employees you want to hire, public tenders, etc. It is also obvious that you need to have your cell phone numbers and be available for colleagues.

How to efficiently co-manage administrative and substantive departments/Directorates General

- How to start and avoid traps? The necessity of an appropriate and objective self-assessment

As in every managerial position you need to be aware of your strengths and weaknesses. Communicating to the environment that you have only strengths is often the first trap that StS themselves fall into. It is very difficult to get out of this trap even if you realize that you have fallen into it. Such an attitude towards other civil servants (colleagues) makes them avoid any dialogue and transmission of information that is relevant for the StS to assure smooth management of the ministry. In extreme cases, this can lead to mutual hostility.

- The better is sometimes enemy of the good

The newly employed StS, especially those who have no experience in the ministry's work, or even in the administration, have a natural inclination to introduce already in the beginnings non-discussed changes and innovations they have read elsewhere about but have never had a chance to test in practice. Such situations often lead to internal conflicts, endless meetings, and usually to the adoption of hybrids of the original idea or something that is completely opposite to the initial intentions. Such situations are never good for the ministry. Many of these innovations quickly become forgotten and are no longer used after a while.

- How to establish good relations with directors and why it is so important?

See above (...)

- How to find the best balance between administrative and substantive tasks and departments/DGs?

It seems that the StS concept adopted in Ukrainian regulations, which simultaneously makes the StS responsible for both – substantive and "organizational" tasks – has several limitations and may or even should be rethought in the future. In no European country where the civil service is functioning, the tasks of the highest ranked sc go so far into the realm of ministerial substantive entities. This is mainly due to the conviction that good management of the office requires a focus on financial, organizational, human resources issues and proper organization of public tenders. Additionally, co-management of substantive issues, that may be controversial and contested by parties who are not in power at present, may in the future significantly reduce

the chances to survive the change of government. It gives newly appointed ministers additional arguments to get rid of unwanted collaborators.

Financial and other obstacles in promoting and attracting best civil servants

- Diagnosis of disparities

When coming to the ministries/taking over their positions, StS often find out incomprehensible and disturbing situations of significant wage disparities between organizational units and even among civil servants holding the same positions. They are often a source of employees frustration (it is especially worse when it hits the best civil servants) and a bad atmosphere at work. Due to the generally limited financial resources, the possibility of compensating these disproportions is also limited even there where it is deemed necessary. From this point of view, the current reform and increase of the wage budget constitutes an important if not a unique opportunity to even partially remedy this situation. At the same time, it is also feared that it could further aggravate existing disparities to the detriment of functioning of the ministries.

- How to overcome financial and other limitations to hire best people? State secretaries role in promoting good reputation of ministries – which instruments to use?

The answers to these questions lies in their formulation. Ministries have to be considered as business brands that have a value for the environment and potential employees. It distinguishes them - in the perception of present and future employees - not only by objective factors like “size” and “importance within the government” or “the implementation of AA/DCFTA”, that are decisive for shaping their prestige, but also by the subjective perception determined by widely understood working conditions. This is the crucial sphere that depends on StS. It is up to their creativity and initiative whether their ministry will be just another factory where people only come after pay or where ambitious people willing to work for the their country can find best chances for their self-fulfilment.

It has to be underlined that nowadays StS do not need unlike ministers, to have their own communication responsible people or departments to promote good reputation. Today it is important to know how to use social media.

- A few cases from practical experience

3. The role of state secretaries in AA/DCFTA implementation

- Why is coordination necessary?
- A short overview of coordination systems in European countries
- Brief assessment of the Ukrainian coordination system made within the A4U project

- Introduction of Directorates General – problems that may arise in daily and strategic management
- How to assure necessary intra- and inter-ministerial coordination
- Importance of proper recruitment mechanisms and procedures

4. Possible A4U assistance for state secretaries

- Enforcement of managerial and institutional capacities through i.e. ad hoc consultations, trainings and dedicated mentoring/coaching sessions
- Review over intra-ministerial coordination procedures and mechanisms and preparation of recommendations

5. Discussion (followed by – if requested – individual meetings, coaching/mentoring sessions)

Please specify to us your needs, if any!

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