

CHAPTER TWENTY



Inspectors General

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By Earl Devaney

New administration appointees are usually surprised to learn that their department/agency Inspector General (IG) was not selected by the incoming President. It is much more likely that the incumbent IG has served under a number of previous administrations. While it is true that most IGs are appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate, only President Reagan attempted to remove all the IGs at the outset of his administration. The resulting firestorm of negative publicity has since served to make new presidents extremely reluctant to expend the political capital necessary to replace the independent “watchdogs” who, by law, report to both the administration and Congress.

But, before you can understand how to work with IGs, you first need to understand their role. Unfortunately, this is easier said than done. There is an old adage in Washington that, “If you’ve seen one IG, you’ve seen one IG.” In truth, while IGs are all selected without regard to political affiliation, they come from an extremely wide variety of professional experiences and backgrounds and they are all different. There is, however, one common denominator shared by each and every IG that is the key to understanding how to foster a good working relationship with them: Independence is a key element of all the laws creating the IG function.

The aforementioned dual reporting relationship makes the typical IG value his or her independence above all other personal attributes. Even the perceived lack of independence has been enough reason for the Senate to reject some IG nominees. Armed with this knowledge and coupled with the following four tips, you can achieve a very productive working relationship.

Tip One: Your First Meeting is Key

This should be one of the first meetings any newly appointed official schedules and it is recommended that it be held in the IG’s office. By going to the IG’s office, a new appointee signals his or her sincere interest in establishing a respectful working relationship. The normal response to this gesture is often a more candid first conversation about what problems the IG knows you are inheriting from your predecessor. It is also a subtle way of acknowledging the IG’s independence from the rest of the organization. While it is critical that this relationship gets off on a friendly basis, it is equally important to remember that most IGs are not looking to make new friends. The experienced IG strives to be independent, firm, and fair without regard to political influence. Most recognize that if you want to be popular, the IG job is not one to have.

Tip Two: Set Expectations

An experienced IG should promise you no surprises. That does not mean you will always know who or what an IG is investigating, but it does mean you shouldn't have to read about it first in *The Washington Post*. In addition, IGs should promise to be very responsive to matters you bring to their attention and to provide you with their results as thoroughly and expeditiously as possible.

In return, you should tell the IG that you understand and value the IG's independence and you understand that sometimes delivering bad news is part of their difficult role. It is also important to tell the IG you have an open door policy and that you do not expect the IG to have to work through your subordinates.

Tip Three: Be Aware of IG Resource Issues

An underfunded budget and a shortage of staff in the IG's office are never in the best interest of the agency. Regardless of how uncomfortable some of the IG's reports have been, it is in both parties' interest to ensure that the IG's work maintains its integrity and high quality, unimpeded by a lack of resources. It is clearly in the administration's best interest if the IG is able to embrace new technologies and keep pace with added program complexities. To that end, the administration should make every effort to support the IG's budget request to OMB and Congress.

Tip Four: Understand How to Respond to IG Reports

Your agency usually gets to comment on a draft IG audit report but rarely, if ever, on an IG investigative report. Often the IG may be willing to make changes before issuing the final version of an audit report and will include the agency's comments in an appendix. The final audit report will also include the

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agency's formal agreement or disagreement with the IG's recommendations. It is important to remember that agreements to IG recommendations are carefully tracked. Failure to follow up on those recommendations can prove to be very embarrassing to agency officials later at congressional hearings.

Because investigative reports are normally criminal in nature, they are never shared before being issued. However, that does not mean that the IG can't give agency officials a heads-up that such a report is imminent.

Conclusion

The working relationship with IGs is a major challenge for any new administration official and a delicate balancing act for the IG. Inherent in that relationship is a natural tension, but that doesn't mean the relationship needs to be adversarial. There undoubtedly will be disagreements but they don't need to be disagreeable. Developing a working relationship with IGs is hard work, but the return on investment is well worth the effort.

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