

Becoming an MP

Helena Cooper-Thomas considers the transition into the role, and how this compares with other workplaces

Politics fascinates us. What politicians do – both in their public and private lives – fills media columns and is the subject of everyday conversation. Yet how much do we know about the role of an MP? And more importantly, how do politicians themselves figure out how to be an MP?

questions

What role should colleagues ideally play in new employee adjustment?

Who is in the best position to evaluate MP performance? Whips, colleagues, the media or the public?

As psychologists, our knowledge should be based on good research evidence. Can we trust the media to provide trustworthy evidence?

resources

Bauer, T.N., Bodner, T., Erdogan, B. et al. (2007). Newcomer adjustment during organizational socialization. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 92(3), 707–721.

Cooper-Thomas, H.D. & Silvester, J. (2014). *Ideas and advice to accelerate the transition for new MPs entering New Zealand's House of Representatives*. Available at tinyurl.com/kaa5wkl

Saks, A.M., Uggerslev, K.L. & Fassina, N.E. (2007). Socialization tactics and newcomer adjustment. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 70(3), 413–446.

Newcomers to any role have to manage a transition, and how they do this is a fascinating topic for us psychologists. Members of Parliament surely have one of the swiftest transitions in being expected to perform their role competently, and under intense scrutiny. From day one, everything they say in the House is recorded for posterity and their actions at select committee are visible to the media and public. They are expected to engage with the media and the public, but only in ways that benefit their party, and not too little or too much. And even politicians in their own party are both colleagues and rivals. How do they manage all this?

“new MPs need to be proactive to fathom out the role”

The power and teeth of the party

While there are constant improvements in the formal training provided to politicians (Rush & Giddings, 2011), much of the requisite knowledge can only be learned informally. My interview research with UK MPs, along with Jo Silvester (Silvester & Cooper-Thomas, 2012), revealed two main channels for newcomer adjustment: the new MP themselves acting and reflecting on their experiences, and support or learning provided by experienced colleagues.

As a resource themselves, new MPs need to be proactive to fathom out the role. As one UK MP noted in reflecting on their experiences, you have to ‘be motivated enough to put yourself through an apprenticeship of your own making’. With regard to assistance from colleagues,

party whips are extremely knowledgeable about how Parliament works and are a potential resource. Whips are responsible for party discipline, in particular managing voting, and in their aim of maintaining party cohesion they may try to influence new MPs using reward (such as information or help) and punishment (e.g. allocation of portfolio work that is more laborious or lower profile). In our UK research, one experienced MP highlighted the contrast in whips’ treatment of new MPs from the campaign trail to entering Parliament, stating ‘Up to that point they [new MPs] will have received nothing but goodies from the Party – now they begin to feel the power and the teeth of the Party’. Colleagues of new MPs may prove similarly unpredictable: an experienced UK MP

remarked: ‘No one should pander to the needs of new MPs.’ Echoing this, a new MP observed: ‘It took me 12 months learning who I could trust, learning that

you’re being told things that are useful to others – not you – that you’re being used.’ Unsurprisingly, in the ultimate of political environments, new MPs must learn to manoeuvre carefully and keep their wits about them.

New employee adjustment

Interviews with UK MPs reveal a fascinating glimpse of the complex environment that new MPs enter and the need for them to proceed cautiously, yet bravely. This contrasts with the long history of research on what is known as organisational socialisation, that is, the process of getting new employees up to speed in their roles (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979).

Historically, organisational socialisation research has investigated highly structured contexts, including recruits starting in the police, military, healthcare, accountancy and other

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Advice for new employees

In any new role, whether starting as an MP, psychologist or PhD student, there are various paradoxes to resolve. Here are some evidence-based suggestions.

1. Investing effort early on to build good relationships with colleagues can save time later. Accept and offer social invitations to go for coffee or lunch so that you can learn through your colleagues, and in particular, get access to the 'hidden' information about how things are done. Try to establish a broad network of relationships – experienced colleagues know how things really work, whereas newer colleagues may have recently acquired solutions to problems that you are about to face.
2. Ask questions. People expect newcomers to have some knowledge gaps that they need to fill. You will look more foolish if you ask later.
3. Choose effective role models. These may vary across the different parts of your job – one colleague may be particularly good at public speaking; another may be good at liaising with stakeholders. Observe what works well and adopt similar strategies where these suit.
4. Be brave and get on with the 'doing' part of the role. Everyone makes mistakes, and colleagues are more likely to overlook these when you are new. Accept that you will sometimes slip up, hope that it will not be too public, and get going.

professional services (e.g. Bauer & Green, 1998; Cooper-Thomas & Anderson, 2002). Meta-analyses confirm that newcomers whose organisation provides a structured socialisation process report better outcomes (Bauer et al., 2007; Saks et al., 2007). These include more immediate outcomes of self-efficacy, role clarity, and perceived social integration and fit, as well as more distal attitudinal outcomes of job satisfaction, organisational commitment, job performance and intent to stay. Hence the traditional focus has been on how organisations have delivered learning, via experienced colleagues, that enables newcomers to rapidly integrate into the organisation, perform their role and think and behave like their experienced colleagues (Thomas & Anderson, 1998).

The importance of proactive behaviour
With the rise of the service economy, fewer organisations recruit newcomers as a cohort to perform a single role in a prescribed manner. Moreover most newcomers enter organisations with work experience. Consequently, organisations have less reason to offer structured training programmes that shape neophyte

workers entering similar roles. Newcomers must take responsibility for their own adjustment in many settings, including politics.

In line with this, researchers have increasingly focused on what newcomers can achieve through their own proactive behaviours. These behaviours include seeking information and feedback, socialising with colleagues, networking, role modelling off senior colleagues and developing a good working relationship with one's manager. When newcomers behave more proactively, they report more learning and understanding of their role, more positive attitudes including job satisfaction and work engagement, and greater well-being (Cooper-Thomas & Burke, 2012; Cooper-Thomas et al., 2014; Saks et al., 2011).

The role of colleagues
Alongside newcomer proactive behaviour, newcomers' colleagues play an important role in newcomer adjustment. In constructive work environments, colleagues both act as a resource for proactive behaviour – for example, answering questions or providing a role model – and actively support newcomers

to learn about their role, team and the organisation more broadly. For newcomers, having supportive colleagues is associated with higher levels of proactive behaviour and positive attitudes more broadly (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013; Nifadkar et al., 2012).

However, there is a potential dark side to colleagues' behaviours towards newcomers. Recent research conducted in law firms, call centres, and universities (investigating non-faculty staff) found that senior colleagues can be verbally aggressive, undermining and can sometimes pressure newcomers to behave against their values. In turn, newcomers provide less help to colleagues, experience higher ethical conflict and emotional exhaustion, perform less well and are more likely to quit (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2012; Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013; Nifadkar et al., 2012).

The other side of the world

The combination of our initial research with UK MPs, the increasing prevalence of individualised newcomer adjustment paths plus the emerging evidence of negative collegial behaviours suggested

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there was much more to be learned from investigating the experiences of new politicians. More specifically, although most politicians start as part of a post-election cohort, there is no structured apprenticeship. The reality is that they have to hit the ground running and be competent in their role from day one, or at least appear so. This individualised, self-motivated transition is the reality for many newcomers across roles and industries nowadays, and therefore it is important to understand and subsequently optimise the process for the benefit of both newcomers and organisations. Additionally, given our glimpse of the highly negative behaviours from new UK MPs' political colleagues, we considered that the partisan context of politics could be especially revealing for understanding the negative experiences of newcomer politicians.

Our recent research was conducted in New Zealand (NZ), which has a single House of Representatives (commonly called 'Parliament') and mixed member proportional voting. This means that parties have both electorate and list politicians, and each voter has two votes – one for their preferred political party and one for their preferred electorate MP. We studied new MPs entering the 50th Parliament in 2011. Of 121 MPs, we interviewed 23 of 28 new MPs across four political parties.

A report on this research (see tinyurl.com/kaa5wkl) was written for participant new MPs, future new MPs and those responsible for helping new MPs to adjust (e.g. civil servants, party whips; Cooper-Thomas & Silvester, 2014). Here we focus on the paradoxes that new MPs have to navigate, identifying three particularly tricky issues:

- | balancing the roles of competent versus novice politician;
- | working alongside yet competing with colleagues; and
- | being present but not dominant in the media.



New Zealand parliament building

Balancing the roles of competent versus novice politician

New MPs need to look competent immediately to confirm to the public and their own political party that they selected well. In other words, they need to be an MP from day one. While many new MPs emphasised the importance of listening and watching how others acted in order to learn, often they did not have the luxury of time. As an example, one MP said that following your 'maiden' speech in the House (the debating chamber), 'the next day you could be put in the House and speaking on a bill you know absolutely nothing about, that you've no experience of, and don't know why it's there'.

New MPs needed to act in order to fulfil their role, but every action could reveal either competence or naivety. Two types of proactive behaviour illustrate these tensions. The first of these behaviours is asking questions. While asking questions *might* allow MPs to gain the specific information required, this was not guaranteed, and even asking a question reveals ignorance; yet speaking without knowing an issue well is extremely risky. 'If you don't know something you don't necessarily want to admit it, depending on what the issue is. ...there is that tension, you don't want to look stupid by being ignorant but equally you can show great ignorance by having not actually engaged with people, and you can put your foot right in it.'

A second proactive behaviour mentioned by new MPs was the importance of just getting on with it and

having a go, known as experimenting or trial and error in the research literature. Some new MPs reported that they were advised by more experienced MPs to have a go and just get on with it, while others felt that MPs were defined by their actions, hence it was critical to get on with doing. According to one new MP 'when you're new you can get away with a few things and you'll learn'. Indeed, because much of the informal etiquette is not written down anywhere, such as behaviour in the House, much learning occurred through coming up against the rules, sometimes by mistakenly transgressing them. In line with this, small errors were common: during my interviews with new MPs, when I asked if they would do anything differently if they were new again, almost all had something they would change, however small.

Working alongside yet competing with colleagues

Politics is all about relationships, hence new MPs need to establish rapport with colleagues in order to learn and be successful. While new MPs need help from colleagues to figure things out, alongside this experienced politicians are careful about who to help – they do not want to be associated with new MPs who are needy or fail to adjust, and they may limit their assistance to new MPs who look too competent as this could accelerate these new MPs becoming competitors for positions and perks such as preferred portfolios, chairs of committees, or delegations overseas. Hence one new MP identified the caucus environment as particularly demanding: 'You go in there and you're colleagues and friends but you're also rivals. And so it's not unique I mean, most workforces are like that as well, and there's an element to it, but the rivalry I suppose is a little bit more intense.' As this new MP notes, this rivalry is not unique – in any team, members may be competing for perks, resources or the next promotion. Professional (and sometimes amateur) sports teams provide another clear example of this where players compete to be picked for matches. But the intensity of the competition seems unique to politics. Within political parties there is a constant comparison and vying for opportunities: 'It's quite a fiercely competitive environment, we're competing for resources... for media attention... for questions... when the House is sitting.'

Yet in spite of this rivalry, new MPs recommended some level of cautious trust with colleagues. While noting 'look it's politics, you're not necessarily trusting

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everyone 100 per cent', new MPs affirmed the value of having colleagues to talk with. Several new MPs suggested this should be a single person: 'Find somebody – go off your gut who that person is ... I'm not saying that you trust them with your secrets, I'm just saying that they are a person that you can go to to bounce ideas off. Because at the end of the day this is not an environment of trust.' In line with this, new MPs reported that much of their learning was through informal conversations, both within and across political parties. Examples of when such conversations took place between MPs included casual chats on evenings when Parliament was in session, visits to electorates, and on overseas delegations.

Being present but not dominant in the media

The third area of paradox facing new MPs was how to manage the tensions of needing personally to have a sufficient media presence so that the public could see you being effective as an MP, while allowing senior politicians to have a greater public profile for the overall benefit of the party. There were risks of too little or too much media presence. Too few column inches and you were invisible and could lose opportunities and even fail to be reselected by your party. Too many column inches and you could be seen as overstepping the mark by senior politicians, and in that way stymie your career.

The case of a junior MP working within a portfolio illustrates this conundrum. Junior MPs are often assigned preparatory work on an issue within their portfolio. They then brief a senior MP who presents the issue publicly. One new MP talked about her media experience with regard to a particular issue that she had worked extremely hard on and was passionate about: 'I'm the *portfolio* spokesperson, but we kicked that upstairs to the leader, because one it raises their profile but it also gives it [the portfolio] extra *mana* [*mana* is Maori meaning power or status] with the media as well'. Yet this same MP noted the consequent harm from her lack of presence in the media, with a prominent blogger calling her invisible, and her frustration that she could not defend herself because her work on the portfolio was indeed concealed.

While the previous example is from an opposition MP, the same quandary faces government MPs: 'As a government backbencher, on the one hand, basically if you're in the news you're in trouble, is the basic mantra for a government backbencher. They want the Prime

Minister to be in the news, and the Ministers, not backbenchers getting in the way. But at the same time, if after three years you haven't been seen to do anything... or been in the news, then the public will say, "Well who is this turkey, what has he been doing?" So again, there's a fine line to being... not getting in the way, but being sufficiently visible. And any direction you go, it's all a tricky balancing act, trying to get the right line.'

Insights from New Zealand MPs

As noted above, this research with MPs new to NZ's Parliament was motivated both by the increasing prevalence of individualised newcomer adjustment paths and the emerging evidence of negative collegial behaviours across various industries, including our own research in UK politics. Firstly, with regard to negative behaviours, while new NZ MPs commonly noted a lack of trust, we were surprised to find no hints of the manipulative behaviour evident in our UK MP research. There was slim evidence for false information, with one new MP commenting: 'Oh, yeah you get bullshit from some of the opposition MPs, basically trying to feed you false information but it's fairly obvious.' A handful of MPs had also been unpleasantly surprised by what they saw as vicious and unnecessary attacks on them in the House or other public forums, but viewed this as petty oppositional politics, making personal attacks to try and damage the opposition party. Overall, there was not the same undercurrent of manipulation as in the UK interviews.

When I asked about this, several new MPs suggested that because NZ's Parliament has so few MPs overall, and everyone knows each other, MPs could not risk spreading malicious information or being underhand because they would quickly be found out and tarnish their reputation. Indeed, related to this, many new MPs reported being surprised at how collegial inter-party relations were, and noted how this enabled NZ's Parliament to run more smoothly (the exception being aggressive debates in the House).

Secondly, picking up on the idea of individualised socialisation, MPs noted that there were many ways to be an MP. Some chose to prioritise the role of legislator, others worked primarily as a problem solver within their electorate, while others campaigned for progress on specific portfolios, such as the economy, health or transport. These were all acceptable ways of being successful in the role. Equally, this may be true in many service roles nowadays, whereby

there is no one right way to provide a service. It also meshes with the potential obsolescence of structured organisational socialisation programmes and the need for more flexible provision of resources for adjustment (Saks & Gruman, 2012).

In politics as in many other environments, there is no one clear route to success and no rule book covering all eventualities. This confirms how important it is for newcomers to figure it out for themselves, while also weighing up advice from experienced colleagues. As one MP observed with regard to learning about the informal aspects of how Parliament worked: 'It's an absolute mystery in some respects. For example around promotion, when a Minister resigns, or someone like that, that leads to somebody replacing them and that leads to a reshuffle amongst the chairmen, select committees and so forth. Whether to lobby openly for a job or just to be quiet and let your experience tell the story, you know there's endless theories from different people and people will tell you the opposite thing. What works and what doesn't work... there's no... [laugh]... there's no set rule.' This reveals the complexities of becoming and being an MP, and the need for individual politicians to navigate their own path. New employees in other contexts face many of these same conundrums of how to be successful, and similarly must deal with conflicting advice and figure out which proactive behaviours work for them. Hence while research with new politicians is fascinating as an extreme environment, it is useful also for the insights it provides for newcomers in general.

Concluding thoughts

Being an MP is hard work (Weinberg, 2012), but becoming an MP is arguably harder. For myself, before starting research in politics, my knowledge of MPs was through the lens of the media. Interviewing new MPs and frankly discussing the highs and lows of their newcomer experiences gave me an unexpected appreciation and respect for what they put themselves through. Of all newcomer adjustment processes, the path of new MPs is one of the most complex and fascinating.



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