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Mercedes Cardona

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# Yale Program on Financial Stability

## Lessons Learned

Jenni LeCompte

By Mercedes Cardona

*Jenni LeCompte was deputy assistant secretary in charge of public affairs operations at the Treasury Department during the Global Financial Crisis and later became assistant secretary, public affairs. She coordinated communications, served as a spokesperson, and advised Secretary Timothy Geithner during the crisis. This “Lessons Learned” is based on an interview with Ms. LeCompte.*

### **Find the right mix of channels for your message.**

Information is now being disseminated in real time and over social media; those factors have to be included in communications plans. But some of those channels are not conducive to thoughtful policy discussions. LeCompte advised that communicators should find “the balance of the platforms and the formats that you can engage on, that are accessible and nimble but also appropriate for Treasury, that do allow a little bit more space and context around what you re communicating.”

The Treasury Department “is always going to be more reserved . . . just because of the market-moving nature of so much of the work that is happening there,” said LeCompte. Communications will continue to evolve, but it will always be “a bit of a unique entity,” she continued:

It’s impossible to say what the communications environment looks like when the next crisis hits, but try to find that balance of what vehicles allow you to move nimbly *and* give you the space to explain substance. To make sure that you are getting context and the meat of the policy out there but doing so in ways that are not constrained to the extent that Twitter does for characters and that kind of thing.

The department eventually launched its own Treasury Notes blog, which allowed the staff to share information in more depth, but at a faster speed.

Dipping our toes in the social media waters at the time, the blog really did emerge as a very key tool, because it allowed us to do shorter posts, move things a little bit more nimbly, and with more color than just a press release could. We could do some more opinion writing from some of our top officials, without necessarily needing to go through the gates of an op-ed page editor or the like.

### **To build up your team, draft key insiders and demand head count.**

LeCompte was one of the first appointees who arrived with Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner in January 2009, with the transition to the new administration. Because the communications department was relatively small, with few career staff and with all of the

appointees from the Bush administration departing, the group was “severely understaffed right out of the gate.”

LeCompte praised Michele Davis, head of communications for former Secretary [Hank] Paulson, with facilitating the transition and helping “bridge some of that connectivity,” but the team never had enough staff to handle the volume of media during the crisis. “True fact, that our spokesperson for TARP would get up and go to the men’s room and come back and have an entirely full voicemail box,” she recalled. Further, she said:

We needed to load up our team in terms of staff. But even then, expand to have additional spokespeople who could help field the inquiries, be engaging on a regular and accessible fashion with the reporters. [Mean]while working internally with the policy teams to try to work along the way to get smart on the policy, so that we were well poised to explain it when it was ready to be put forward.

LeCompte stressed that the communications staff must get up to speed while at the same time learning the lay of the land. “Trying to find the road forward from a standing start is a tough bar to achieve,” she said. Her recommendation: “Bring as many veterans to the effort as possible and really push to have the resources within the department that are going to give you the muscle to meet the moment.” She saw this eventually happen at Treasury:

There was, from the beginning to the end of the Obama administration, definitely growth in the public affairs team that we had at Treasury. I think that was a good investment in terms of giving as much capacity to that team as possible to do a really important function in normal times, but also, especially in those crisis moments.

### **Insist that Communications has a seat at the table and dedicate bodies to public education.**

Communications is not always an administrative priority, especially in the middle of a crisis. Public affairs needs to be up to speed with the resources and information to explain policy and decisions to the press and, through them, to the public. The communications staff needs to be able to speak with authority and knowledge. LeCompte expounded:

Very frequently, policies would be finalized moments before we were moving them out to the press. So the job of the communicators was to sort of digest and learn in almost real time, as we were explaining to reporters. It was certainly not an ideal circumstance, but definitely something that the pace and the heat of the moment brought upon us, like it or not.

Secretary Geithner was not a natural communicator coming into the office (he would say that himself, says LeCompte) and freeing him and other officials to appear on television or brief reporters was a challenge in the middle of the crisis. However, such challenges must be addressed in the most efficient manner, LeCompte suggested:

Determine the key spokespeople, beyond the secretary, for the effort. Do those individuals sit within the policy teams? Do they sit within public affairs? Is it a combination of the two? But making sure that those resources are dedicated somewhere, so that it really can be a robust effort to communicate externally about what you're doing in a really informed way, while still giving the space to the people who need to spend the time doing the policy itself. That's no easy thing, but obviously something that needs a ton of attention.

LeCompte stressed that the responsibility of the public voice/face "cannot be the secretary alone" and that the work of explaining the policies cannot be done exclusively on background: "You have to get out there and do a chunk of it on the record, too."

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