

10 Things to Remember When

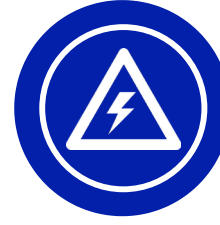
WORKING WITH EU COMMISSION STAFF

1. COMPLIANCE



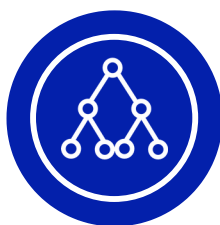
COM staff must comply with financial, ethical, and other rules and guidelines. These are valued above all else, and may limit COM staff flexibility regarding your project, even when they personally would want to be more flexible.

6. MINIMIZING RISK



COM staff tend to place great emphasis on low risk solutions. For instance, creative marketing, event ideas or copywriting may get pushback if they're considered too 'edgy' or may risk triggering a social media backlash, even if you are convinced that they're excellent.

2. HIERARCHY



Be mindful that the multiple layers of hierarchy in the COM can have a major impact on various aspects of your work:

a. Approval:

The multiple steps and layers of the approval process, in which various managers / department heads take part, will impact feedback and deadlines. Do not expect a 24-hour turnaround for issues involving significant budget implications, internal political discussions, or project scope change.

b. Chain of command:

Circumventing a project manager and going straight to their head of unit, or director, may not go down well if an official feels they're being sidelined, especially if a dispute or conflict is at stake. Don't antagonize anyone unnecessarily.

c. CC'ing:

Think twice when to cc (or not) a manager/staffer, especially if your message is critical of someone or something.

7. VISIBILITY



While it is normal to praise/thank someone for their good work, be mindful not to put your COM interlocutor in an uncomfortable position in front of their superiors when giving them credit. Keep in mind that COM officials need to get prior approval when their name appears on a publication outside the scope of their work, so if you want to give someone public credit, make sure they've approved it beforehand.

8. TRANSPARENCY



Most of your emails and written communication, including meeting notes, will be recorded/archived, and may be disclosed to the public under a freedom of information request, so choose your words/comments/commitments carefully.

3. UNEQUAL PARTNERSHIP



You are an external stakeholder who's expected to follow the COM's instructions, even if your ideas/solutions are objectively better. Don't try to assert yourself above your client, but do remain assertive and positive in your communication.

9. LEGITIMACY



The COM is struggling with a legitimacy crisis among a section of EU citizens; it's trying hard to do 'the right thing' and 'what's popular', but these two often do not overlap. If you help them with this challenge, they'll be forever grateful (and award you more projects).

4. DIVERSITY



COM staff come from 28 countries (even after Brexit ☹️, at least for a while), and their cultural background/diversity has a major impact on their values, communication style, deadlines, and expectations towards external stakeholders like you (read the book "The Culture Map" to learn more).

5. MOTIVATION



At the kick-off meeting, try to understand the core motivations of your COM interlocutors, and always try to look for win-win situations where you can provide valuable input. This will lead to a better understanding of your advocacy goals.

10. MESSAGING



a. **Channel:** Be mindful of communication methods and channels. They should depend on the type of communication and the *desired outcome*:

- **For controversial issues:** phone calls or meetings are best (followed by a brief written memo to confirm what has been agreed).
- **For open-ended complex questions or brainstorming:** phone calls (for less complicated issues) or meetings (for the truly challenging ones) are best, with action items or minutes noted.
- **To share updates or exchange information:** email (with numbers/bullets) is best. Try to keep your email short and to the point. You are more likely to receive a response in a timely manner if they can read, review and address your requests quickly and easily.

b. **Proactivity:** Open-ended questions in an email may take a long time to get answered. Instead, anticipate and insert A-B-C scenarios in your email to make it easy for the recipient to decide. No matter what problem arises, your interlocutor is likely to be a very busy person and will appreciate an easy-to-decide approach. It should also result in you getting a quicker response.

c. **Empathy:** Anticipating objections or reservations and addressing them upfront can go a long way to getting buy-in. It will also reduce email back and forth between you. (An example of this approach is, "I understand you might disagree with this idea because it's too costly. On the other hand, it saves significant amounts in the mid-term already").

d. **Language:** Ask, but don't demand ("I'd be grateful to receive" vs. "Can you please send me"). Whenever possible, say "thank you" instead of apologizing ("Thank you for your patience regarding my reply.")