

They're Not Just for the President: The Role of the Chief of Staff in a Property Office

By Lana El Eryan, CPPS



Your organization likely has a President, a CEO, and a CFO -- but is there a person who holds the position of “Chief of Staff, Property Office”? The answer, most likely, is no. Chiefs of Staff are generally found in the office of the President or a member of Congress, but an article recently published in *Fortune* magazine discusses how all types of

organizations are naming Chiefs of Staff at the highest level. This article will discuss the main functions and duties of a Chief of Staff and subsequently, why a “Chief of Staff, Property Office” is a necessary position within any organization. Property professionals have known for years what those working in other industries are just beginning to

realize: personal property is crucial to mission execution for every facet of every organization. From federal agencies, to private corporations, to universities and beyond, virtually every person in every organization needs equipment to be able to do their job. Hence, the functions of the Property Office are mission-critical and integral to the operations of

every organization, and can range from executing day-to-day tasks, to establishing organizational policies, to gaining insight into the use of property, to communicating property-related information throughout the organization.

However, we only seem to notice how crucial a smooth-functioning Property Office is during times of crisis-- when something is needed and can't be located, when our equipment isn't functioning properly, or when an external inquiry or audit requires immediate action. So how are all of these duties of an effective Property Office accomplished while mitigating risks and maintaining smooth operations?

The answer requires an investigation into the composition of a typical property office. A property office generally includes staff who create policy, staff who manage physical property, and an individual who manages the staff and office functions, commonly referred to as the "Property Manager." The Property Manager is focused on positioning property strategically within the organization and defining the requirements for the next set of tasks that must be executed. The policy staff is strictly focused on defining policy, and the organization's property custodians are busy on the ground, executing the day-to-day tasks of managing the organization's property. Which of these players, then, manages the development of messages, packaging of information and dissemination of that information to other parties within the organization? Who controls access to the Property Manager? Who ensures that the Property Manager has insight into the use of property in the field? Who ensures that policies are enforced throughout the organization? With each team focused on its individual objectives, a gap remains that must be filled by a team member who will assume the responsibility of keeping

the operations running while regulating the information coming into and going out of the Property Office. Enter the Chief of Staff whose main purpose is to act as both a liaison with other groups within the organization and as a "filter" to control what information flows into the Property Office (specifically, to the Property Manager). Additionally, the Chief of Staff is tasked with ensuring that the policy set forth by the Property Manager is adhered to. Chances are that you already have a person who fills this role, your 'go-to' person, whose title could be Inventory Control Specialist, so why not name this position what it truly is?

Any person who employs a Chief of Staff will likely testify to the fact that it is an indispensable position. By managing certain tasks and activities, the Chief of Staff allows a President or a CEO to tune out the noise and to identify those matters that truly require their attention and action. Let's take a look at some of the functions of a Chief of Staff, and, subsequently, why this position is integral to any Property Office. It seems so logical to us that a President or CEO would establish a Chief of Staff for these reasons, but few of us have considered what a Chief of Staff could potentially do for a Property Manager.

Because property affects everyone in an organization, at any point in time, anyone from any office can be reaching out to the Property Office to request information. For example, the Chief Information Officer of an organization might ask for a list of all laptops assigned to employees in a particular region, the Chief Financial Officer may need insight into all capital assets acquired and put in service for a particular fiscal year, and the Contracts Office can reach out for a last minute policy clarification to include in a bid that is due in two hours. The Property Manager, who may currently be

focused on another issue, such as ensuring that all property is procured for use in a building, will likely not be able to respond in a timely manner to these requests that are streaming in, let alone be able to focus on the daily operations of the Property Office. The operations of the property team require a unique individual who will keep the office running smoothly at all times, by maintaining communications coming into and going out of the office and allowing the property team members to focus on their specific missions and objectives.

Like most Chiefs of Staff, the Chief of Staff for the Property Office will wear many hats and act in several capacities on any given day. Therefore, it is imperative that he or she establish good working relationships throughout the organization to ensure that Property Office activities have stakeholder buy-in; that the activities are effectively communicated throughout the organization, and that issues are mitigated and addressed so that tasks can be completed on time. To this end, the Chief of Staff will also fill the role of Property Office Communications Manager. The ability of the Chief of Staff to determine the best way to communicate projects, updates and changes translates into how well these projects are received and executed by the participants. Additionally, by filtering incoming communications through a Chief of Staff, this individual can address issues as appropriate and direct those requiring specific attention to the correct person for resolution, thereby increasing the efficiency of the property team while controlling access to the Property Manager. Overall, the Chief of Staff will essentially function as the Property Office Operations Manager. While the Property Manager is focused on executing the strategic goals of the Property Office and ensuring that

all initiatives are progressing, the Chief of Staff, who is establishing relationships throughout the organization and managing communications, is already positioned to focus on executing the day to day, tactical operations of the team to ensure that all operations run smoothly, and all tasks are completed on time and within scope.

Maintaining the overall operations of the organization's Property Office not only gives the Property Manager's Chief of Staff unique insight into the property team's activities, but allows him or her to establish valuable relationships throughout the organization as an extension of the Property Manager. How do you establish the Chief of

Staff position within your Property Office? The first step would be to evaluate your current Property Office's structure to identify the teams within the office as well as their areas of responsibility. The next step would be to align the people with these areas, and chances are you will quickly be able to identify the person who is performing the Chief of Staff tasks. The third step would be to create the Chief of Staff position, and with your analysis from steps one and two, provide justification for it. Once you officially assign the tasks and the Chief of Staff position to the person in your office who has been executing these tasks all along, you as the Property Manager can finally begin to focus on the big picture. ■

BIOGRAPHY

Lana El Eryan, CPPS has more than six years of asset management experience specializing in the federal agencies sector. Currently a Solutions Director at Sunflower Systems, Lana works with clients to provide solutions for business challenges ranging from new solution implementations to adopting new processes that comply with new regulations. Lana has over 13 years of system implementation experience documenting requirements, designing solutions to training, and supporting the user community. Lana is an active member of the NPMA Federal Center Chapter.