



Princeton Plasma Physics Lab • Princeton University • Department of Energy

The Science of Executive Operations

Helping a Department of Energy national
Lab executive team save time & grow faster

Executive Summary

Challenge

Opportunity

Approach

Impact

Team

This case study explores the strategic collaboration between Cedar, a global leadership consulting firm, and the Princeton Plasma Physics Laboratory, focusing on enhancing leadership systems and streamlining operations to support the lab's rapid expansion and increased operational complexity.



SECTOR

Energy

Government

SERVICES

Leadership Assessment

Executive Operations

Executive Search

Process Optimization

Performance Management

Executive Coaching

Organizational Design

Training & Development

Executive Summary

CHALLENGE

The lab's rapid expansion into 4 new scientific areas led to increased operational complexity and overwhelmed its leadership. Executives were bogged down by low-priority tasks and inefficient processes, detracting from strategic focus.

OPPORTUNITY

Recognizing these issues, the lab seized the opportunity to overhaul its operations. A key strategy was the introduction of a Leadership Operating System, aimed at refining executive focus and improving overall efficiency.



Executive Summary

STRATEGIC INITIATIVES UNDERTAKEN

Central to this transformation was evaluating the current state leadership operations, hiring a skilled Chief of Staff, improving Executive Assistant performance standards, establishing new processes, and delivering targeted executive coaching.

POSITIVE OUTCOMES ACHIEVED

The initiatives led to a notable reduction in unnecessary meetings, improved decision-making, and faster execution. Furthermore, the partnership with Cedar received high satisfaction ratings, demonstrating the effectiveness and positive reception of the strategies employed.



Challenge

The Context

The U.S. Department of Energy has 17 National Laboratories, pivotal for America's advancement in clean energy, innovation, and security.

The National Lab footprint had expanded significantly, with DOE funding up by over 8% in 2023 and \$1.5B allocated for laboratory infrastructure upgrades in 2022.

The Ask

When the leadership team of one of these fast-expanding labs, the Princeton Plasma Physics Laboratory (PPPL), committed to streamlining leadership operations, they partnered with Cedar to develop customized solutions for the people, processes, and technology that underpinned the lab's day-to-day activities.

The Issue

National labs' organizational structures were intricate, involving Department of Energy oversight, site office management, and partnerships with universities, industry, and government agencies.

This complexity greatly complicated reporting lines and daily operations for leadership and the lab.

The Stakes

The timing of this initiative was especially critical for PPPL. The lab had recently expanded its mission from one area of scientific focus to five.

The lab's expansion required growth in headcount as well as the development of new ultra-modern research facilities. Facing unprecedented pressures, PPPL leadership saw streamlining operations as the pivotal first step in preparing for expansion.

Opportunity

While planning significant expansion in the years ahead, the leadership team already felt overextended by their current workload. The executive team struggled to focus on strategic priorities and often found themselves entangled in low-level work.

Two factors hindered the leadership team's ability to establish and adhere to critical priorities. First, lab executives regularly catered to stakeholder requests at the expense of other pressing tasks, often with minimal notice. Second, PPPL's culture was deeply rooted in "open door access"; executives were often brought into matters that are not high priority.

Development areas

Underdeveloped decision-making process and delegation of authority

Too many meetings

Difficulty tracking and implementing projects

PPPL faced a critical opportunity to address these specific issues and their underlying drivers to create stronger ways of working and to prepare for significant growth in the years ahead.

Approach

LEADERSHIP OPERATING SYSTEM

Cedar's top priority was to establish PPPL's leadership operating system. This layer of people, process, and technology solutions fostered better focus and prioritization for the C-suite. Executive meeting, decision and escalation policies were especially impactful.

CHIEF OF STAFF SEARCH

Cedar developed a customized Chief of Staff role for the Lab and built out the ideal candidate profile. Cedar then executed the 3 month search for the new Chief of Staff, identifying a strong pipeline of diverse, top-tier candidates from new pools of talent.

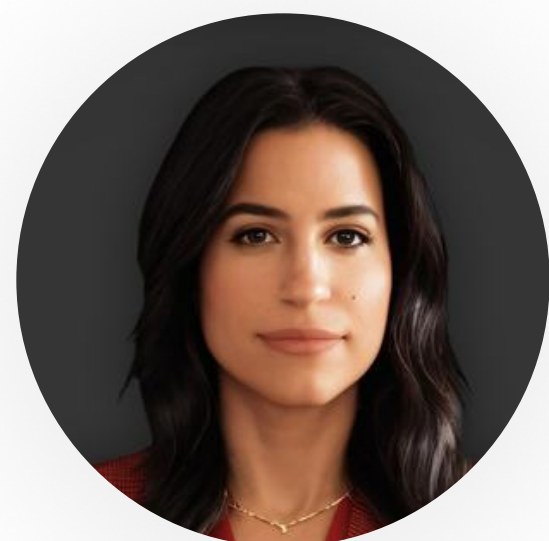
ORG DESIGN & DEVELOPMENT

Cedar worked to further streamline the lab's operations below the executive level. Specific initiatives ranged from improving PPPL's Executive Assistant performance management standards to designing training and development programs for middle management.

EXECUTIVE COACHING

Cedar provided coaching for Lab executives and built personalized C-suite protocols to optimize executive time, energy, and focus. Once the protocols were designed, Cedar trained the Lab's Executive Assistants on implementation.

Chief of Staff Spotlight



Chantal Badre

Princeton Plasma Physics Lab
Chief of Staff

Previous Roles

VP Head of Strategy & Business Development

Chief of Staff to the CEO

Solvay, Fortune 500 Europe

Education

MBA London Business School

Ph.D. Pierre & Marie Curie University

Expertise

Specializations: Strategic Planning, Organizational Leadership

Skills: Strategy, Advanced Project Management, Business Development

Industry Experience: Over 10 years in corporate leadership in lab-based, science environments

Successfully managed projects over

\$100M

Increased operational efficiency by

20%

Impact Since Joining

- Initiatives: Implemented a new program management approach
- Organizational Improvements: Increased C-suite productivity by 20% in the past 6 months
- Team Dynamics: Introduced better C-suite weekly meeting cadences

"Chantal's impact has been immediate and profound. We're lucky to have such a visionary leader on board."
COO, Tim Meyer

Impact

↓ Less time in meetings

↑ Increased speed to execution

↑ Faster decision-making

↑ On-time project completion

Client satisfaction survey results (average score among C-suite respondents on 0-5 scale):

4.7 Satisfaction with level of knowledge and expertise demonstrated by Cedar team

5.0 Overall satisfaction with Cedar engagement

5.0 Likelihood of recommending Cedar advisory solutions to others

“Cedar was attentive to lab needs and culture while also challenging assumptions, adding value, and building a new consensus”

Princeton Plasma Physics Lab
C-suite Member

Our Team of Experts

Our consulting team helped the Lab executives become fast and fearless leaders.



Mackenzie Lee
Client Partner



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Get in touch.

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