

Obama's Female Staffers Came Up With a Genius Strategy to Make Sure Their Voices Were Heard

By Claire Landsbaum



Under Obama, women are in the room where it happens. Photo: Pete Souza/The White House

When President Obama first took office, the White House wasn't exactly the friendliest place for female staffers. Most of Obama's senior staffers — such as former chief of staff Rahm Emanuel and former economic adviser Lawrence Summers — were men who'd worked on his campaign and subsequently filled his cabinet.

“If you didn't come in from the campaign, it was a tough circle to break into,” Anita Dunn, who served as White House communications director until November 2009, told the *Washington Post*. “Given the makeup of the campaign, there were just more men than women.”

Susan Rice, who's currently the national security adviser, said she (and other women) had to shoulder their way into important conversations: "It's not pleasant to have to appeal to a man to say, 'Include me in that meeting.'"

And even when they'd made it into the room, female staffers were sometimes overlooked. So they banded together (shine theory!) and came up with a system to make sure they were heard:

Female staffers adopted a meeting strategy they called "amplification": When a woman made a key point, other women would repeat it, giving credit to its author. This forced the men in the room to recognize the contribution — and denied them the chance to claim the idea as their own.

"We just started doing it, and made a purpose of doing it. It was an everyday thing," said one former Obama aide who requested anonymity to speak frankly. Obama noticed, she and others said, and began calling more often on women and junior aides.

As the *Post* points out, things have gotten much better for female staffers in Obama's second term. There's an even gender split among his top aides, and half of all White House departments are headed by women. "I think having a critical mass makes a difference," White House senior adviser Valerie Jarrett said. "It's fair to say that there was a lot of testosterone flowing in those early days. Now we have a little more estrogen that provides a counterbalance."