

# What Will It Take for Johnson to Get Up to Speed as Speaker?

October 26, 2023 **by Dan McCue**



House Speaker Mike Johnson of La., speaks during a news conference at the Capitol in Washington, Wednesday, Oct. 25, 2023. (AP Photo/Jose Luis Magana)

WASHINGTON — Imagine vaulting from kit manager, or clubhouse attendant, to coach. Okay, the writers of the hit Apple TV+ series “Ted Lasso” have already done that.

But it’s not too far a stretch from what newly minted House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., is experiencing right now.

Until Wednesday afternoon, the devoted, religious, Shreveport, Louisiana, native had remained largely on the periphery of House leadership.

As conference vice chair, his previous position in the House GOP hierarchy, his primary responsibility was scheduling members’

one-minute speeches on the floor.

His second duty was to encourage — not order — Republican members to write op-eds for their local papers and other publications.

Now, he runs the whole darn show — and without the benefit of ever having attended the House Republican leadership's daily management meeting.

"Speaker Johnson has his work cut out for him managerially, legislatively and politically," is how a top aide to former Speaker Paul Ryan summed up the situation in an email to The Well News.

"Running the legislative branch was a massive undertaking for his recent predecessors and all of them had more leadership experience when they took the job," he said.

The aide went on to say that in addition to developing a plan to fund the government, Johnson's first order of business will be "staffing up."

"He will need experienced staffers capable of helping him run the House of Representatives on a day-to-day basis and experience will likely be prioritized over ideology," the aide said.

"My expectation is he will rely on his colleagues in leadership to help him get situated and given the tall task ahead of him, hopefully his colleagues will give him a honeymoon period until he finds his footing," he added.

Johnson currently had a staff of 12, eight of whom started working for the four-term congressman in the past year.

The new speaker has already indicated he's asked at least some of those staffers to transition from his personal to his new speaker's office.

But he'll need dozens more staffers just to keep the speaker's office running smoothly, with tasks including everything from floor operations to messaging.

According to sources familiar with the situation, he's actively looking to fill the most senior staff positions, including bringing on a policy director, a foreign policy adviser and a member services director.

Then there's the matter, equally critical, of bringing on a spokesperson and communications team to handle a press corps that Johnson has had comparatively minimal experience dealing with in the past.

"I would expect Johnson to try to keep as many of McCarthy's staff in place, at least temporarily, so he can hit the ground running," said Matthew N. Green, professor of politics at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.

Green, the author of "The Speaker of the House: A Study of Leadership" and, with Jeffrey Crouch, "Newt Gingrich: The Rise and Fall of a Party Entrepreneur," went on to say that "keeping old staff for a longer period might suggest that Johnson will maintain the status quo, but it really depends on whether the staff are responsible for policy and member relations, which vary by speaker, or for more routine matters like press relations."

"He could keep McCarthy's communications staff, for example, but hire new aides who focus on issues that were less important to the former speaker, which would suggest a new course," the professor said.

Johnson has indicated he plans to interview "a lot" of McCarthy staffers. How many actually stay on appears, right now at least, to be mainly up to them.

Staffing aside, another question on people's minds is what happens to the current configuration of the House Republican leadership.

Both House Majority Leader Steve Scalise, R-La., and Majority Whip Tom Emmer, R-Minn., were designated as speaker candidates by the conference, but ultimately were rejected by tight-knit factions of angry members.

In the 24 hours since Johnson's ascent to the speaker's chair, some have suggested Scalise will likely be empowered as a result of what he's been through and Johnson's relative lack of experience.

Green said while there will obviously be a race for the leadership post Johnson just vacated, conference vice chair, he did not expect to see a new majority leader or whip any time soon.

"Scalise and Emmer are in established positions and are generally well liked in the party," Green said. "Furthermore, they each demonstrated that they can get the votes of a majority of their party for speaker, so they have an incentive to stay in leadership in the hopes that they might be able to move up to party leader when that position opens up."

Asked what kind of life Johnson will be living the next several weeks, the aide to former Speaker Paul Ryan said it will be akin to trying to "drink from a fire hose."

"He'll have to manage a narrow majority, strive to keep competing factions at peace, handle mutually exclusive requests from individual House members, and deal with fast-approaching legislative deadlines," the aide said.

"And he will also have a responsibility to prepare House Republicans for a challenging 2024 election cycle. The speaker

always has a never-ending to-do list,” he added.

Another question on people’s minds is how Johnson will get along with people that former Speaker Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., alienated before his ouster.

President Biden met with Johnson and Jeffries Thursday afternoon, prior to a Situation Room briefing for both congressional leaders about the supplemental spending bill the president requested a week ago to aid both Ukraine and Israel.

Afterwards Johnson told reporters the meeting was “productive.”

“I enjoyed my meeting with the president,” he said.

Meanwhile, Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., has said little about his new counterpart in the House beyond acknowledging that he doesn’t really know the Louisiana congressman.

In a post on X McConnell said Wednesday that he congratulated the new speaker on his victory.

“We will be meeting soon to discuss the growing list of important business Congress must address in the coming weeks on behalf of the American people,” McConnell said.

Then there are the Democrats in Johnson’s own chamber, many of whom felt McCarthy went back on his promises time and again to appease the hard right wing of the House Republican Party.

Green said at this point, he sees no reason to think Johnson will be any more bipartisan than McCarthy was.

“However, I do think that Johnson may be able to cultivate better relations with Democrats, especially if he keeps his word to

them, which was something McCarthy often did not do,” he said.

Getting through the appropriations process for the next fiscal year — in a wicked short time frame — may well provide all the answers anyone needs as to how Johnson will work with these personalities.

“The appropriations are his number one challenge right now,” Green said. “He’ll have to figure out how to keep his right flank happy while conducting the inevitable compromises with President Biden and Senate Democrats.”

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