

Completing the Governor's Agenda

Govern to the End

The last actions of a governor are often remembered most. As one former gubernatorial aide commented, "It's possible for a governor to ruin himself in his last 60 days in office." How a governor finishes his or her term cannot be left to happenstance and must be planned and managed.

Former governors urge incumbents to govern to the end—working full steam ahead through the last day in office. When asked for advice on how to successfully wind down an administration, one former governor responded: "Don't! Finish up!" Finishing strongly requires a plan and a commitment from the top.

For governors already planning to leave office, governing to the end requires vigilance in protecting the integrity of the governorship, persistence in finishing what has been started and diligence in keeping things under control. For governors running for reelection or another office, it requires additional efforts. Involvement in a campaign necessarily diverts attention and energies from governing. Assuming good government is good politics, the state must be run and run well in the governor's absence.

Suggested steps to keep everything on course include:

- In the governor's absence, put someone in charge who is not involved in the campaign, and clarify roles of senior staff as focal points for information and decision-making;
- Assign a staff group representing both the governor's office and the campaign organization to help manage the governor's schedule—planning and identifying opportunities, reviewing requests and permitting no commitments without such review;
- Reiterate and clarify lead responsibilities for legislative liaison; and
- Emphasize and reinforce the importance of "governmental" matters.

Whether or not the incumbent governor is running for office, he or she must manage in a highly politicized environment. Control must be maintained to complete the administration's agenda, promote continuity of government and reinforce appropriate staff behavior.

Complete the Administration's Agenda

The final year of an administration brings pressure, and sometimes a rush, to complete the "agenda," consisting of three components: finishing what has been started, institutionalizing what has been achieved and undertaking initiatives still on the 'to do' list.

1. Finish what has been started. Staff should be instructed to consolidate and focus their energies on programs and initiatives already underway, thus motivating a strong finish. Incumbent governors should consider setting a few clear priorities. Progress on major goals and priorities should be monitored and reported. Concurrently, policy issues of major concern need continuing attention and action. Finishing what was started is a noble goal, but not necessarily achieved easily. Former governors and their staff offer simple advice: Keep the agenda short, monitor progress and get it done. Specific comments illustrate.

- "Pay enough attention to programs and initiatives to prevent them from falling through the cracks in the state of flux that exists during the final months of a term." (A former chief of staff.)
- "Don't leave undone what can be started. Put in place and safeguard what has been started." (A former governor.)

2. Institutionalize what has been achieved.

Maintaining program momentum and continuity is also a major challenge. Some former governors regret their failure to embed major program initiatives for posterity. Institutionalizing and maintaining initiatives may involve firming up present programs with legislation (if any opportunity for legislating remains), rule-making (again if the state's rule-making process can be followed in the remaining time) or executive order; or institutionalizing ongoing programs now housed in the governor's office by placing them in agencies.

For outgoing governors concerned with program survival, several approaches might be considered:

- Make certain that programs are well-conceived and supported by strategic constituencies;
- Build institutions, not projects;
- Develop ownership among those who will continue to serve in the next administration;
- Involve the incoming governor; and
- Build programs into the ensuing budget.

Notwithstanding efforts by incumbent governors to institutionalize programs and blend current and future agendas, successors frequently are not receptive, as they have their own agendas. One former governor suggested: "Save something for the new governor."

3. Undertake new initiatives with caution.

The last year of an administration is usually not the time to begin major new projects. As a governor's term comes to a close, others in the political process (e.g., the legislature) increasingly look to the next governor and are not inclined to take on many new initiatives. If the desire for a new program is powerful, the following decision tree may help frame what needs to be done.

• **Is there time left to firm up all that the administration has accomplished?** If not, then new programs are ill-advised on that basis.

• **If there is time left to act, then consider if the contemplated "new" initiative is really new or is another try at a failed initiative.** If it is the latter, how have circumstances changed? If the answer is that the initiative still is likely to fail, but we cannot pass on one more try, consider that failing yet again on the same issue can lay the stigma of failure and irrelevance on the outgoing administration and detract from its attempts in other areas in the time remaining. People often remember what happened last.

• **If it is truly a new initiative, why didn't the initiative surface previously during the administration?** Usually it was a low priority or could not be achieved, thus was not initiated previously. If either of these applies, again ask the question what circumstances have changed to indicate that the initiative can now be achieved?

• **Finally, if all prior programs are firmed up and need no further attention and if the initiative is truly new (or changed circumstances do exist), is there a reasonable chance of success?** Risks are part of the calculation, but inevitable losses are not. If the answer to all of this comes down to "there is time and chance of success," then go for it.

Promote Continuity of Government

The bureaucratic system or infrastructure of state government provides stability for any administration. With the reality or prospect of a change in administrations, the system can deteriorate. Work can come to a halt, people can begin jockeying for future positions and programs and employees can become unmanageable.

Problems within the governor's office and cabinet generally occur later rather than sooner. Such problems need the personal attention of the departing governor. In contrast, problems within state government agencies generally occur sooner

rather than later. The incumbent governor and his or her cabinet officials should take steps to maintain commitments and loyalties, reduce workforce anxieties and send clear messages to management.

Agency employees—whether careerists or gubernatorial appointees—may become more focused on maintaining their current jobs or obtaining new ones than on performing their current duties. Even loyal employees may consider leaving. The workforce becomes anxious when facing uncertainty. Management needs reassurance and reinforcement.

Several preventive steps can be taken by the incumbent governor, staff and cabinet officials:

- Carefully analyze current staff positions that are likely to be vacated and those that are most critical to finishing the governor's agenda;
- Develop a succession plan for staff replacement;
- Research the history of turnover in prior transitions, analyzing the legal rights of employees occupying those positions and communicating those rights to current occupants;
- Recognize agency differences and approach potential problems of employee uncertainty in appropriate ways;
- Have one-on-one talks with key people about their concerns and options;
- Develop and communicate a clear stance on people leaving for other jobs, such as granting permission to do so or stating expectations for them to remain to the end;
- Deal with individuals on a professional basis; and
- Send clear messages, through word and deed, about the administration's intentions to lead and work fully to the end.

Reinforce Appropriate Staff Behavior

Political environments produce political vulnerabilities. Whether or not the incumbent is running for reelection or another office, he or she

must attend to both outside and inside political concerns, and should develop guidelines for doing so.

Outside concerns include public apathy, campaign opponents or candidates, the legislature and the press. For those not running for any office, public apathy emerges. As one former chief of staff recalls, "It usually takes a calamity to wake up the public in the final months, for them to take notice of what the governor is doing." For those not seeking reelection, former governors and staff advise staying above the battle and out of the political fray. Incumbents seeking reelection are advised to ignore potshots, avoid major mistakes and finish strongly. When dealing with the legislature, incumbent governors are urged to defend the integrity of the office. In regards to the press, one former governor's observation is universal: "Good press relations can't save a poor administration, but poor press relations can destroy a good one."

Inside concerns are less situational. They include political activities of employees, the handling of remaining appointments and management of existing staff and programs. Incumbent governors are advised to develop and disseminate ground rules covering acceptable campaign involvement of state employees who are endorsing or supporting candidates. It goes without saying that political appointments towards the end of an administration should be resisted. Further, charges of manipulating people and programs can best be avoided simply by not doing it.

Such actions are within the incumbent governor's control. The election of a new governor is not. Nonetheless, steps taken beforehand to maintain control can help smooth the transition.

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