

Advice from Veteran Governors' Staff

Government Leadership and Management

NGA Consulting offered a special management session on governing while running for reelection during the 2006 NGA Winter Meeting held February 25-28 in Washington D.C. This program was open to all governors' staff and featured commentary and recommendations from a panel of veteran governors' staff who have been through this unique year in the life-cycle of a gubernatorial administration. During the presentation, the panel discussed methods for handling unique election-year challenges such as maintaining separation from the campaign (while working with the campaign), preparing for the silent transition, and dealing with the unique media environment.

The panel discussed the following topics: (1) An Overview on Governing While Running; (2) The Governor's Policy Agenda and Message; (3) The Governor's Leadership and Management; (4) Coordination yet Separation of the Governor's Office & the Campaign; and (5) Concluding Recommendations.

This NGA management brief provides a summary of the observations and insights shared during the panel presentation and interactive discussion.

Overview on Governing While Running

When your administration is facing a reelection year, remember to keep in mind that the governor and some key staff have already had successful experiences, first in winning election and then in governing. However, most of them have not had the experience of governing while running for reelection. The difference in navigating this situation is not in doing more, but in doing the work differently and smarter. A few key points to remember:

- The governor must do both (govern and run).
- Good governing is good politics.
- Even if you are confident of reelection, still run strong. You can and must govern strong.

The Governor's Policy Agenda + Message

Governors who do well are active, engaged, and vocal about the issues of the day. They get out constantly to tell people what their administration is about. Be sure to talk about the same themes: things you have done, things in progress and what you're currently doing, as well as what you're going to do.

Take stock of your agenda—this will provide you with a platform from which to talk, and remember that the administration's election-year agenda is very important. Be sure to include the communications director in the policy strategy; he or she is one of the most disciplined people with the agenda.

Staying on message is sometimes the biggest challenge. What convinced our Governor were the numbers, i.e., people's identification with the issues that the administration picked and/or highlighted. Even people who disagreed [with the administration's strategy] were more willing to recognize that the administration was working on issues that are important. It allows for better focus, a clearer agenda.

Press releases and press conferences are different in their significance and should be used accordingly. Although you definitely want to broadcast all the good news, you need to rank it. When there are good things happening in state government that aren't major announcements, let the agencies send out the announcements.

Make sure the governors personally handle PR for their agendas. One challenge is handling friendly advocacy groups that want your governor on their message; he/she should concentrate on his/her own message. It helps to periodically remind your governors that they chose the administration's top agenda items and the focus should remain on those items. And it's very important to limit the top items to no more than five.

Summary Recommendations:

- **Build momentum.** Have a clear and limited policy agenda, which is driven by the governor's vision and values. It should drive all else—budget, legislative, communication, policy and political strategies.
- **Help the media focus on the agenda and tangible accomplishments.** They'll cover the campaign.
- **Give voters good reasons to vote for the governor:** promises made, promises kept; not only the what, but the who and how; an agenda for another term.
- **Focus your agenda on 3-5 major themes.** Have the agenda drive *everything* else. Use that as a grid through which all else is filtered (e.g., messages, scheduling decisions, budget priorities, agency agendas).
- **Build a clear policy agenda for the reelection year.** Look ahead and think about an agenda for a next term.
- **“Legacy” is not puffery.** It is not about bills passed, nor funds appropriated, nor abstract accomplishments. It's about passing the “kitchen table” test of how a family will view and remember the governor (i.e., how did the governor affect me and my family?).

The Governor's Leadership and Management

Get agencies to interact with the governor's office and notify you about press releases that are coming out. Also, be sure to be notified when agencies get Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests. Another important area is to know what attorney general opinions are out there. Find out since these could be used to hit you. For appointments to boards and commissions, remind them to let you know what's going on. Decisions being made there (obscure but sensitive decisions) could hit you.

Blending of staff is good (political/governor's office) that way you can build more trust between these groups. One way to do this is to have the deputy chief of staff take leave to lead the campaign. There are good reasons why the chief of staff should stay in the governor's office—specifically, running state government must be the top priority. You need to keep track of promises made and promises kept and be sure to get this information out there. There are all kinds of ways to measure productivity and accountability. You're successful when you get bureaucrats to think more politically and to understand what you're doing. With new campaign staff, you're successful when you get them to recognize that their efforts are essentially their job application [for work following a successful reelection].

The “silent transition” time frame provides an opportunity for cabinet and staff decisions. Start thinking in the summer and early fall about staffing decisions, such as who to retain and who may need to move on to other opportunities so you can make these changes right after reelection. It’s often hard for governors to make these decisions, and furthermore, it’s critically important to handle the process with grace and diplomacy. The governor will need help to handle these changes. Making a change may be viewed by others as acknowledging a mistake by the governor and often these are people the governor has known for years. This process is not just about firing but also includes people who are leaving for other reasons. Try to identify who might leave so you can anticipate these changes. The silent transition process involves not just negatives but also positives, such as people who are transitioning out of the governor’s office to agency leadership positions. Be sure to get commitment from good people and be sure to “move your stars up [the ladder].” Be sure to let staff know the timelines that they should be thinking about. In other words, let them know: “In June/July, you should start thinking [about what you want to do], and in September, you should have an idea of what you will do, either to stay or go.”

When it comes to dealing with burnout, talk to people who may be tired and ask them about their thoughts [going forward]. It’s better to ask now because later they can be unhappy. Provide people with an opportunity to move to a different area or issue so they can do something different. An outlined agenda [for the second term] can give people an added reason to stay because it emphasizes how a second term is different; it helps make the second term seem shorter and unique.

In terms of succession planning, you should ask agencies, “How deep is your bench?” You should be careful not to raise concern, so try not to focus your question on whether there is an agency problem but try to get an overall sense of how things are going. You can have this discussion in a cabinet meeting and June or early summer is a good time to approach the subject.

Summary Recommendations

- **Energize and excite the administration.** It’s not the “same-old, same-old.” There’s a much greater opportunity to provide clarity than in the initial election.
- **Use the “window” for a silent transition.** Keep the core team members (the great ones). Ease out the problematic. Selectively look for some fresh players.
- **Use the time as an opportunity for change.**
- **Use NGA as consultants.** Consider strategy sessions for the governor and senior staff and/or a strategic review and planning retreat for them and the cabinet. Do it sooner rather than later, preferably before the start of (and in preparation for) the reelection year.
- **Manage the agencies.** Control for eruptions. Guard against people going “native.”
- **Prepare a one-pager that articulates the governor’s policy agenda.** Have the agency directors disseminate this to agency managers and staff. Have the agency directors develop and submit a one-page agency agenda that is keyed to and implements the governor’s agenda themes.

Coordination yet Separation of the Governor's Office and the Campaign

The discussion during this session topic centered mainly on the question of coordinating between the governor's office and the campaign, specifically on how staff are assigned duties and responsibilities. There were extensive questions from participants during this topic which resulted in notable commentary from the panelists. The following section highlights some key areas of interest during this open discussion: the roles of the chief of staff and communications director, scheduling and advance, and the role of the governor's spouse.

The Role of the Chief of Staff and Communications

For the chief of staff, **one of the first big decisions during a reelection is who should stay and who should go with the campaign?** It can't be that the governor is the only nexus between the governor's office and the campaign, so who else will help facilitate and coordinate between the two? The chief of staff is the main day-to-day manager of the administration so it makes sense that he or she needs to stay and run the government. It is also very important for the chief to find out and communicate with staff **the legal requirements in your state which can affect whether governor's office staff can be involved in the political campaign.**

Make and enforce clear rules on the role of communications in two areas: 1) who will be responsible for governor's office communications with the campaign; and 2) how the governor's office will interact with and respond to the press. To ensuring successful media relations, you need to determine who is responsible for commenting on political activity, press releases, and promoting the governor's agenda.

When it comes to communications between the governor's office and the campaign, the chief of staff's role is to communicate with the campaign constantly but these communications are during the chief of staff's off-time.

Concerning media relations, when an opponent makes an attack on the governor, the governor's office would respond since it's a criticism of the governor's office. Most attacks are on the administration so the response would come from the press shop. For other states this depends, though, on how state law is set-up as well as what the political climate is like in that particular state. Our governor's office explained to the press what the process would be during the campaign year: that the chief of staff is the only person in the governor's office who can discuss both the campaign and the governor's office. Everyone else will refer political or campaign questions to the campaign. Be sure to tell and/or disclose to the press how these roles will be handled.

Scheduling and Advance

In the first race, we tried to send all scheduling requests to the campaign and that didn't work well. In the second race, **we determined that legally there were no problems with having the scheduler keep the calendar inside the governor's office as long as the scheduler did not ask for money or votes.** In addition, one of the staffers in the scheduling office went to work with the campaign, not so much to know the details of what's going on at campaign events as much as to know what time things are going on, etc. The one place where it makes sense to have coordination handled in the governor's office is with the scheduler.

Regarding how to handle security, our state hired an aide to assist with campaign advance work. When the whole day is a government day, it's fine to use state equipment.

The Role of the Governor's Spouse

Should the governor's spouse continue with current initiatives or help with the campaign and campaign events?

- Our governor's office kept the first lady's appearances focused on her key/top issues. She did campaign events that connected with her issues.
- In our governor's office, the first lady was the first surrogate when the governor couldn't make an event.

Concluding Recommendations

- **The rule of one = one decision-maker, one voice, one schedule.**
- Make assignments to the campaign full-time; no half-ways.
- Peel off a few (a very few) people from the governor's office to work on the campaign.
- Keep campaign meetings off-the-clock and logistics off-site.
- The key question for the chief of staff is whether to stay or not to stay. If staying, hire credible and powerful leaders for the campaign.
- Have counsel develop a list of political dos and don'ts. Communicate that widely, including to the press.
- Follow the rule of limited access to the governor's office, from inside and out, particularly from the campaign and on campaign-related matters, to a single person (e.g., the chief of staff) or to a very few (e.g., chief, press secretary, scheduler).
- Develop clear guidelines for referring and responding to "negatives" from the press and political opponents. Include clear ground rules for who speaks (e.g., the governor's office on criticisms of the governor's policies and programs; the campaign office on criticisms of the governor personally). Keep the high ground and avoid excuses and defensiveness. Admit any mistakes; don't cover up.

Good governance, indeed, is good politics. Reelection should be the outcome if permissible and desired, for a governor who has governed well and has delivered good results. One major key is to frame an agenda that is simple, and that people can understand and relate to. The bottom line is passing the "kitchen table" test of how a family will view and remember the governor—how were my family and I affected and changed by our governor? If the answer is positive, then reelection prospects should be good. If negative, the outcome may be in doubt.

Additional Information

NGA Consulting provides governors and their staff with valuable resources and management information pertaining to the life-cycles of an administration. Many publications are available online at <https://www.nga.org/consulting>.

For management strategies on governing while running for reelection, please contact Nikki Guilford, director of NGA Consulting (202-624-5422; nguilford@nga.org). For more details on state strategies described in this brief, please contact Christie Amberman, associate director of NGA Consulting (202-624-5370; camberman@nga.org).