

Recruiting Gubernatorial Staff

Introduction

Competent and loyal personnel are paramount to the governor's ability to lead and manage state government effectively. They play a pivotal role in the success of the governor and the administration. Once the transition team is established, immediate attention must be given to recruiting and selecting key gubernatorial staff.

Gubernatorial staff will be the eyes and ears through which the governor will gather information to assist with developing policy positions and making decisions. Gubernatorial staff should be skilled at anticipating problems and addressing them before they become serious. The press, legislature, citizens and state employees will evaluate the governor in part based on the impression of the governor's immediate staff.

Errors in staff selection can result in personally and politically painful situations. If a governor must remove a member of his personal staff, he or she is admitting to a judgment error in the initial staffing decision. Correcting errors in staff selection can be painful when the staff member has close personal ties to the governor. Also, some staff members are associated with particular constituencies and may be seen as symbols of the governor's attitude toward a geographical area of the state, wing of a political party or ethnic group.

This management brief discusses key elements surrounding the process for recruiting gubernatorial staff, the traits of effective gubernatorial staff and the sources from which to recruit effective gubernatorial staff.

MANAGEMENT BRIEF

Key Elements of the Recruitment And Selection Process

The governor should help develop a strategy and clarify his or her involvement in the process for selecting gubernatorial staff members. Most governors will want to play an active role in the recruitment of core senior staff members. A critical determination should be made regarding which appointment decisions will be reserved for the governor and which will be delegated to the transition team.

Although the specific nature of the governor's involvement will vary from state to state, some key elements include:

- Determining the key functions of the governor's office;
- Establishing the roles and responsibilities of governor's staff members;
- Clarifying the governor's expectations and definition of success for the governor's staff;
- Developing guidelines regarding the processes for recruiting and selecting governor's staff; and
- Assigning staff responsibility for coordinating and implementing the recruitment and selection processes.

The governor must determine which positions are most critical to fill. It is important to develop a process for hiring individuals for positions that need to be filled prior to inauguration and a process for positions that will require a more lengthy recruitment period. Setting priorities helps allocate gubernatorial time, staff time and other resources.

Traits Of Gubernatorial Staff

The criteria for selection of individuals to work in the governor's office should be similar to criteria for filling other important positions. Governor's office staff should have strong capacity for analyzing problems, expressing themselves well on paper and in person, working well within a team, possessing subject-matter expertise and following the leadership of the governor. Governor's office staff also should possess certain critical traits.

» **Self-confidence**

Governor's office employees should be self-confident. In the positions that they hold, they are potentially the subject of considerable criticism and should expect to take criticism deflected from the governor to the team. In addition, they often will find themselves in situations when it is important that they act on imperfect information rather than delay. A high degree of self-confidence is required to address such situations; the effectiveness and efficiency of the governor's office can suffer from staff members who lack this trait. Individuals lacking self-confidence are reluctant for other staff to take charge of work that they cannot accomplish on their own. This can lead to a hoarding of problems resulting in bottlenecks, lack of accessibility and inaction.

» **Humility**

Though staff members should possess self-confidence, they should not portray arrogance. Governor's staff members often receive attention from and are lobbied by heads of corporations, labor unions and cabinet directors. Staff should not appear arrogant to political supporters, legislators, agency heads or the press—all of whom may impute staff arrogance to the governor personally. Staff should make it a practice to keep appointments, return phone calls and answer correspondence in a timely manner. A staff person with the combination of self-confidence and humility will place the governor's interest first and can be a true asset.

» **Political Sensitivity**

By their nature, campaigns for office are oriented toward a specific individual and immediate supporters. While support comes in varying degrees

from other elected officials and one's political party, the candidate and campaign staff are the primary actors in raising money, making logistical arrangements, taking positions on issues and winning voter support. The manner of conducting business during a campaign is not always an effective way of conducting business in the governor's office. The success of the governor and the administration often will depend on collaboration from legislators from both political parties, interest groups acting on behalf of their constituencies and balanced media.

Staff transitioning from the campaign to a new role in the governor's office must understand the importance of working with nonaligned parties. In a campaign, it is true that those who are not with us are against us, but the same does not hold true in the governor's office. A governor should make certain that staff is careful to recognize the necessity of working with individuals and groups beyond those previously committed to the governor.

NGA CONSULTING CONTACTS

Nikki Guilford, Director
nguilford@nga.org | 202-624-5422

Katherine Grady
Program and Membership Specialist
kgrady@nga.org | 202-624-3598

Danielle Davidson
Program and Membership Coordinator
ddavidson@nga.org | 202-624-5408

Christie Amberman, Associate Director
camberman@nga.org | 202-624-5370

» **Accessibility**

The governor's staff should be accessible to the public and should understand the views of the average citizen, agency mid-management personnel, legislators and interest group representatives. How accessible the governor and his staff can be to the

public correlates to the volume of work. However, even when pressures of workload are severe and time is limited, it is important for members of the governor's staff to address groups and individuals in a manner that conveys that the state's highest office is interested in and responsive to their needs.

For example, early in an administration, a delegation with a specific problem of less than statewide significance may seek to bring the problem before the governor or governor's staff member for resolution. Staff members often will agree to meet with the delegation but then keep them waiting, rush them in and out or not meet with them at all because of other pressing priorities. Frequently the individual who organized the delegation (often a legislator) loses credibility with the delegation and the problem is not addressed.

There is a better approach: Staff members can explain workload constraints and still be responsive. The staff member can explain that the governor's office wants to address the delegation's concerns or that he or she is happy to meet with the delegation but will have difficulty scheduling a meeting of appropriate length because of pressing issues such as budget preparation. The staff member can ask the leader to communicate the concerns over the phone and schedule a meeting at a later date when a solution can be offered.

» **Competency**

An individual may possess the traits of self-confidence, humility, political sensitivity and accessibility, but he or she also must possess the skills, knowledge and abilities to perform the tasks required by his or her position and meet the governor's needs. The functions performed by gubernatorial staff members carry a tremendous amount of responsibility. Gubernatorial staff members must be able to serve the governor, the administration and the citizens of the state. Groups such as the local media, senior government managers, interest group leaders and legislators may criticize certain campaign staff members who do not have the knowledge and experience to work effectively in government.

Sources Of Potential Staff Members

Persons who have worked with the governor previously and with whom the governor has trusted are the most obvious and common sources of staff for new governors. However, for situations in which the governor had limited or no staff, a major source of candidates is the individuals who worked for the governor on the campaign.

» **Campaign Staff**

The use of former campaign staff as the nucleus of the governor's immediate office staff has advantages and disadvantages. Advantages include:

- **Availability:** campaign staff are often immediately available upon the conclusion of the election;
- **Ability:** campaign staff have demonstrated the ability to work long hours under stressful circumstances;
- **Loyalty:** campaign staff have demonstrated loyalty to the governor;
- **Shared objectives:** campaign staff most often agree with the governor's positions regarding significant policy objectives;
- **Reward:** campaign staff have dedicated significant time and effort toward the governor's election to office, and therefore the governor may want to assist campaign staff members with opportunities; and
- **Existing working relationships:** campaign staff members have a history of working well together and can carry these working relationships through transition and into the new governor's office.

Those advantages are often accompanied by some disadvantages:

- **Lack of interest:** certain campaign staff members' interests lie in campaigning, not governance;
- **Lack of knowledge:** certain campaign staff do not possess the knowledge, skills or abilities for governance; and
- **Lack of traits:** certain campaign staff may lack the above traits necessary to be successful in a position within the governor's office.

Some campaign staff members possess skills suited for positions in the governor's personal office, and some are suited for positions elsewhere in the administration. In most states, the governor has the authority to appoint senior personnel in various departments. When this power exists, the best use of campaign staff may be as deputies, policy staff or aides to the new cabinet official.

Additional Sources

When asked about staff roles, experienced governors often surprise new governors with the following advice: Don't assume campaign staff will make good governing staff.

The demands of governance are quite different from those of running for office. As the new governor transitions from candidate to chief executive, the team around the governor may change. The governor may be faced with the difficulty of not selecting a trusted and loyal campaign staff member who has worked diligently to secure the governor's election to office. Examples of additional sources for recruiting gubernatorial staff include:

- Experienced state government managers;
- Seasoned legislative aides or legislators;
- Former gubernatorial staff members;
- Subject-matter experts related to the governor's priorities; and
- Individuals respected by important constituencies.

Conclusion

The governor's office is a powerful force in providing support to the governor as he or she leads and manages state government. The governor must assemble a competent gubernatorial staff to ensure the successful direction of the executive branch and the successful accomplishment of the governor's agenda. It is important for the governor to define the functions that must be performed in the governor's office and the roles and responsibilities of the staff who will perform them. The governor and his or her trusted advisors must follow the established process to recruit and select the best possible gubernatorial staff to serve the governor and the state.

CONTACT »

Nikki Guilford

Director,
NGA Consulting
» 202.624.5422