Finding the Perfect Match: A Governor's Guide to Finding, Interviewing and Hiring the Best Cabinet

Introduction*

A strong management team doesn't just happen. Building an effective cabinet and governing team requires a thoughtful process of recruitment, screening and decision making. The challenge is particularly difficult for a new governor-elect, who will make dozens of key appointments within a few weeks or months of taking office. Experienced governors urge governors-elect to make key personnel decisions a high priority and assign clear responsibility to a trusted senior staff member to develop and manage the recruitment process used during the transition and through the administration's early days.

This management brief discusses one approach to the recruitment process that has proved successful in numerous administrations. Unlike some approaches that begin by describing the ideal candidate, this approach first examines the agency, diagnosis its past flaws and articulates its future promise before building a search for personnel.

Searching for the Right Match: A New Start

You ran and you won. Now, you have to figure out how to govern. What you do with your time in office and how you do it will in large part be determined by the team you hire. From your central office to your cabinet, your staff can make or break your term, so you must choose wisely.

My hiring philosophy emphasizes finding the right match over finding the right credentials. What constitutes the right credentials for any cabinet office varies according to needs and circumstances. Finding the best candidate requires that your administration do the hard work of evaluating an agency's real needs without shirking away from its inherent divisions, politics and problems. The best search confronts these problems head on and uses them as the basis for finding the right candidate. The worst search is premised on the naïve hope that the right candidate will solve all the agency's problems. You will find the best match by following what you probably already know intuitively: The best results are driven by open communication.

The hiring process is the first and probably the best chance a governor has to set his or her priorities. Consider the hiring of each person as an opportunity to clarify your objectives and begin to define your legacy. Here are five principles to guide your search:

- **The hiring process is an educational process.** It is as much about you and the type of administration you want to run as the candidates.
- **Be clinical.** This is a diagnostic process that benefits above all from objectivity.
- **Engage stakeholders.** The dialogue among stakeholders, your team and others who understand the circumstances of the agency will help you determine the agency's true needs.
- **Expect contradiction.** The process will inevitably generate contradictions, and it is far easier politically to unearth them now than later.
- **Above all, be open with all participants in this process.** Direct communication now is the best strategy for generating the results you want later.

Developing the Game Plan: Designing the Hiring Process

Before you recruit your star team, think about the design of the hiring process. You need to answer two

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basic questions: How much control do you want to have over the process? And, how public do you want it to be? Most governors choose to delegate control of the hiring process to a trusted advisor—a chief of staff, campaign manager or even an old friend. Some governors hire executive recruiters, but that is not necessary. What *is* necessary is placing someone in charge of the process who can remain objective.

The person in charge of the hiring process must focus on presenting you with the best possible options, options you can use to help determine the future direction of an agency. Without good leadership in the hiring process, your choices may be narrowed in a way that does not serve your best interests.

Recognize that early in your administration, and to a degree throughout your term, members of your core team will engage in power plays as they struggle to establish their domains. Will policy be set in your office, or will cabinet officers drive it? What type of access will your cabinet officers have to you and your chief of staff? The person you place in charge of hiring should be ready to parse out these internal divisions in a rational fashion, with you as the final arbitrator. Otherwise, you risk each new hire reflecting the winner of that day's power struggle. Ultimately, you will delegate to your team responsibility for running day-to-day operations; as you hire your cabinet, however, you also are setting a precedent for how your team will support your governance throughout your term in office.

How much input the public—interest groups, advocacy groups and the general public—should have in the process is typically a matter of ideology. For some administrations, control and the efficiency that follows is a hallmark of their particular management style. For others, transparency and public input are worth the tradeoff in efficiency. Of course, custom also plays a role in the decision. If every modern governor has consulted with the public employees' union and small business association before appointing the state secretary of labor, you should take that into account as you begin your search. You are not bound to follow those traditions, but the decision to break them should be well-reasoned.

Although I cannot tell you how public to make your search, I will say that a more public approach can affect the level of candor and rigor your administration employs to foster clear understanding of its priorities. A big process that typically includes public input at the start and some type of public review of candidates at the end—in addition to the internal reviews suggested here—can be used and has benefits, but it also can be unwieldy and time-consuming.

Use this brief to guide your search for cabinet members. Although it describes a single search, this formula also applies to the larger task of organizing a new cabinet at the start of your administration. A large transition simply requires a higher level of organization and management in which the transition director assigns a single recruiting team to each cabinet position, and that team follows the approach described in this brief.

When appointing your new cabinet, you also will find there is a logical hierarchy to hiring. Large agencies that are more closely scrutinized demand the most thoughtful review. If you have already decided on certain appointments (or reappointments), moving on them early can relieve pressure on the transition team and appease the media. Remember too that big searches can benefit smaller ones: Your search for a secretary for human services, for instance, may help you identify candidates for noncabinet-level positions in public health and child welfare.

Please note: Throughout this memo, *you* refers to you, the governor, and *recruiter* refers to the advisor you put in charge of the hiring process. The same philosophy can be applied regardless of who guides the hiring process and who you hire. Use openness to get the best results.

Starting Your Search: The Rolodex Fallacy

The best searches begin with internal diagnosis: What is going on in the agency now and why? A recruiter

needs to know which circumstances the new leader will be asked to handle before he or she can determine which type of candidate can best handle them. What was the previous head of the agency like? Was he or she a strong manager? Which forces, internally and externally, prevented the achievement of critical goals? Where are the fault lines within the organization? A good search is an educational process. It allows the recruiter to learn the strengths and weaknesses of an agency and present them to you at the point in your tenure when you are best equipped to address them.

Do not allow your recruiter to commit the fatal mistake, or *the Rolodex fallacy,* of believing some magical person exists whose qualifications will meet all your needs, if only your recruiter had a Rolodex thick enough to find him or her. Many recruiters deal in talent, finding you the best match to a fixed set of criteria. But a recruiter's real value to you is as an objective party, one who can help you diagnose an agency's illness and use that diagnosis to find the candidate who can cure it.

Using a set of fixed qualifications as a starting point rarely results in successful hires. Instead, the hiring process should be dynamic and designed to address an agency's particular needs at a given point in time. No fixed set of criteria will work. A good recruiter will help you find the most qualified person.

Finally, a legal (and political) caution: A recruiter must know the statutory requirements related to the position being filled. The recruiter must understand the enabling legislation for that agency, any legal requirements associated with the position and the relevant statutory policies and political considerations related to equal opportunity hiring and community input. I was once hired by a state's personnel board to recruit the director of a major state agency, but a quick read of the statutory requirements related to that agency revealed that the board had no authority over the position—it was a gubernatorial appointment. Three directors had been appointed without anyone realizing the error. Misinformation, even mythology, can build around these appointments. Knowing the facts matters.

Diagnosing the Needs: The Doctor is in

A recruiter's first task is to identify the target agency's challenges and needs. I start a search by approaching the agency's various stakeholders: everyone from the senior management team, to the office staff, to the unions and advocacy groups that interact with the agency. My request of them is simple: "I know nothing. Fill me in." This helps me understand the environment into which the next agency head will be coming. What are the present circumstances? What is the history? What is the agency's past performance? What has led to scandal? Which opportunities are being missed?

The previous administration generally leaves a briefing book on the state of the agency, but these books only address formal circumstances. To get a real sense of what is going on, the recruiter must listen to individuals, both agency employees and members of the outside groups that interact with the agency. I stick to small conversations (generally one-on-one) so people feel certain they will face no consequences for being candid. In this way, the recruiter gets full disclosure and learns about the real state of affairs in the agency.

Over time, these conversations lead to hypotheses, which a good recruiter will use to focus future conversations. I once recruited a state secretary of transportation. The more people I talked to, the clearer it became the previous leader had been brought in because of his political skills and not his management skills. He was a poor manager who lost control over his senior management team. As a result, the agency had Balkanized and now lacked a strong central leader. I used that hypothesis in future conversations to tighten my analysis. I learned that the agency was also under the sway of an overpowering legislative leader, and staff members would defer to whomever was more threatening to them at the time—the cabinet official or the legislator. That knowledge allowed me to address the tension over the agency's leadership with the governor and offer a comprehensive assessment of the real-life conditions a future agency head could expect to face. Most important, it allowed me to

recruit a candidate who was up to the agency's specific challenges.

Knowing the problems an agency faces helps your recruiter find the candidate who is best able to fix the problems. Knowing the problems an agency faces also plays a vital role in the dialogue the recruiter—and later you—will have with that candidate. Diagnosing the problems up front is the only way your candidate will be able to offer you targeted, real-world solutions.

Your recruiter should bring this diagnosis to you before launching the search. It is the moment for you to hear about circumstances that may affect the search and give your input and direction to the recruiter. You may impose explicit expectations; for example, requiring that the new agency head be a medical doctor or a state business leader or agree with your policy and program positions. Alternatively, you may ask for more exploration; for example, the person's thoughts about prison expansion and alternatives to incarceration or whether the person is a strong manager or more of a visionary who is nonetheless willing to work closely with the chief operations officer. Ultimately, this is an abstract conversation, but it provides a guide your recruiter can use to serve your specific interests. When you see your recruiter at the end of the search, he or she should be able to report how these ideas played out in the talent marketplace and the networks he or she explored in the process.

Finding a Candidate: Skip the Game of Cat and Mouse

A recruiter's next step is to bring in a group of candidates who personify the strategic and policy choices the agency is facing. In the same case of the transportation department, I knew the governor was facing distinct choices. Should I suggest a former politician who could serve as a political counterpoint to the overreaching legislative leader? Should I address the situation with an unflappable manager less likely to provoke confrontation with the legislature? Should I propose a deal to share power with the legislator and bring in someone with technical qualifications? I decided to bring in all three candidates, each of whom became a distinct choice for the governor in terms of management and policy direction.

How did I find each candidate? Networking. As he or she begins the candidate search, your recruiter must abandon the idea that a good search results from a Rolodex full of contacts. Even as a professional executive recruiter, I start every search from a zero point. I have no built-in list of talent from which to choose. Instead, I use existing professional networks to seek out candidates and do something that surprises them. Most recruiters work by creating a list of qualifications they seek. I name the circumstances within the organization that a successful candidate will have to address.

Over the course of your recruiter's conversations with individual stakeholders, he or she will have identified key organizations that now become good places to start the candidate search. National membership organizations, advocacy groups, leaders in the field and well-regarded academics generally make up the first round of recruiter calls.

For the transportation secretary search, I started by calling the American Public Transportation Association, a professional membership organization, but person-to-person networking soon led me to construction companies, highway safety advocacy groups, design firms, rail transit advocates and federal bureaucrats. I wanted to speak with a representative spectrum of the groups associated with the agency. Although each group has its own interests to promote, it also can lead a recruiter to some of the best contacts.

When I approached these groups, I informed them openly and honestly about the situation in the transportation agency: "In our state, the legislature has reached over the line, and we're losing direction. We're looking to address these and other critical circumstances." When people are treated with that kind of directness and integrity, they tend to respond in kind. They are generally more than happy to suggest candidates or, if they can offer no recommendations themselves, suggest someone who can. Recognize too that most "news"

about the real politics within the agency is no news at all. People close to the agency already know this information, and it is only one degree removed from outsiders close to the agency. For the referrer, the only surprise in the equation is that the recruiter shows a willingness to discuss the challenges.

Defining the environment in an organization rather than listing a specific set of qualifications a candidate must meet is a more appealing way of recruiting. "I've talked to you about the challenges facing our agency. Do you know anyone you think might be able to meet those challenges?"

Asking this kind of open-ended question expands people's minds in a way that asking them to track down qualifications on a résumé does not. It leads to different kinds of candidates—candidates who tend to represent the universe of choice for an agency's future, including the political expert, the managerial expert, and the engineer.

This approach to recruiting ultimately takes no more time or energy than conventional recruiting methods. It is, in essence, person-to-person networking. One group of people makes recommendations for others to call, and the tree grows quickly. It takes 80 calls, not 150 or 1,500.

Laying It Bare: Naming Without Blaming

A good search brings out the tensions inherent in any organization. The key is to be willing to name these tensions openly during the search process rather than hiding them, hoping the candidate will be able to fix them after the fact. After your recruiter has identified a list of potential candidates for a position, bring the candidate into the discussion of the agency's problems.

I once was hired to recruit the new president of a national family planning organization. The organization had started as a loose affiliation of independent members and become much more centralized under the previous leader. During the search, however, it became clear that the organization was in the midst of a major identity crisis. Some factions wanted to maintain the organization's role as a national advocacy organization. Others wanted to turn it into more of a women's health practice. Still others wanted to return to the original model, in which each affiliate acted autonomously.

Rather than hide these divisions, the hiring process became a discussion and growth process in which I encouraged the organization's board to use the search to determine which path it wanted to follow. When the board members found that they could not determine that path on their own, it became the task of each candidate to show how he or she would manage these divisions.

Because we were clear about the challenges, we attracted candidates who sought to tackle the obstacles from different perspectives—an activist who promoted a strong national advocacy organization, a health care expert who wanted to reposition the organization as a business devoted to women's health, and a leader who encouraged a strategy of independent affiliates. This gave the board the opportunity to test different strategies as well as different candidates. The most successful search is one in which the issues that cannot be resolved are discussed openly.

Structuring the Interview

By the time your recruiter brings in candidates for interviews, the organization has already engaged in learning and discussion. Each candidate becomes a choice to be considered and represents a different approach for the agency to take.

For the transportation department, the stakeholders considered a former elected official, an attorney who had led a large utility company and had long-term experience in policy planning and project management, the head of a state highway system who had an engineering background and the head of a mass transit system. I assembled a group of the most qualified candidates from a range of approaches.

When your hiring team has chosen its candidates, it will

have a limited amount of time to get to know each of them. In that time, the team needs to get a true sense of what each candidate can do for the agency. The only way to accomplish that is to grant the candidates who make it to the interview stage all possible access to relevant information. By the time the candidate walks into the interview, he or she should know what your team has learned over the course of its diagnosis of the agency.

Psychologists believe the ideal size for a group exchange is between seven and nine people. Ideally, the interview panel should include no more than that. The panel generally consists of the head recruiter, your chief of staff, several other members of your core team (policy director, political advisor, budget director, etc.) and one or two trusted outside advisors. If you are following a more public citizen approach, you also will want to invite one or two representatives from key stakeholder groups on the condition that they take part in the direct and open exchange this type of hiring process requires.

The recruiter should take time at the beginning of the interview to acknowledge the dynamics at play within the room. He or she should be prepared to identify who comes from which faction—he favors a strong manager while she is hoping for someone who can get the agency's science in order. There should be no secrets as you begin the interview process. Whatever is not acknowledged at the beginning of the process will be revealed more uncomfortably later.

An interview is not a game show: A candidate should not get points for being able to answer things on the spot. Instead, it should reflect the real challenges and opportunities awaiting the successful candidate and allow him or her to offer real-world solutions to those challenges.

The Sequence

I always start by asking the candidate to speak about his or her background, experience and what interests him or her about the job. That approach serves as a way to break the ice and get to know the candidate as an individual.

My next question addresses the specifics: How will he or she do this job? Because the candidate already understands the agency's dynamics, this is not an abstract question. It is an open-book test that gives the candidate the opportunity to start sizing up the organization. The recruiter should make it clear that the candidate is expected to confront the organization's problems head on.

During the interview, I always offer the candidate the option of asking any questions he or she still has about the agency and the points of view represented at the table. The fewer constraints a candidate faces, the easier it is for a candid exchange to take place, one which allows the candidate to make the case directly for what he or she plans to do in the position.

Avoiding the Pitfalls

An effective interview requires time and strategy, not gut reactions and snap judgments. Interviewers tend to form opinions of a candidate in the first half of a discussion, which wastes the second half and squanders an opportunity to ask meaningful follow-up questions. The interviewers then take it upon themselves to answer those questions as they believe the candidate would have responded.

The second half of the interview should be used as a reaction to the questions and negatives that emerge in the first half. Rather than holding fast to an initial judgment—the engineer under consideration, for instance, does not seem like she will be a persuasive public speaker—the interviewers should acknowledge that judgment and give the candidate a chance to address their concerns. Be blunt. It is not about disrespect but about insisting on a truthful exchange. This is how you will want to work with your team in the future, and it is important to set that standard during the hiring process.

The interview team should also be prepared to discuss the potential need for future hires who will supplement and complement the candidate. The greatest visionary may still need a good deputy manager to execute that vision; the longtime politico who has little executive

experience may need strong deputies who have strategic and managerial skills to be able to put his political expertise to work. Part of an open exchange with candidates is challenging them as to how they will compensate for their weaknesses. Everyone has them, and it is better to wrestle with them now in the interview room than three months later in the press.

The interview team should never couch things in vague language. It should express its questions and concerns up front. This way, your team gets to know what the candidate's responses are to those concerns rather than having to guess at them.

Every candidate you meet has strengths and weaknesses. In the end, a big part of what you are looking for is a quality of self-understanding that allows someone to be effective in spite of those weaknesses.

Finally, one generally accepted rule of interviewing is that you should conduct interviews consistently. That does not necessarily mean following an identical structure; rather, the interview team should create a similar platform for each candidate, but each candidate will inevitably address the same problems differently. The team should explore what those differences are, not hide from them for the sake of perfect consistency. In doing so, they are trying to match the candidate with your expectations of what the job requires.

The Friends and Family Dilemma

It is not uncommon to have a devoted political loyalist, or even a personal friend, in the candidate pool. In that situation, loyalty and familiarity do have real value, especially over a pool of candidates you do not know personally. This process allows you to give weight to those qualities but also tailor the questions to that person's potential weaknesses. For example, in the case of a longtime ally and prominent environmentalist, your interview team might ask how he would mediate his position as an environmental advocate with the administration's obligation to create business growth and community development. How will he deal with his former allies when this happens? What will his loyalty be to the administration, and what decisions would bring about a break with your administration and a resignation? Raise the issues that likely will confront that person in the job, and recognize that some of those issues are particular to that individual. Your environmental advocate friend is likely to find different challenges than a lifelong bureaucrat. Each will be tested differently. It is better to test the candidates' ability to handle those issues now.

The Payoff

Out of this process arises a set of candidates who fit into the range of organizational directions you are considering. For instance, there are candidates who will comfortably conform to a policy and budget agenda that your staff controls. Others will only join your team if they drive that agenda, but they promise big payoffs in return. You benefit from a process that offers you those choices and helps you clarify how you want your administration to run.

The additional payoff comes in the form of the education you and your interview team have just received. In the course of the interview process, you have heard from five or six different experts about the different strategies they would use to deal with an agency's particular challenges. By bringing into this debate men and women who represent real choices, you have discovered a set of governance and policy choices that reflect the character and abilities of the person you choose and acknowledge the complexities of the relationships within the organization.

Soliciting Referrals: Once Again, Honesty Is the Best Policy

References are a necessary part of making a final selection, but many people are hesitant to provide a truthful assessment of a candidate's past performance. There is no exact formula to getting a helpful reference, but as with everything in this process, directness and openness at the outset will help your recruiter get the information you need.

The recruiter should include the candidate in the discus-

sion from the start of the referral process. People who run a cabinet agency need to be able to deal with criticism and opposition. If they have held previous leadership positions, there will be critics of their performance. They key is to gauge the nature of the criticism: Is it about poor performance or about making the best of difficult choices? Candidates need to accept this review and participate in it even when it is uncomfortable. Again, any criticism that arises now will reemerge later if the candidate is hired. It is better to address it now.

The recruiter should follow the same candidness mandate he or she followed in the interviews and speak openly with the candidate about the questions he or she wants to ask referrers. For a candidate whose treatment of coworkers is in doubt, the recruiter might ask, "We want to talk to people who can comment on your creativity and brilliance. We also want to talk to people who have worked under you, and we're going to ask how you treated them. Are you comfortable with that? What do you think we will hear?"

The same directness is essential when speaking to the referrer. The key is honesty. Rather than asking whether the candidate gets along well with coworkers, the recruiter should be direct: "We have an impression that he might not treat coworkers well when he's under pressure. Can you comment on that?"

With such a direct question, even a non-answer ("I don't want to talk about it") helps give you the answer you need. Your recruiter may strike out 5 times out of 10, but people will often be responsive.

Making Your Decision: Finding the Pattern

When you make your final choice, you are choosing among different strategies for the agency. None is going to meet every need exactly, but the advantage of this learning process is that you have already considered the implications of the tradeoffs you are making.

In the end, your search team should present you with a pattern. You want to know the nature of this person's approach and have this person marked and defined. Ideally, the candidate knows how he or she has been marked and defined, as well. At this stage, you as governor should have a good sense of who this person is and how he or she is going to do the job. You should be able to use this information as you narrow down your candidates and prepare for the final interview.

That final interview will generally take place in your presence and present you with a few well-defined leadership options. Use the interview to deepen your understanding of the final candidates' plans for the office. Stick to the same direct, reactive format as earlier interviews.

Investing in Future Harmony

This process, in a sense, is not sophisticated. It takes on few airs. Instead, it is built on frankness and humility and the recognition that this is about discovery. It is ultimately a way to fill in those elements that a new administration does not know, but needs to know, about itself.

A more conventional approach to recruiting will lead to similar discoveries, but they will come further down the line, in a far more brutal and less controlled fashion. Dealing with the loss of efficiency, internal battles and even scandal that can result from not hiring the right person is far more costly than the time investment at the beginning.

This hiring process yields positive benefits. I once worked to hire the head of a human services system for a western governor. The previous leader had been an efficiency expert who experienced mixed results: He had cut costs, but morale in the organization was low. When we started our search, we acknowledged the fragility of the agency and found two candidates to fill the role. One was an effective manager, more balanced than the last, who would stabilize the agency. The other was more of a visionary who wanted to point the organization to big new ideas but would spend more of the governor's precious political capital to do so. Both demonstrated the ability to move the agency forward, but the approaches suggested different demands on

resources. The question came down to the governor's vision for his administration. As a recruiter, all I could do was present him with a set of clearly defined options. In the end, he chose vision over stability.

That decision paid off. When I returned to that state capital years after he had left office, I stumbled on a small bronze plaque that hung under his portrait. Out of all his myriad accomplishments, the plaque recognized above all the work he had done to reform human services. With clear choices in front of him, the governor was able to make the decision that became his legacy.

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