

## Recruiting During Transition: Building The Governor's Team

### Introduction

The immediate transition—from election to inauguration—should be an opportunity to begin the process of selecting the people who will lead and staff the new governor's personal office, central management and cabinet agencies and key boards and commissions. Without talented and dedicated people serving the new governor, little will be accomplished despite the governor's best efforts.

A strong management team does not just happen. Building an effective team requires a thoughtful process of recruitment, screening and decision making. The challenge is particularly difficult for a new governor who will be expected to make dozens of key appointments within a few weeks or months. Many governors have found that their direct appointments of gubernatorial staff and cabinet officers, as well as their substantial influence or direct appointment of sub-cabinet officials, gives them a powerful tool for establishing a team with a balance of management and political skills.

Experienced governors urge new governors to make key personnel decisions a high priority and assign clear responsibility to a trusted senior staff member for developing and managing the recruitment process used during the transition and through the early days of a new administration.

Major challenges include:

- Determining the key appointments;
- Clarifying the roles and expectation of key appointees;
- Developing processes for recruitment and selection of key appointees; and
- Establishing the governor-elect's involvement in recruitment and selection processes.

This management brief discusses governors' involvement and priorities regarding the recruitment of gubernatorial staff and cabinet and agency appointees as they transition from campaigning to leading and managing state government. It also discusses the importance of developing a strategy for recruitment that ensures a diverse pool of candidates and a plan for effectively selecting right individuals for the positions that need to be filled.

### *The Governor's Involvement And Priorities*

#### **The Governor's Involvement**

A primary goal of a new administration should be the development of a strategy for staffing the governor's administration. Processes also should be developed for the recruitment and selection of gubernatorial staff and key cabinet or agency appointments. Finally, the governor's involvement in the process for staffing his or her administration should be clarified.

The most critical determination should be which appointment decisions will be reserved for the governor and which will be delegated to the transition team and other senior officials. The governor also must develop strategies concerning consulting with advisors, friends, contributors and constituencies regarding the recruitment and selection of staff and appointees. It also is important to ensure adequate time has been allotted for the governor to interview finalists and review appointment recommendations.

#### **The Governor's Priorities**

All governors should make staffing the governor's office and cabinet and agencies a personal and administration priority. The governor must decide the schedule with which he or she will make appointments. If appointments

are made and announced over a predetermined schedule, the governor should decide which appointments will be given first priority.

Setting priorities is the process of deciding which vacancies are most critical for assisting the governor in transitioning effectively from campaigning to leading and managing state government.

- The first priority for staffing the administration generally is recruiting and selecting individuals to serve on the governor's personal office staff. These positions are key to advancing the governor's policy and management decisions as well as serving as the nucleus for the extensive recruitment process for cabinet or agency positions.
- The second priority for staffing the administration generally is recruiting and selecting individuals to serve in the administration's key central management appointments responsible for raising revenue and developing the budget and centralized business operations.
- The final priority for staffing the administration is filling remaining cabinet and agency heads and subcabinet positions.

Although a number of approaches can be used to prioritize cabinet positions, it is helpful to place them in three general categories:

- **Immediately critical:** The earliest attention should be paid to agencies critical to the administration's success, including those in which mismanagement can result in harm to individuals or significant scandal;
- **Proactive opportunities:** The governor should then select individuals to fill key positions in agencies that provide crucial opportunities for the implementation of the governor's

management and program initiatives; and

- **Remaining:** Once key positions are filled in agencies meeting the first two criteria, attention can turn to remaining agencies.

Priority-setting also assists with proper allocation of the governor's time and staff time and resources.

### ***Recruit Strategically***

Strategic recruitment requires governors to look closely at the relationship between the job to be filled and the governor's goals. For example, if improving child welfare and child health care is a top priority and will require an increased budget and legislative action, it would be wise to hire a leading child care advocate as the director of human services agency.

Strategic recruitment also may involve balancing political and professional considerations when reviewing potential candidates for high state government positions. Most governors warn that building an administration based solely on the groups of people who were instrumental in the election campaign can be a dangerous approach to appointments.

As citizens take interest in the customer-focused management of government at all levels, many governors have turned to professional state government managers, sometimes recruited from other states.

### **Candidate Search and Interview**

Most appointments benefit from a search—a systematic, disciplined effort to understand the nature of jobs to be filled and the strengths and weaknesses of candidates to fill the positions. The governor should consider using an executive recruitment firm for positions that are difficult to fill or sensitive. The scope of each search will vary. A search may be within the boundaries of the individuals who worked on the campaign, other loyalists or known public servants; talent within the borders of the state or region; or national.

It is critical for the search-and-interview process to be structured to produce the most useful information possible. These are critical decisions for the governor and the candidate to consider. During the interview with final candidates, the new governor should describe priorities, program ideas, challenges and opportunities that relate to the department or agency. Candidates should then be given the opportunity to comment on the implementation of critical programs. Such an exchange will demonstrate whether or not a candidate is suited for the position and allow for a clear, baseline understanding between the new governor and appointee.

### **Screening for Loyalty and Competency**

Governor's offices are very efficient at screening for loyalty and ideological compatibility. While these traits may aid cohesiveness within the administration, competence to govern also must be a priority. Governors have an unrivaled ability to gain the truth about candidates' competence to govern by seeking the truth from their many confidants. With adequate preparation, the governor can use the search-and-interview process to learn the problems that exist in a particular state department, compare the strengths and weaknesses of a pool of choices, learn the work history of a candidate and predict the capacity of a particular candidate for a specific job.

### ***Categories Of Candidates***

#### **Recruiting Strangers**

Chief executive officers, public and private, are notorious for being reluctant to hire individuals they do not know. Though someone a governor has known for years may have limitations, those limitations are at least known. When a governor appoints someone unknown, there is some risk involved given the limited exposure to the candidate prior to the appointment. Regardless of the risk, every governor will hire unknown individuals to serve in the administration—either to add a professional or national luster or to fill vacancies where more familiar candidates are not available, not qualified or have not been identified.

#### **Recruiting Family**

By contrast, the governor-elect has logged hundreds of hours with campaign staff and has observed them in various situations. A governor often will look to the campaign and his or her most ardent supporters to fill gubernatorial office staff as well as remaining key cabinet and agency positions.

It is critical for there to be a match between the demands of the position and the skills and abilities of the appointee. A systematic review of the campaign staff and other candidate pools will provide the governor a rich field of candidates for key positions and appropriate opportunities to reward loyalists. The governor will live with appointees for several years; unwise appointments will harm the reputation of the governor and the appointees. The governor can avoid potential problems and criticism by hiring staff members who will bring competence, valuable experience and knowledge to the new administration, including:

- Knowledge of state programs and how they operate;
- Experience working with the legislative process;
- Knowledge of public or business administration and management principles;
- Knowledge of local government issues and operations;
- Knowledge of federal government programs and operations; and
- Familiarity with key people in state government.

If people in the family have talent, they are the best possible hires. However, if people in the family do not have talent, they can be the worst hires because if they fail, the public will label them as cronies and the governor as just another politician.

#### **Recruiting Legislators**

Governors should carefully consider the wisdom of appointing individuals within their own political or interest group constituencies. Experienced governors advise that the decision on whether to

include independently powerful politicians in an administration should center on the substantive goals of the new governor and the tactics necessary to accomplish those goals.

If legislation in a certain area is necessary to accomplish the new governor's goals, the governor must weigh the benefits of having a respected legislator as an advocate within the administration. The new governor also may feel that if the respected legislator shares his or her own position on a key issue, the best place for the legislator may be in the state legislature, where he or she can secure passage of the governor's package.

Appointing a respected state legislator who shares the new governor's concerns in a particular subject area can be beneficial. The appointment signals to the legislature that one of its own is valued member of the new governor's team. The legislator will bring a measure of influence, which can be used to assist the acceptance of the governor's legislative objectives. While it is safe to assume that legislators have leadership experience, a review of the legislator's management experience is always wise.

### **Balance the Executive Team**

Many governors have found their direct appointment of cabinet officers and substantial influence or direct appointment of subcabinet officials gives them a powerful tool for establishing a team with a balance of management and political skills. For example, for a department in which a constituency-based appointment is appropriate, subcabinet officials can be recruited from the ranks of business or professional management. It should be noted that some cabinet officers may express displeasure if the governor attempts to select their subordinates.

In some states, the governor's appointment powers are limited to his or her immediate staff. There may be requirements to fill certain positions within the administration with civil service personnel. In those states, the governor will face the challenges of

complete accountability with limited power.

## ***Vetting Selected Candidates***

### **Background Investigation Process**

Part of the reason to take adequate time in choosing an executive branch team is the necessity of conducting an extensive background check on every potential high-level public official. Experienced governors stress the importance of weeding out potential conflicts of interest from the beginning of the administration. Nothing can damage the best-laid plans and programs of new governors more than speculation about possible conflicts of interest in the new administration. Background checks often involve law enforcement inspections by state police, credit agencies and state and federal tax authorities. The governor or statutes also may require financial disclosures as a condition of employment. Legal counsel for the new governor should ensure the screening process used complies with all applicable state laws.

### **Legislative Confirmation Process**

Many principal cabinet appointments will require confirmation by the state legislature. Issues or problems identified in the screening process should be addressed in light of legislative hearings. Although a new administration can tolerate nominees who are likely to engender some controversy, nominees who cause serious opposition are problematic. Widespread opposition to nominees may generate media and public criticism that can rob a new administration of its honeymoon period.

Many successful transition committees ensure the internal background reviews and rehearsal and preparation of nominees for confirmation generally and substantively exceed the subsequent formal process. Prospective nominees who fail these internal reviews may have their nomination rehabilitated by further preparation. However, if a nominee cannot pass this internal test, moving the nomination forward and hoping for the best is not typically in the new governor's best interest.

### **Prepare for the End of the Relationship**

Governors also should think through how a relationship with an appointee may end before offering a job to a prospective employee. Both cabinet and governor's staff should be acutely aware that they serve at the governor's pleasure. Veteran governors report that time is well spent during the interview process to make it clear to potential members of the executive team that a sudden parting of the ways may be necessary at some future time. This task may be unpleasant, but considering how difficult or graceful

an exit might be is an important consideration for the new governor.

### **Conclusion**

The governor must build a strong and diverse team to ensure the needs of the state are being addressed and assist with the successful implementation of the governor's agenda. Therefore, it is crucial for the governor to dedicate adequate time and attention during the transition period to strategic recruitment and selection of the best candidates.

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