

Recruiting a Gubernatorial Team

This management brief addresses the governors' role in finding, interviewing and hiring gubernatorial staff and cabinet and agency officials, as well as the ideal traits of effective staff.

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INTRODUCTION

A governor's immediate transition – from election to inauguration – is an opportunity to work with his or her transition team to begin the process of selecting the people who will lead and staff the new governor's office, central management and cabinet agencies and key boards and commissions. This team represents the governor and will be the eyes and ears through which the governor will gather information to assist with developing and implementing policymaking decisions and managing state government.

It is crucial that the governor dedicates adequate time, attention, and thought to developing his or her vision, diagnosing agency challenges and selecting the best candidates. Investing the time up front in finding the right team members is better than addressing the loss of efficiency, internal battles and even scandal that can result from a bad hire. ***In short: the wrong hire can be far costlier for a governor and the administration's reputation. Never hire someone who can't be fired.***

It is challenging to make dozens of key appointments within a short time period. Yet, each hire provides an opportunity to clarify priorities and objectives and begin defining a governor's legacy. **Experienced governors urge governors-elect to assign clear responsibility for managing this process to a trusted senior staff member.** This person could be a campaign manager, chief of staff, transition director, or even a trusted friend or colleague. Some governors might hire an executive recruiter, but that is not necessary. What is necessary is to place someone in charge of the process who can remain an objective third party and set the stage for the administration. Members of the core team may engage in power plays as they struggle to establish their domains, and some cabinet officers may express frustration if the governor recruits and selects their subordinates, so empowering a trusted senior staff member to establish a chain of command and organizational chart early in this process is important.

The Governor's Involvement and Priorities

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

- **Clarifying the vision and goals of the administration, as well as promises and themes from the campaign.** The hiring process is an educational process. It is as much about the governor – and determining his or her vision for the administration– as the potential candidates.
- **Determining the governor's level of engagement in each key appointee.** Which positions will he or she take an active role in identifying, interviewing and selecting? Filling the remaining positions will be the responsibility of trusted staff members and transition team members.
- **Recognizing the responsibility of each state agency.** The outgoing administration generally provides a briefing book, but these books often only address formal circumstances. A new administration must be aware of the true challenges within each agency before recruiting and selecting the best candidates.
- **Engaging stakeholders.** The dialogue among them, your team, and others who understand the governor's vision and state priorities will help determine true needs. The best searches address these needs head on and use them as the basis for finding the right candidate.
- **Recruiting and selecting individuals to serve on the governor's personal office staff.** These positions are essential to advancing the governor's policy and management decisions.
- **Recruiting and selecting individuals to serve in the administration's key central management positions.** These officials are responsible for raising revenue and developing the budget and centralized business operations. These positions typically include the chief operating officer (COO), chief budget officer (CBO), chief information officer (CIO) and director of administrative services.

Note: In some states, the governor's appointment powers are limited to his or her immediate staff. In those states, the governor will face the challenges of complete accountability with limited power.

Recruiting Potential Staff Members

Strategic recruitment requires the governor to examine the relationship between the job to be filled and the administration's goals. It may also require balancing political and professional considerations when selecting the right candidate. It is critical that the demands of each position and the abilities of the appointee match.

The governor can avoid potential problems and criticism by hiring staff members who will bring competence, valuable experience and knowledge to the administration, including:

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

Potential staff members may be found from numerous places, including: the campaign team, legislators, trusted friends and advisors, general applicants and additional sources for recruiting gubernatorial team members.

Campaign Team

The use of former campaign staff as the nucleus of the governor's immediate office has advantages and disadvantages. Advantages include that they are available, able, loyal and share the same objectives. Some campaign staff may work well with the governor and earn a position. However, the advantages are often accompanied by disadvantages. Some campaign staff possess skills for campaigning, not governing, and may not have the knowledge or traits needed to work in a government office. **Bottom line: The demands of governance are quite different from those of running for office. Don't assume campaign staff will or will not make good governing staff, but rather vet them as you would other candidates for the job at hand.**

Legislators

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. A governor must weigh the benefits of having a respected legislator as an advocate within the administration versus in the state legislature, where he or she can secure passage of the governor's legislative priorities. Additionally, a review of the legislator's management experience is wise.

Trusted Friends and Advisors

Loyalty and familiarity do have real value, especially over a pool of unknown candidates. If trusted friends and colleagues have talent, they may be strong possible appointees. However, if they do not have the right talents, they may be the most challenging appointees because if they fail, the public will label them as "cronies" and the governor as just another politician. Also, state law may dictate the degrees to which family members can be hired.

General Applicants

When a governor appoints someone unknown, it can be risky; however, every governor will hire unknown individuals to serve in the administration – whether for their professional or national experience or to fill vacancies where more familiar candidates are unavailable, unqualified or unidentified.

Additional Sources for Recruiting Gubernatorial Team Members:

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

Traits to Look for in Gubernatorial Team Members

Leading a state agency or working directly in a governor's office require similar traits: a strong capacity for analyzing problems, expressing clear thought, positioning themselves well on paper and in person, working effectively within a team, possessing subject-matter expertise and following the governor's leadership.

Self-Confidence

Team members will potentially be the subject of considerable criticism and should expect to take criticism deflected from the governor. They will need to make decisions despite imperfect information. Individuals lacking self-confidence can lead to a hoarding of problems resulting in bottlenecks, inaction and inaccessibility. Staff members should possess self-confidence yet not portray arrogance.

Humility

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 be a true asset.

Political Sensitivity

A campaign is different from a governor's office. The success of the governor and the administration often will depend on collaboration with legislators from both parties, interest groups acting on behalf of constituencies and the media. Staff must recognize the necessity of working with all individuals and groups.

Customer-Focused

Even when workloads are severe, and time is limited, it is important for members of the governor's staff to address citizens, legislators, interest groups and others in a manner that conveys that the state's highest office is interested in and responsive to needs.

Loyalty and Competency

Loyalty and ideological compatibility add cohesiveness within the administration; however, governing competence must be a priority. Staff must possess the skills, knowledge and abilities to perform the tasks required by his or her position and meet the governor's needs.

Interviewing Candidates

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. Whether the governor or transition team conducts the early interviews, the interview team should create a consistent set of metrics to evaluate each candidate although each one will address the same requirements differently.

- 1. Ask the candidate to speak about his or her background, experience and what interests him or her about the job.**
- 2. Address the specifics: how will he or she do this job?** For example, in the case of a longtime ally and prominent environmentalist, the interview team might ask how he or she would mediate the position as an environmental advocate with the administration's obligation to create business growth and community development. How will he or she deal with former allies when this happens?
- 3. React to the questions and concerns that have emerged.** Interviewers should acknowledge concerns about a candidate and give the applicant a chance to address them. Raise the issues that likely will confront that person in the job and recognize some of those issues are specific to that individual. For example, the governor's environmental advocate colleague will experience different challenges than a lifelong environmental bureaucrat. It is better to test their ability to handle anticipated issues before they are appointed.
- 4. Discuss the potential need for future hires who will supplement and complement the candidate.** Every candidate will have strengths and weaknesses. The greatest visionary still may need a good deputy manager to execute that vision; the long-time politico with little executive experience may need strong deputies with strategic and managerial skills to be able to put that political expertise to work.

In the end, a big part of what should be sought is the quality of self-understanding that will allow someone to be effective despite weaknesses.

- 5. What will his or her loyalty be to the administration and what decisions would bring about a separation or a resignation?** Veteran governors report that time is well spent during the interview process making it clear to potential team members that a sudden parting of the ways may be necessary at some future time, as they serve at the pleasure of the governor.
- 6. The governor will likely interview the top leadership recommendations.** These interviews should be used to deepen the understanding of each candidate's plans for the role.

Background Checks and Legislative Confirmation Process

Conducting an extensive background check on every potential high-level public official is necessary before hiring them. This often involves a thorough review of information available through law enforcement, credit agencies and state and federal tax authorities. Financial disclosures may also be required. The governor's legal counsel should ensure the screening process complies with all applicable state laws.

Additionally, many cabinet appointments require confirmation by the state legislature. While some controversy may be okay, widespread opposition to a nominee may generate media and public criticism that can rob a new administration of its honeymoon period. Successful transition committees ensure a candidate's internal background review satisfies the required criteria for appointment before then helping a nominee rehearse and prepare for legislative confirmation.

Final Reminders for Hiring Good Team Members

1. Be clinical. This is a diagnostic process that benefits above all from objectivity.
2. Be open with all candidates and team members. Direct communication generates the best results in the beginning and throughout the administration.
3. Big searches can benefit smaller ones – a health secretary search may help find candidates for other positions.
4. Agencies that are closely scrutinized demand the most thoughtful review.
5. If a decision has been made on a certain appointment (or reappointment), announcing that early can relieve pressure on the transition team and can appease a hungry media.
6. The amount of input others are granted – including interest groups, advocacy groups, and citizens – is up to each governor, just be transparent.

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