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Transition Teams Matter

By Christine G. Springer

As President-elect Obama comes to office, his administration faces daunting challenges and yet many expect that his diverse team of cabinet appointees may serve as a model for future transitions. In order for this administration to be truly successful, more is required. There must be functional teams in place not only at the cabinet level but also at the public administration level within each agency that operate according to clearly defined decision-making protocols and understand what they are accountable for and are willing to own the results achieved. This requires leadership, team skill and an alignment process so that progress can in fact occur. Only when such teams are fully functional will the optimal transition occur.

The new administration truly represents diversity. Less than half of the incoming cabinet level appointees are men and they include 3 Latinos, 4 Blacks and 2 Asian-Americans as well as three current or former governors, a former mayor and a prominent scientific researcher. The transition is complimented and complicated by such diversity. Not to mention that the country is encountering an economic crisis, engaged in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and that agencies at all levels of government are operating on reduced budgets. As an example, offices like the Office of Financial Stability have not hired staffers to manage bailouts. In Mid-November, a group of political appointees was overseeing contractors and it was unclear whether or not those employees would become part of the new administration. Beyond a need to accelerate the confirmation process, there is a need to focus on the overall management of government.

As John Palguta, Vice President of Policy at the Partnership for Public Service has said: *“That’s the major difference between the last transition and this one, a great understanding of the fact that the work of government and of the people, and the quality of the people in government, is going to be crucial. That sets up a mandate for the next administration to focus not just on new policies and new programs. . .but to focus on the management of government.”*

Cabinet appointees as leaders need to recognize and deal effectively with resistance in their organizations and among stakeholders by talking with resisters, giving people choices and investing in change with the understanding that both resistance and fiscal crises foster innovation that the well prepared team can use to deliver better outcomes. These conversations often need to occur intergovernmentally. Leaders also need to build on the past without totally ignoring it, reinforce functional relationships with managers and employees, become part of the team themselves not simply serving as head of it, encourage everyone to hold one another responsible for achieving results, show how it’s done by modeling the way without maintaining that they always have all of the answers to every problem. It is hoped that this process will be more possible in this Presidential transition due in part to the involvement of individuals like the chief human capital officers and the creation of the CHCO Council in 2002. The Council, made up of human resource leaders from 23 federal agencies, has devoted much of its time in the past year to transition planning and has also met with federal labor unions and other groups about the issues government employees face in the transition.

In my experience, great teams are led by those who energize change, are visionary, know that they cannot do it alone, build authentic relationships, and model behaviors expected from team members. Such leaders help team members become more focused on the team as opposed to their own individual performance, focus on key decisions that need to be made and who and how they will be made, emphasize continuous improvement and along the way create an organizational infrastructure to support cultural and behavioral change based upon improved performance. None of this occurs over night, but small steps set the stage and lead the way for larger and measurable accomplishments that eventually manifest themselves in sustained organizational momentum.

We know that public managers often become important leaders. As team members they demonstrate leadership through their technical and strategic skills and in their ability to influence others. They also become adept at assessing where others see themselves on the team and how to influence those individuals to become part of the new direction. The *Skeptics* agree on the business-concept level but have decided to withhold full support. By listening to their concerns, encouraging them to offer suggestions, it is possible to build trust. The *Contrarians* disagree with both the goal and the process but have experience to offer. By encouraging candor and the sharing of stories, new agreements can eventually be structured to move ahead. The *Unenthusiastic Loyalists* support the team's effort but disagree with the leader's point of view. By presenting a strong business case objectively and integrating their input, it is possible to engage them and develop their commitment. *Partners* support and agree with the leader and have a positive influence on others if encouraged to interact with the *Skeptics*, *Unenthusiastic Loyalists* and *Contrarians*.

To forge teams takes time and requires that good and continual communication and management of meetings be maintained throughout the process and that team decisions are strategically focused, social pressures to conform to the majority view are highlighted and avoided, and that the decision making process is as much as possible quick, high quality, engaging and transparent so that individual members of the team are truly accountable for decisions made. Overcoming the resistance to change takes some time so that everyone has time to understand and absorb changes in direction and in approach and also have an opportunity to ask and get questions answered. We know that getting a new team requires that leaders: 1. start at the beginning, letting everyone know what their expectations are, and 2. stay engaged with weekly feedback sessions and 3. Provide role models and mentors to those who want to be successful as part of the diverse team effort with members who they are at times unfamiliar and uncomfortable being around.

There are three traits that are key to being a great team member: good listening, conflict-management and convincing skills. Good listening skills involve not continually interrupting an individual who comes with an opinion or a concern and not withdrawing from the conversation but instead responding with phrases that encourage the speaker to say more and to explain their position. Conflict-management skills allow the individual to connect with the speaker, clarify points of view, confirm what each individual needs to be a committed part of the team, and finally, come to an agreement as to what is necessary for positive future interaction. Convincing skills include being persistent and talking straight about an issue but also being able to acknowledge when the other person has made a good point.

Becoming committed to a common direction as a team means focusing on new deliverables that evolve from that direction, being clear about team member roles and responsibilities, having a decision-making protocol in place and being able to communicate across departments and agencies and levels of government. This alignment process usually occurs by first making a diagnosis as a team as to what is to be accomplished and by when – four years or less is usually the target – so that data collection, the next phase of alignment and team transformation is possible. Secondly, the team agrees to behave differently in five key areas: 1. Overall outcomes 2. Strategy 3. Roles and responsibilities 4. How to make decisions and resolve conflicts, and 5. critical interpersonal and interagency relationships and interdependencies that require addressing in order to be successful.

Before the Obama administration can accomplish an effective transition across the federal system of government, there must be an empowerment of good teams not only at the cabinet level but also throughout public administration at the federal, state and local governmental level. We all have important work ahead!

Brittany Balldenstedt and Alyssa Rosenberg, “Steep Climb,” *Government Executive*, December 1, 2008.