

## ASSEMBLE YOUR LEADERSHIP TEAM

Your team needs to be able to effectively develop and implement all your agency's programs, not just your top priorities. Your programs will cross many interests. The team will need to work effectively with multiple stakeholders on both the programmatic and political dimensions. The team will need to address a complex external environment, a complex internal environment, tight resource constraints, and cumbersome processes.

Agencies are too complicated to be managed at a distance by a small cadre of political appointees developing a strategy and then directing a larger body of career staff to execute against that strategy. Such an approach will run into obstacles that could have been avoided with a wider initial conversation between your political staff and career staff. It needs to be a joint effort.

A 2015 report by Douglas Brook, former senior official in the George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush Administrations, and Maureen Hartney says that a critical success factor for moving quickly to implement key administration priorities is to create: "Joint executive management teams at the department and agency level that quickly coalesce and include both political and career leaders" in order to create shared expectations and objectives. Creating shared accountability increases your chances for success.\*

### **Leverage the senior career staff: Find out to whom you should listen and on what.**

Your agency is large and complex, with all the vices of a large bureaucracy. It has a cadre of senior career managers who are ready and able to get that large bureaucracy to do what you want it to do. Those senior career managers support your agency's mission and recognize that they need political leadership to achieve it. Those senior managers will be critical to your success, but they are also part of the same bureaucracy.

The senior career managers overseeing this bureaucracy are skilled at getting it to move forward, although their approaches may sometimes stick too closely to the traditional. The vehicle may be obsolete, but they know how to drive it. You will find many people in your agency at both senior and lower levels that have an entrepreneurial bent. Unlike the private sector entrepreneur who pursues profit, these government entrepreneurs pursue program results or transformation. They care about the mission and know how to get the larger organization to move in a desired direction. Many have good ideas on how to improve service delivery that will assist you in your own agenda. Your senior leadership team can help you leverage this entrepreneurial energy as well as get the bureaucratic behemoth you now manage to move in the right direction.

However, you may need different skills from those your agency needed in the past. You may find some of your staff too wedded to the status quo and

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\* See *Additional Resources*, page 138.

too quick to explain why the way things work is the way things should be. Your most important skill will be figuring out to whom you should listen and on what. When some people tell you not to take a course of action, they may be warning you against very real dangers. When others warn you against a course of action, they may simply be embracing traditional ways of operating.

You will need to figure out who are the former and who are the latter. Further, you will find that one person has good insights in one area and poor ones in another. One may be good on the politics but weak on program realities. One may be strong on program issues but oblivious to the political ramifications. Leveraging the right strengths from the right people leads to success. Not listening at all or listening to the wrong people on the wrong issues risks failure.

### **Hire senior political staff with the right political talents.**

Your career staff are largely in place, but they will be less effective without political leadership. Selecting your political appointees will be among your most important decisions. It often requires approval from the White House. Your selections will need to meet the needs of both you and the White House. Most of the selection criteria will be specific to your agency and the job, but some are more general in nature.

- Choose appointees who have the talents and existing relationships to work effectively with political interests outside your agency and with your stakeholders. They will be particularly important in working with your agency's key constituencies.
- Choose appointees who have the technical and people skills needed for the specific job. You will be under pressure to employ political staff that the administration likes for various reasons. Not all candidates have the right skills for your needs. Match skills to needs.
- Choose appointees who have energy and are committed to your agenda. They should see the larger picture and commit to sticking around for a while. Many appointees have a short time horizon for a job. It needs to be long enough to meet your needs.
- Finally, at the risk of being indelicate, choose appointees who will support you over other political interests. Most political appointments involve some balancing of different political interests. Different wings of the party, different geographic regions, and different congressional support all come into play. You will need political staff that are loyal to you and your agenda first.

The right mix of political staff will be crucial to achieving your goals.

### **Blend political and career staff: Leverage their different strengths.**

Your success will depend on your ability to build an effective senior management team to carry out your, and the administration's, agenda. It will need

## Rules of Engagement for Political Appointees

Rule	Illustration
Engage the career staff and listen to their advice—even if you don't ultimately heed it.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Involve the career staff in agency deliberations.</li> <li>• Actively solicit their analysis and recommendations.</li> </ul>
Show the career staff that you respect them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read your careerists' résumés.</li> <li>• Understand their skills and what they bring to the table.</li> <li>• Make it clear that you are the decision maker, but treat them as partners.</li> </ul>
Spend some time learning the details.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask lots of questions—particularly as you enter office.</li> <li>• Find out why some initiatives have worked and others haven't.</li> <li>• Know the details to give you stronger credibility within the agency and improve the chances of achieving your agenda.</li> </ul>
Have a clear and limited set of objectives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Motivate the career staff with ambitious but achievable objectives.</li> <li>• Make sure the careerists know where you're going.</li> <li>• Make sure you know where you're going.</li> </ul>
Be willing to compromise and admit mistakes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Realize that sometimes you have to give a little to gain a little.</li> <li>• Be strong but pragmatic.</li> <li>• Take responsibility for your mistakes.</li> </ul>
Don't forget about the organization.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pay attention to organizational stewardship.</li> <li>• Take on bureaucratic and administrative problems within the agency.</li> <li>• Make an effort to attend job fairs and new employee orientation events.</li> <li>• Don't shy away from tough human resource management issues.</li> </ul>
Communicate, communicate, communicate.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Constantly communicate your goals.</li> <li>• Constantly give the career staff feedback about ongoing agency deliberations.</li> <li>• Make sure that the staff understand why decisions have been made.</li> <li>• Give the staff feedback on their performance.</li> </ul>

From "Getting to Know You: Rules of Engagement for Political Appointees and Career Executives" by Joseph A. Ferrara and Lynn C. Ross. In *Learning the Ropes: Insights for Political Appointees*, Mark A. Abramson and Paul R. Lawrence, editors (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

to be a blend of senior political and career staff working together. It should not be an inner circle of political appointees who then communicate with the career staff. That road leads to failure, as programs with major flaws not visible to the political staff get started and later need to be adjusted or, worse, fail. It is better to fix the problems internally as part of the design than to fix them publicly as part of a redesign.

Political appointees often begin their tenure with reservations about the career staff. Invariably, they leave government service with a high opinion of the majority of the career staff they have worked with, lauding their ability, knowledge, work ethic, and integrity. Interestingly, career staff say the same kinds of things about the political appointees they have served under when surveyed after the fact.

That said, what is true of the average is not true for all. You need to build a team that delivers on your agenda. That means you need people committed to the mission and with the right skills for their job, not some other job. They also need to be able to work together and resolve the inevitable conflicts.

Three geniuses who cannot work together may be worse than three solid people who can. You will need to assess your senior career staff as individuals and decide whether they are the right fit for where you want to go or if they might best support the government somewhere else. Consult with your human resources staff if you want to move people, as process is particularly difficult in the personnel arena.

### **Recognize that political appointees and careerists have different roles and responsibilities.**

Despite having stressed the importance of a joint political/career team, it is worth emphasizing that each is part of a distinct community. The two communities have different roles that need to fit together well for success.

Careerists tend to manage down and concentrate more on service delivery. Politicals tend to manage up and out and work on managing the stakeholders and the message. The political community is part of an administration that will last four to eight years and then move on. Its members bring innovation, a new agenda, and the political connections to bring it about. They usually make or advocate policy. They are subject to different personnel rules and will be involved in political activities that are forbidden to career employees.

The career workforce tends to have a longer time horizon with the federal government, although the old lifetime employment model appears to be declining. The career workforce brings continuity and the operational skills to ensure programs are carried on from prior administrations or beyond the current one. It tends to be more the policy implementer than the maker. It is subject to different personnel rules and cannot be involved in political activity.

## The Role of the Careerist

Careerists want to feel like they are contributing to the mission of their organizations. If political managers cut them out of processes or if their advice is rarely sought, they suffer from a sort of professional identity crisis. Such an identity crisis negatively affects their job satisfaction and motivation. Ultimately, the productivity and the effectiveness of the organization will be negatively affected, too.

Careerists are the institutional memory of American public administration.... They draw the policy maps that connect the past, present, and future. They are the keepers of the institutional "lore" and can tell political appointees the stories that explain what has and hasn't worked before. As Richard Neustadt once wrote, "What makes lore invaluable is the sad fact that no institutional sources of memory exist as substitutes, save patchily, by happenstance, at higher executive levels of American government. Lore is almost all there is. Without it, available documentation tends to be ambiguous, misleading, or perverse."

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### **Be careful how you blend the political and career jobs.**

To a large degree, political and career jobs will be defined before you arrive. Political jobs tend to be reserved for senior policy makers and their immediate support staff, or for positions in which the administration conveys its views to the public. Career jobs tend to be more operational, or reserved to ensure the public's confidence in the impartiality of the government.

Placing political appointees in operational jobs carries some risks. If you place a political appointee between career employees in an operational management chain, you risk reducing the operational efficiency of your organization. The careerists will be inclined to look for a political "sign off" or feel the need to clear actions at a higher level. The appointee is like a "circuit breaker" in your management accountability chain that will regularly have to be reset.

This has nothing to do with the skills of the politicals and everything to do with organizational culture. It can be overcome, but it needs to be addressed at the beginning. A simple example is when a career executive manages a national program but regional operations for that program have been placed under a political appointee. Expect simple operational decisions to come back to your senior political staff for resolution, taking time away from your real agenda and slowing your agency's reaction time. Unless you address this up front, you or your senior staff will be refereeing operational disputes.

In the long run, this can also have an impact on your legacy. One of the virtues of the career bureaucracy is continuity. What begins under you is more likely to continue when careerists run it. If the program is controversial, it has

## Differences Between Political Appointees and Career Civil Servants\*

Factor	Political appointees	Careerists
Role perception	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Determine the nation’s business”</li> <li>• Focused on achieving policy outcomes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Do the nation’s business”</li> <li>• Focused on ensuring a fair, open, and sound decision process</li> </ul>
Partisanship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Affiliated with a political party</li> <li>• Serve a particular president</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nonpartisan on the job</li> <li>• Serve various presidents</li> </ul>
Professional experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often a mix of government, academic, and private sector</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Government has been their main career</li> </ul>
Tenure of service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Come in and go out</li> <li>• Average about two years in their positions, about four years in their agency, and about nine years of government service</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In for the long term</li> <li>• Senior executives average six years in their SES position and more than 23 years in government service**</li> </ul>
Time perspective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tend to have a shorter-term outlook</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tend to have a longer-term outlook</li> </ul>

\* From “Getting to Know You: Rules of Engagement for Political Appointees and Career Executives” by Joseph A. Ferrara and Lynn C. Ross. In *Learning the Ropes: Insights for Political Appointees*, Mark A. Abramson and Paul R. Lawrence, editors (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

\*\* From *Mission-Driven Mobility: Strengthening Our Government Through a Mobile Leadership Corps*, Partnership for Public Service, February 2012

a reduced likelihood of continuing if it is under the direct management of a political appointee. You may want to have political appointees in operational jobs as you get started, but at some point you will want to move careerists into those jobs for your legacy’s sake.

### **Keep “political appointees only” meetings rare and reserve them for political matters.**

Your effectiveness in getting your agency to do what you want it to do will depend on your ability to build an effective joint political/career team. Your staff meetings should be joint, as should most of the meetings involving your agency’s management. Nonetheless, you will find that you occasionally need

to meet separately with your political staff on political issues. Such meetings might cover political strategy or campaigns. These are necessary and the careerists should not be there. However, you will have more success running your agency if the two communities regularly work together in policy development and implementation.

### **Put it all together and decide on whom to depend and for what.**

Step one in harnessing the power of the career bureaucracy is figuring out to whom you should listen and on what. But that is only step one. The more critical step is figuring out on whom to depend and for what. This applies to both the career and political side of your organization. You will find most of your career staff have the right combination of knowledge and inclination to support your agenda. Some may not be in the best positions to exploit the full force of their talents and need to move to new positions. Others may not be a good fit for what you want to accomplish and need to move as well.

Your success will depend on how well you put together this joint political/career team to deliver on your agenda. Some of this will be matching skills to the job, but some of this will be finding the right chemistry between your politicals and careerists. If you have a good team that works well together, you can get it done.

### **Don't reorganize your agency.**

One last thought: Reorganize only as a last resort. Government reorganizations consume enormous resources, always take much longer than planned, and focus energies internally at the expense of the mission. If you do reorganize, make sure you do it quickly, have the right career staff in charge, and don't try to fix too many problems at once. Otherwise the process takes over, and it is easy to lose a year or more to a reorganization initiative.

## **Takeaways**

- Leverage the senior career staff: Find out to whom you should listen and on what.
- Hire senior political staff with the right political talents.
- Blend political and career staff: Leverage their different strengths.
- Recognize that political appointees and careerists have different roles and responsibilities.
- Be careful how you blend the political and career jobs.
- Keep “political appointees only” meetings rare and reserve them for political matters.
- Put it all together and decide on whom to depend and for what.
- Don't reorganize your agency.