

Beginning with the critical selection process and orientation, *Paths to Making a Difference: Leading in Government* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2011) takes readers inside the lives of 24 political appointees.



The Challenge of Selecting and Orienting Political Appointees

by Paul R. Lawrence and Mark A. Abramson

In spring 2009, we launched an ambitious project. Would 24 top political executives in the newly formed Obama Administration—some of whom had not yet arrived—be willing to meet with us for three extended interviews over their first 18 months in office?

Our goals were both to track their learning curves and to understand more about their journeys as political executives during the first two-and-a-half years of a new administration. We asked to interview them at the end of six months, 12 months, and 18 months. By starting at the beginning of an administration, we would have the opportunity to see their early experiences firsthand and continue the conversation throughout their first two years of service. We aimed to capture the experience of political executives in real time while it was fresh.

In January 2013, a new group of political executives will arrive in Washington D.C., either to join the Obama Administration or a new administration. First-timers in the federal government can find the transition daunting. The aim of our research is to make it less daunting and to provide top appointees with practical advice on their journey into the halls of government.

Political executives are critical to any administration's game plan and ultimately to its historic legacy. In many ways, political executives are the "quarterbacks" of government, calling the plays (with some help from their coaches at the White House and at department headquarters). Their organizations, including critical career civil servants, look to them for leadership.

Our research offers the Office of Presidential Personnel (OPP) another way to think about the political positions it is filling. Previous books on

presidential appointee positions have been organized by department or around policy clusters (health, defense, or natural resources). We offer a framework organized around management challenges. The job specs for a science executive, a regulator, or a deputy secretary are dramatically different. The desired professional backgrounds and other requirements for each type of position also are different.

This article focuses on two crucial steps in the political appointment process:

- the selection of appointees
- the orientation of appointees.

Selecting Appointees: What OPP Needs to Know

We offer three important lessons for OPP in selecting the right appointee for the right position.

Lesson One: All Jobs Are Not the Same

We clustered the positions we examined by function. While it may be readily apparent that being a government scientist is different from being a regulator, which is different from being a deputy secretary, we continue to find across government people who presume that a smart person can fill any position. This is not the case.

Lesson Two: Identify the Right Set of Experiences for the Job

There is no doubt that nearly everyone on the long list for a presidential appointment is clearly qualified, in the sense of having a distinguished professional career and impressive educational credentials. But the key question is whether the person has the right set of experiences for a specific job at the point in time when she or he is selected.

One example is the White House decision in 1998 to seek a business executive who may or may not have had a legal background for the position of Internal Revenue Service commissioner. The White House needed somebody who could

Administrator Joe Main had to deal with the Upper Big Branch mine explosion in West Virginia. Main recalls, "I've lived through these experiences before, so I knew what to expect. ... My experiences earlier in my career were crucial."

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manage the information technology challenges that were currently facing IRS. Throughout its history, distinguished tax lawyers had run the agency but the right set of experiences had changed for IRS.

More recently, in the aftermath of the Deep Horizon crisis in the Gulf of Mexico, Michael Bromwich was selected to take over the Minerals Management Service (MMS) in the Department of Interior. Instead of sticking with the traditional set of energy and natural resources experience for MMS, Bromwich was recruited for his crisis management and turnaround skills. Additionally, it was appropriate—and perhaps necessary—to select an individual who had *not* had previous experience with the embattled energy industry.

Lesson Three: Experience Matters

An additional challenge for the OPP is anticipating problems and making selections partly based on the question, "What type of individual and what type of experience would be necessary if the agency faced a major crisis?"

In the case of the Mine Safety and Health Administration,

Orienting Appointees: The Importance of Onboarding

During our interviews, we observed a clear need and eagerness among new political executives for orientation activities at the departmental or agency level, in addition to activities organized government-wide by OPP. The orientation of political appointees has long been an issue of importance to new administrations. Amendments to the Presidential Transition Act of 2000 provided \$1 million for each new administration to provide orientation for its new appointees. The Clinton, Bush, and Obama Administrations performed orientation activities.

However, in a 2009 report, *Ready to Govern: Improving the Presidential Transition*, the Partnership for Public Service concluded that too little attention is paid—and insufficient resources are devoted—to preparing and training political appointees. In a survey of departing political executives conducted in 2008, the last year of the George W. Bush Administration, the National Academy of Public Administration and the Partnership found that nearly 45 percent of respondents reported that they

had received no orientation and that 33 percent of respondents rated the orientation they did receive as only somewhat effective (17.2 percent), not very effective (12.5 percent), or very poor (3.1 percent) in effectiveness.

Our interviews supported this finding and clearly demonstrated the desire by political executives for orientation services. One political executive told us, "I wish there had been a boot camp, 'Washington 101.' That would have told me how to navigate in Washington, including working with [Capitol] Hill." Political executives do receive numerous briefing books at the start of their tenure, but these books don't provide much advice on the navigation challenge.

Nearly all those interviewed expressed a desire to better understand the inner workings of Congress and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). One political executive confided, "I wish I had been better prepared to deal with Congress ... and how it operates. I may have been naïve about Congress prior to my arrival."

In addition to Congress and OMB, the political executives we interviewed also wanted to learn more about the budget process, the hiring process, and the procurement

process. Another political executive lamented, "I wish I had a 'dos and don'ts' list about how to do a reorganization. I would have liked to have known how to do it more efficiently."

The American public expects its political appointees to get up to speed as quickly as possible. Thus, more orientation and onboarding is needed for newly appointed executives. Based on our interviews, we offer the following recommendations on how to implement onboarding programs for political executives.

1. The chief operating officer (COO) of each department should create a small unit (one or two people) within his or her office to assume responsibility for onboarding new political executives. Placing this function up high would give both prestige and credibility to the initiative.
2. Shortly after their confirmation, the COO's onboarding team would facilitate informal meetings for new political executives with political executives who were confirmed earlier and have been in the department or agency longer. There are three key advantages to an onboarding program located in each department or agency:

- **Speed.** Since all appointees do not arrive at the same time, departments and agencies can provide orientation on a rolling schedule as soon as possible. Senate confirmation dates for our interview subjects ranged from April 2009 to December 2009. Eight arrived from April through June; eight arrived in July and August; and five arrived from October through December. All political appointees should receive some type


of orientation during the first month of their tenure.

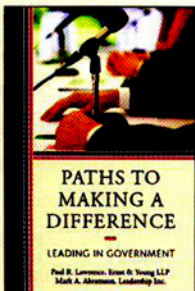
- **Customization.** Orientations should be developed to meet the specific information needs of the new executive. Political executives who come from the Hill obviously do not need to be briefed on the workings of Congress.
 - **Small groups.** Orientation may take place for 10 to 12 new appointees, from one or more departments at once on specific topics.
3. OPP should enlist the Library of Congress' Congressional Research Service, OMB, and the Office of Personnel Management to provide briefings on the legislative branch, the budget, and the government hiring process, respectively.

Our interviews conducted from 2009 to 2011 with political executives newly appointed to the Obama Administration illuminated a clear need to customize and increase the supply of orientation activities at the White House level, department level, and agency level. New political executives deserve no less.

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 **For more information** on how to do a reorganization right and personal reflections of John Berry, Patrick Gallagher, and Richard Nevell, see the summer 2011 issue of *The Public Manager*.



This article is adapted from *Paths to Making a Difference: Leading in Government* (Rowman &

Littlefield, 2011), which called for more orientation of political appointees.