

## **Post-Election: Adjusting to the New Regime**

**By Scott J. Cameron**

For many civil servants in state and local government, the November 2014 elections presaged the arrival in January 2015 of a lot of new faces in the political leadership of the agencies. The first six months of a new Administration, whether in City Hall, the Governor's mansion, or the county seat, in many ways will present a highly sensitive series of career challenges for leaders in the civil service.

### **Change is Change**

If the incumbent governor, mayor, or county leadership is re-elected, then the agency's pre-election pressure cooker atmosphere will rapidly dissipate. While there may well be some turnover at the political level in the agency as the new term begins for the old incumbent, that turnover will most likely happen in a leisurely and relatively stress-free way.

If the incumbent is term-limited or otherwise is not up for re-election, then there will certainly be a change in the elected individuals at the top of the organization chart, even if the same political party stays in control. It is a mistake to assume that just because the same party controls the elected positions before and after the election that policies and priorities will remain constant. The new team will have their own personalities, their own priorities, their own set of commitments made during the campaign that may be quite different from those of the prior Administration of the same party. Indeed, there will often be a great deal of self-imposed pressure for the new team to differentiate itself from the prior ways of doing things, even if they are of the same political and philosophical persuasion.

If, on the other hand, the voters decided that it is time for a change in party control of the government, not just a change in personalities, then a new set of challenges confront the career civil servant.

Inevitably, the outgoing Administration would have been concerned with locking in its "legacy". Signature initiatives of the outgoing administration or agency head probably became overwhelming preoccupations in the last few months of their term in office, as the outgoing team struggled against time to complete its priorities before the new team moved into the executive suite.

The career civil servant's predicament will become considerably more complicated, and risky, if one of the priority initiatives of the outgoing leadership team is anathema to the incoming leadership team. One's new bosses will be wondering who it was among the agency civil servants who they are inheriting helped the outgoing team get their last gasp priorities accomplished. The incoming team will usually be mildly sympathetic to the idea that career civil servants have an obligation to follow the legitimate instructions of the outgoing political appointees. After all, they will want and deserve the same deference to their own judgments. However, they will also be alert to any signs that particular career civil servants were unnecessarily energetic or enthusiastic in pursuing policies opposed by the incoming team. The fine line that the civil servant needs to walk is therefore to appear to be responsive and professional to the outgoing political leadership, without becoming perceived by the incoming team as an over-zealous enthusiast of the previous administration. It is not unheard of for career civil servants

to exercise their bureaucratic skills to stealthily stall actions of the outgoing team that they know are opposed by their future bosses. However, this behavior is inappropriate, and undercuts arguments that you will later want to make to the new team about the objectivity and professionalism of the civil service.

### **Burrowing In**

A change in administration often is accompanied by a phenomenon known as “burrowing in”, where individuals who occupied political appointments are converted into career civil service positions. The outgoing team may employ this practice for a variety of reasons. Motivations may vary from the benign, where a former political appointee truly enjoys government service and is eager to continue it, albeit in a different capacity. It may be motivated by practical considerations; it is a tough job market out there. Unfortunately, the incoming political team will almost always tend to take a sinister view of such appointments, viewing them as an effort to plant partisan saboteurs and spies into the agency, in jobs from which they can undercut the efforts of the new political leadership.

Each jurisdiction has its own rules about such practices, and whatever those may be, it is vitally important for responsible government human resource management professionals to ensure that those rules are followed to the letter. For example, in some jurisdictions, the requirement is that any such conversion takes place before Election Day, or some number of days before the new regime is sworn in.

For the burrower, the experience can be mixed. It certainly is great to have a job when your former political colleagues are job-hunting. However, the newly minted career civil servant’s political pedigree will be noticed by the new regime. I have seen situations where the burrower became a perennial outsider, never fully accepted by the career civil servants who came up through the ranks, and never trusted by the political leadership from the incoming Administration. That can make for a lonely work life, and is an eventuality the prospective burrower needs to consider before making the move.

### **Getting to Know You**

As is true of the first few months in any relationship, there is a period of mutual adjustment between the new political leadership of an agency and the career civil servants who were there before, and are likely to be there long after the new leaders have moved on to other opportunities.

There are several aspects of this new relationship that need to be carefully managed by the civil servant.

First, the civil service leader would be wise to have a conversation as soon as possible with the new political leader during which the civil servant explicitly says that they are there to help the new leader succeed, and are very eager to employ all their experience and knowledge of the agency to that end. This conversation help begin to overcome the common tendency of political leaders to be wary of trusting the civil servants who just spent some number of years trying to help the “other team” succeed. You can’t take for granted that the new political leader will intuitively grasp the role of civil servants; it is best to be explicit in this regard.

There are a number of ways the civil servant can make a positive impression early on. First, the agency's new political leader is going to need a lot of help with administrative challenges in the first few weeks on the job. Making those trivial tasks go as smoothly as possible will show the new political leader that the civil servant can in fact deliver value quickly.

Second, the civil service leader should organize a series of briefings for the new political leader on what the agency does, what processes it uses, and what programmatic or process decisions are likely to have to be made in the first 90 days that the new political appointee is in office. Providing this sort of structure will raise the level of comfort on the part of the new political leader, and at the same time demonstrates the knowledge and expertise of the career civil servant.

Thirdly, the civil servant leader should make an effort to compile policy statements and positions that are relevant to the work of the agency that were espoused by the government's new chief executive while that person was still a candidate for office. This allows the civil servant to anticipate the agenda of the new political leader, and also allows the civil servant the opportunity to begin to reflect on appropriate and alternative strategies for accomplishing that policy agenda. Such a compilation can even be presented to the agency's new political leadership in the form of a briefing book. That signals that the civil servants have at least been paying attention to what the new mayor, governor, or county elected official has been saying, and by extension that they are at least to some degree on board with the agenda, and willing to act like "part of the team".

Fourth, learn not to say "no" to the ideas of the agency's new political leader. New political leaders often have very little understanding of the processes of government, and how one can most effectively and efficiently navigate the bureaucratic process to accomplish policy and programmatic goals. They are rarely familiar with procurement regulations, or civil service employment rules, or the constraints of government union collective bargaining agreements, for instance. Instead of responding to a political appointee's perhaps not too well conceived ideas by saying something like "We don't do things that way around here", instead focus on the goal behind the idea. Be prepared to present alternative approaches that will accomplish the same policy objective without violating law, regulation, or otherwise creating a commotion that will ultimately hurt both the political appointee and the agency.

I once worked with a supremely skilled and interpersonally artful senior civil servant. He was a master at identifying and promoting alternative courses of action that would likely lead to the same policy outcome for his political superiors, while gently but firmly deflecting them from pursuing high risk strategies, to which they were dearly attached, but that would probably have boomeranged very painfully for all involved. Instead of saying "no" to an ill-advised idea, he would say something like, "I understand what you are trying to do, and I am committed to helping you succeed. May I make a suggestion that may enable you to achieve your goals more quickly and with less risk?" Who could refuse that sort of offer?

**Take a Deep Breath and Try to Relax**

Elections are part of the natural and essential rhythm of American society. They do pose challenges for civil servants. By exercising some care, those challenges can be overcome. You can position yourself for future success, and you will be ready when the next election cycle kicks in.

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