

## **Coping with the Career-Threatening Unexpected**

**By Scott J. Cameron**

I recently was emailing with a person who unexpectedly lost her government job after a local government election. She was not in a career civil service position, but still had been a longtime employee of the agency where she worked. The greatest irony is that she knew, and thought she had a good relationship with, the incoming political management team. When I first heard from her, she had already been let go by her agency, and was trying to adjust to the new reality, accept it, and decide what to do next with her life.

Her story motivated me to write this column on the various sources of career risks that government employees may face as a result of the electoral process. I also wanted to identify strategies that government employees might use to try to mitigate those risks.

### **Budget Risks**

There can be a lot of reasons that can lead to a government employee finding himself unemployed. Over the last decade, perhaps the most common reason has been layoffs driven by budget cuts that in turn were driven by revenue shortfalls at state and local governments during the great recession. While these layoffs were often massive and involved thousands of employees, at least the employees could typically see it coming. In most communities, it was pretty widely known for some time that government tax revenues were declining, and typically the legislature and the agency heads spent many months publicly talking about what to do about it. While the exact distribution of budget cuts may not have been known very far in advance, a reasonably attentive government employee could easily have predicted that something unfortunate was going to happen to someone pretty soon. The relatively good news in these sorts of scenarios is that staff reductions are often accomplished through providing employees with opportunities for early retirements, buyouts, and hiring freezes, so involuntary separations can be minimized.

There are several strategies for coping with the possibility of job losses from revenue shortfalls. First of all, the employee should understand what the involuntary separation rules are for the agency. The human resources department should be able to explain that easily. Is the last hired automatically the first fired? Are the people with the highest performance ratings, regardless of tenure, in the safest position? Are the highest graded employees the safest, able to “bump” lower graded employees out of their jobs? If after examining the rules, the employee feels he or she will be safe where they are, then the certainly can just decide to “tough it out” and see what happens. Alternatively, if the employee feels they are vulnerable, then it is time to update the resume and start looking for a new job. That doesn’t necessarily mean leaving government. It may mean moving to another agency or another part of the current agency that is perceived to be less exposed to budget cuts.

### **Policy Shifts**

Another scenario that may lead to job loss in government is when an election leads to a shift in the majority ideological view in the local or state legislature. All of a sudden, some programs that were the darlings of the previous majority become tempting areas for budget cuts under the new regime. Typically, the more closely those programs were associated with the prior regime, the more vulnerable they are when the political winds change. What follows are typically steep budget cuts in the programs

newly out of favor, even possibly program eliminations. Government employees employed in those newly vulnerable programs have to deal with the very real possibility of significant numbers of involuntary separations, since softer strategies for reducing the workforce probably can't accommodate the number or percentage of jobs that may be shed. There is also the psychological blow of public rejection that these employees must absorb. The period before the election they were often told and believed that they were doing something important, work that was valued by the community. After the election, their work is portrayed as waste; or worse, as being at odds with the prevalent values of society. These employees have to deal simultaneously with the stress of job loss and the emotional blow associated with a sense of rejection.

An effective coping strategy in this situation is to consider making a career move to an agency or program that is favored by the new leadership, and may even be the likely beneficiary of budget increases. However, one does need to be aware of possible disconnects between those who draft the budgets and those who actually appropriate funds. For instance, it would be truly unfortunate to move from a program in an agency that ended up being well funded by the state legislature over the objections of the governor, to a program favored by the governor whose funding the legislature decides to cut.

### **Scandal**

A third scenario that often leads to job loss, at least at the management level in an agency, is a real or perceived public scandal associated with the program. One example at the national level include the problems with unacceptably long waiting times and allegedly fabricated performance reporting for medical services at the Veterans Health Administration. Another is the Internal Revenue Service's alleged active antipathy to conservative non-profit organizations. At the local level, officer-involved shootings such as happened in Ferguson, Missouri, can be very damaging for the agencies involved. In this type of situation, legislators and other elected officials often publicly talk about "culture" problems in the agency, and the need to "clean house" in order to change the culture. This usually translates into firing or forced resignation of the senior career civil service managers in the agency. It also results in the entire agency, even parts of the agency totally unconnected to the public scandal, operating under a cloud of suspicion for an extended period of time. The press will continue to probe and publicize the real or imagined wrongdoing for many months, especially if the agency is viewed as less than forthcoming. In the most severe instances, there will be investigations conducted by independent external authorities. There may even be the threat of criminal prosecution of those in the agency most directly involved. Even if it is eventually determined that there was nothing illegal or inappropriate that actually happened, employee morale will absorb a blow. Recruitment and retention of employees will suffer. Employees will find themselves subject to teasing from friends and acquaintances in social settings, or even being the butt of jokes from the hosts of late night television shows.

The best strategies for dealing with the scandal scenario are first to try to legitimately distance oneself from being associated with the heart of the problem, assuming you really aren't the one accountable for the problem. Secondly, eagerly volunteer to be part of the solution. Every agency grappling with a scandal wants to show the public quickly and convincingly what it is doing to remedy the situation. Make yourself part of the team working on the solution. Thirdly, amidst all the bad public relations and bad jokes, hold onto your devotion to the mission. Remind yourself what motivates you about working in the agency. Hold onto that commitment to help you weather the bad publicity storm.

## **Bad Perception**

Finally, a civil servant's job, or at least their position, may be endangered simply as a result of an election involving a change in the executive branch leader of a government, whether it is a Mayor, County Board Chair, Governor, or the President. Sadly, the incoming political management of the government has the unfortunate tendency to view all the civil servants that they inherit from the previous political team as slavishly devoted to the previous team's agenda. They are perceived therefore as unenthusiastic about or even potential saboteurs of the initiatives of the new team. This pattern tends to prevail even when the outgoing political team and the incoming team belong to the same political party. The new team will want "their people" in place; people who they perceive owe their allegiance to the new leadership.

They also have the practical political problem of wanting to show their appreciation in some fashion for their supporters who were helpful during the successful campaign. Often this will mean looking for ways to place those campaign workers in government jobs, especially government jobs that are not covered by civil service rules. For government employees who do not have civil service protection these changes can mean loss of employment. For those with civil service status it may still mean job transfers to a different position, perhaps a position that is viewed as being less sensitive or essential in accomplishing the priorities of the new leadership.

There are two related strategies a government employee can pursue to reduce the career risks associated with a change in political leadership brought about by an election. First, one should routinely maintain a certain degree of professional detachment in the conduct of one's responsibilities. While it is important to be loyal, efficient and effective, it would also not be prudent to be perceived as a zealous promoter of programs and policies to the extent that the line blurs between the role of the civil servant on the one hand and the political advocate on the other. The people on the outside who are hoping to be on the inside after the next election will note any apparent overzealousness by a civil servant, and remember it after they prevail at the polls. The second strategy is to be direct in pledging loyalty to the incoming regime as soon as the new agency leadership is installed, and making a commitment to do one's professional best to help them accomplish their policies and goals. It is important to be upfront about this to help overcome the skepticism or even suspicion that the incoming team typically brings with them to their first interactions with civil servants.

## **Coping**

If the worst happens, and a change in jobs seems inevitable, it is important to realize that what is happening to you almost certainly should not be taken personally (unless you happen to be under criminal investigation!). You are most probably are an innocent bystander being affected by larger forces that are at work. You just happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Try hard not to jump to the conclusion that something is wrong with you; that you are somehow a less worthy person than you were before. Instead, try to view the change in situation as an opportunity to try something new; to learn; to grow; to take your life in a new direction.

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