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Speeding Up the Learning Curve: Observations from a Survey of Seasoned Political Appointees

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The men and women who serve, “At the pleasure of the President, for the time being subject to good behavior” and who have been confirmed by the Senate represent a unique cadre. Forever going forward, they will be able to use the word “Honorable” before their names. This may be one of their few perquisites of office.

For most of the seasoned executives who have filled these roles over many administrations, the chance to serve the president and thus serve their country has been one of the most rewarding times of their lives. The system of replacing senior leaders every four or eight years has been criticized by efficiency experts as being a sub-optimal solution to managing government. The most important key to the success of the process is the competence—knowledge, skills, and abilities—of the people who take on these leadership roles. These competencies can be learned, but what cannot be taught is the motivation for service that these individuals bring.

In the leadership of most departments and agencies in the federal government, you will find one or more presidential appointees who require Senate confirmation. These men and women are referred to as “Presidential Appointments with Senate Confirmation” (PAS) in the *United States Government Policy and Supporting Positions*, commonly known as the Plum Book. The report is published alternately by the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs and the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform every four years, just after the presidential election.

There are about 500 key executive and leadership PAS positions. Some people feel that this is too many. Others, particularly members of Congress, believe that confirmation is important to assure the quality of senior individuals and to remind them that they have responsibilities that extend to oversight by Congress.

There is great diversity of backgrounds and expectations for the group of PAS appointees. They are scientists, statisticians, accountants, social service providers, business leaders, as well as other professions. The common bond among them is that they serve “at the pleasure of the president.” Their job is to faithfully execute the duties of the office they hold and to develop and implement the policies of their president’s administration.

For many it is their first and only job in government. For others, it is the capstone of a career in government. In either case, the job is challenging and the environment heady. This paper is based on a survey of PAS members of the George W. Bush administration as they prepared for a “change of command.” The survey focused on the advice they wish they had when they took their positions.

This paper presents findings from the survey and is aimed at speeding up the learning curve for the presidential appointees arriving in the Obama administration. This survey was a “snapshot” in time. It was not intended to be a scientific examination, but rather an organized description of helpful observations from one group of appointees to their successors.

Six Observations of Seasoned Presidential Appointees

The outgoing Senate-confirmed appointees of President George W. Bush shared their insights in a survey conducted by the National Academy of Public Administration and the Partnership for Public Service during September 2008. In general, this was a seasoned group with a significant amount of federal experience prior to taking their positions, and many of them had served for more than the average PAS period of service.

Their observations are presented here as a guide for their successors.

Observation One: Knowledge of Ethics Standards and Financial Disclosure Rules is Needed to be Rapidly Effective

As they started their tenure, especially during the confirmation process, the group was focused on learning the rules for ethics and financial disclosure. While this undoubtedly stems from the need to prepare for confirmation hearings, the uniformity of the responses shows that making sure that they understood and measured up to the prevailing standard of behavior was a predominant concern.

Along with this came the need to be sure of what was expected of them. The appointees clearly both wanted and needed direction from their department or agency head and the White House about how they would be measured in their jobs.

Observation Two: Performance and Results Matter

Two aspects of performance were cited as important or very important by the group:

- Measuring organizational results in terms of outcomes
- Evaluating employee performance

These two items were seen as related. The appointees viewed their jobs as setting standards for performance and measuring the organization's ability to meet these standards. This aspect of management ranked well above financial, contract, or pay and benefits management in the survey responses. Key to achieving agency performance was encouraging the high performance of key subordinates.

Observation Three: Policy Development and Implementation Depend on Understanding Processes

Four factors ranked at the top of the appointees' agendas when developing and implementing policy:

- Understanding the president's management and policy priorities
- Knowing how the executive branch functioned
- Understanding the budget process
- Mastering the process of policy development

Almost all of the appointees cited "knowing the president's priorities" as the most important element in developing and implementing policies at the agency level. They did not want to be seen as independent actors, but rather as members of the administration team.

Observation Four: Managing Relationships Matters

The group surveyed put the Office of Management and Budget, career employees and Congress at the top of their list for groups with whom developing and maintaining good relationships is crucial. Seen as significantly less important were unions and other employee groups.

Observation Five: Leadership is the Key Competency

All of the appointees surveyed cited leadership as an important or very important competency of a presidential appointee. This was followed closely by negotiation and communication. In their narrative discussions, the group often cited the need for communication “up, down and sideways” as a key element of their success.

Observation Six: The Support of Career Executives is Critical

The survey indicated that career executives provided three essential ingredients:

- Knowledge of the agency’s policies and processes
- Supportiveness for the goals of new leaders
- Understanding of the internal culture

Again and again, the appointees cited the reliance on career executive staff as a key element of their success.

What Was Learned From the Survey?

What do appointees need to know?

One set of questions probed the appointees' view of what information their successors will need to be effective rapidly in their new roles. The importance of seven different areas to the appointees' effectiveness is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Knowledge and Insights Needed to be Effective Rapidly

	Important or Very Important	
	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Ethics Standards	62	96.8
Financial Disclosure Rules	61	95.3
Expectations During First Months	60	92.3
Senate Confirmation Process	53	81.5
Orientation/Onboarding	53	80.5
Security Clearance Process	48	73.9
Benefits and Compensation	27	41.5

Knowledge of ethics standards was selected as the single most important element to promote effectiveness. More than 73% said it was very important, the highest category. No one felt that it was unimportant. Financial disclosure was second in importance. More than 95% indicated that this was either important or very important.

At the other end of the spectrum, information about benefits and compensation was found to be important or very important by only 41.5%, while almost 17% found it to be unimportant or very unimportant.

How important is management?

The next set of questions related to the appointees' views of the importance of various management aspects of their job. Again the focus was on what their successors needed to know to be successful. As shown in Table 2, two of the six areas stood out. They were managing and evaluating employee performance, and measuring results and outcomes. Both of these scored higher than 95% in responses that they were important or very important.

At the bottom of the group, with less than 70%, were procurement and contract management and pay and benefits for employees.

Table 2: What Elements of Management Matters

	Important or Very Important	
	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Managing and Evaluating Employee Performance	65	98.5
Measuring Results/Outcomes	62	95.4
Recruiting and Training Talented Staff	57	89.0
Financial Management and Internal Control	55	85.9
Procurement and Contract Management	45	69.2
Pay and Benefits (for Employees)	38	58.4

What do appointees need to know about policy and operations?

The respondents were asked which aspects of policy and federal operations were most important to their effectiveness and would be similarly important to their successors. In six categories, more than 90% of the respondents found that the items listed in Table 3 were important or very important to their success. Only federal personnel management practices (69.3%) seemed to be of lesser importance.

Table 3: Policy and Operations

	Important or Very Important	
	Number of Respondents	Percentage
How the Executive Branch Works	63	96.9
President’s Management and Policy Priorities	62	95.4
Budget Process	61	93.8
Policy Development/Implementation	61	93.8
How Congress Works	60	92.3
White House Organization/ Decision Making	59	90.8
Federal Personnel Management Practices	45	69.3

How important is managing relationships?

Management at the federal level is not all about managing budgets and procurements. It is also about managing relationships. Again, the respondents had strong agreement on seven of eight items, five positive and two of lesser importance. More than 90% believed that relationships with Congress, OMB, career executives, stakeholders/ interest groups, and the public were important or very important. Less than 60% believed that relationships with union or employee groups or OPM were important or very important. These results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Managing Relationships

	Important or Very Important	
	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Office of Management and Budget	61	93.8
Career Government Executives	61	93.8
Congress	61	93.8
Public	61	93.8
Stakeholder/Interest Groups	59	90.8
Media	57	87.7
Unions/Employee Groups	38	58.5
Office of Personnel Management	34	52.3

What skills are needed by appointees?

“Leadership” received a unanimous rating as either important or very important in terms of the skills needed to be effective. Others that ranked higher than 90% included communications, collaboration, and negotiation. Technology was cited by 67.7%.

Table 5: Skills

	Important or Very Important	
	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Leadership	65	100.0
Negotiation	63	96.9
Communication	61	93.8
Collaboration	60	92.3
Change Management	57	87.7
Team Building	55	84.6
Technology	44	67.7

What type of orientation and training is needed by appointees?

Responses in this area were more open-ended in character. The key question asked was, “Overall, how well did the orientation you received when you entered the federal government prepare you for your first appointed position?” Forty-five percent (45%) reported that they received no orientation, and 33% of the entire sample rated the orientation only somewhat (17.2%), not very (12.5%) or very poor (3.1%) in effectiveness.

However, most respondents indicated that they thought that additional orientation or continuing training was necessary for effectiveness. The range on topics suggested included:

- “A better understanding of the who, what and how things are organized at OMB, the White House and my department.”
- “Continuing training on empowering and developing teams.”

- “A government management training course similar to the one career SES attend.”
- “It would have been great to know White House expectations, reporting relationships, communications strategies.”
- “Know performance management: how to align incentives of SES and general schedule employees to get priorities done.”

How should appointees view career executives?

All of the respondents indicated that working with career executives was very important (89.4%) or important to getting their job done. In terms of the attributes of career executives that were necessary to work effectively with presidential appointees, all five categories scored above 90% as being important or very important.

Table 6: Attributes of Career Executives

	Important or Very Important	
	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Knowledge of Agency Policies and Processes	65	98.5
Supportiveness for Goals of New Leaders	65	98.5
Understanding Internal Culture	64	97.0
Understanding External Stakeholders	62	93.9
Dealing Successfully with Congress	60	90.9

When asked to list the top three things they would recommend to their successor to help foster a strong partnership with career government employees, the appointees recommended:

- Listening
- Trusting
- Communicating

Comments such as the following reflect these recommendations:

- “Listen and trust. You do not have to accept advice and recommendations but spurning it will mark you as someone who has no respect for career service.”
- “Make them part of your team—minimize the differences between your career and political appointees.”
- “Gain insights from career executives on what worked well, why, opportunities yet to be tapped, etc.”

How well prepared were agencies for the 2009 presidential transition?

In September 2008 when the survey was conducted, more than 95% of the respondents felt that their department or agency was well prepared for the 2009 presidential transition, and none felt that they were unprepared. When asked the most important thing their agency could do to smoothly integrate new presidential appointees into their positions, the predominant responses were communication, good planning and making themselves available.

When asked for advice for their successors, the comments included:

- “Learn the guts of the HR process—selection, promotion, bonuses, performance plans. Learn how to align your bureaus with what the department or agency wants to get done. Make sure people know what you want to get done.”
- “Arrive with a mission and goals. Articulate them clearly to the whole agency. Value career civil servants. Read and understand everything. Incorporate goals and performance standards in performance reviews. Share accountability with the entire agency.”
- “Be aggressive in the pursuit of change but always be conscious of the impact that change will have on institutions that are hostile to change.”

How helpful were the Bush administration performance management and measurement initiatives?

When asked to rank the helpfulness of various performance management and measurement initiatives implemented during the Bush administration, the respondents cited the Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART) (82%) and the Executive Branch Scorecard (69%) as the most helpful, and the Performance Improvement Council (37%) and the Agency Performance Officers (33%) as the least helpful. About 62% of respondents would somewhat modify or totally redesign PART.

There was sentiment for having program assessment managed in the agencies and not in OMB. Additional advice includes focusing on cross-cutting areas, devoting more resources to training on program evaluation, and revamping performance measurement within agencies to reduce burden.

Some comments illuminate these responses:

- “If you are not keeping score, you are just practicing. No matter if it is customer service metrics for operating units across an agency or general performance metrics, the absence of a concerted effort to measure success means results will not be recorded.”
- “If program assessment is delegated to the agencies without OMB or independent check, it will fail.”
- “OMB trying to run government is wasteful, ineffective and disempowers executives. Need to insist on performance management internal to agencies.”

Who Was Surveyed?

Individual Characteristics of Respondents

The survey was administered by the National Academy of Public Administration and the Partnership for Public Service during September 2008. It was conducted via e-mail using an online survey instrument. The Bush administration critiqued the survey and it was reviewed by an independent group of experts before distribution.

The President of the National Academy sent an e-mail accompanying the survey and follow-up reminders. Of the 327 e-mail addresses to which the survey was sent, there were 66 respondents (19%). This response rate was consistent with, but slightly lower than, a survey of the Senior Executive Service that was conducted at the same time.

Experience of Appointees

A significant percentage of those surveyed (45.5%) said that they had worked in the federal government immediately prior to becoming an appointee. The private sector was in second place with 22.7%.

Table A-1: Type of Organization Immediately Prior to Current Appointment

Type	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Federal Government	30	45.5
Private Sector	15	22.7
Nonprofit Sector	8	12.1
State Government	7	10.6
Local Government	1	1.5
Academia	3	4.5
Other	2	3.0
Total	66	99.9

Forty-nine percent (49%) indicated that they had at least five years of federal experience before taking their assignment. This may be partially accounted for by the fact that 56.9% indicated that they had held two or more presidentially appointed positions during their careers.

Table A-2: Years of Prior Federal Experience

Years	Number of Respondents	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
None	5	9.4	9.4
1 to 5	21	39.6	49.0
6 to 10	12	22.6	71.6
11 to 15	6	11.3	82.9
16 to 20	2	3.8	86.7
More than 20	7	13.3	100.0

Confirmation Process

Despite the prior government experience of this group, confirmation was not rapid. More than 56% indicated that it took four or more months from the time they were officially nominated until confirmation. In more than 10% of the cases, the time required was 10 months or more.

Table A-3: Time from Official Nomination Until Confirmation

Months	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Less than 1	6	9.1
1 to 3	23	34.8
4 to 6	25	37.9
7 to 9	5	7.6
10 to 12	5	7.6
More than 12	2	3.0
Total	66	100

Additional Resources

Resources Providing Advice on Serving as a Political Appointee

The Presidential Appointee's Handbook (Brookings Institution Press) by G. Edward DeSeve. This volume focuses on the key competencies for presidential appointees: leading for results, managing change, providing technical ability, leading others, leading yourself, and maintaining global awareness.

Getting It Done: A Guide for Government Executives (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc.) by Mark A. Abramson, Jonathan D. Breul, John M. Kamensky, and G. Martin Wagner. This volume includes two sections. The first section focuses on the six “to dos” for political appointees: before confirmation, be careful; learning how things work; act quickly on what can't wait; develop a vision and a focused agenda; assemble your leadership team; and manage your environment. The second section focuses managing relationships with 14 key stakeholder groups.

The Operators Manual for the New Administration (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc.) by Mark A. Abramson, Jonathan D. Breul, John M. Kamensky, and G. Martin Wagner. This volume presents information on eight essential tools for achieving the goals of government executives: leadership, performance, people, money, contracting, technology, innovation, and collaboration.

Agencies in Transition: A Report on the Views of the Members of the Federal Senior Executive Service (National Academy of Public Administration). This volume presents findings from a survey of more than 1,000 members of the Senior Executive Service and includes recommendations on the 2009 presidential transition.

Presidential Transition Guide to Federal Human Resources Management (Office of Personnel Management). This *Guide* was prepared to provide the incoming administration a detailed description of the various rules, regulations, and policies that govern the establishment of transition teams, the departure and appointment of political appointees, and the treatment of career federal employees during the transition period. The guide is available online at www.chcoc.gov/Transmittals/Attachments/trans1300.pdf.

Government Accountability Office's 2009 Congressional and Presidential Transition Guide. On this website, GAO provides insight into, and recommendations for addressing, the nation's major issues, risks and challenges. The guide is available online at www.gao.gov/transition_2009.

Resources Providing Information about Political Positions

United States Government Policy and Supporting Positions (Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs) provides a full listing of all Presidential Appointments with Senate Confirmation (PAS), as well as all other appointee positions. The listing is available online at www.gpoaccess.gov/plumbbook/2008/index.html.

The Prune Book (Council for Excellence in Government) provides in-depth descriptions of key positions in each federal department and major independent agencies. *Prune Book* position descriptions are available online at www.prunesonline.org.

About the Author

G. Edward DeSeve served as a Senior Lecturer at the University of Pennsylvania's Fels Institute of Government while conducting the survey presented in this report. He was recently appointed Special Advisor to the President for Recovery Implementation, Assistant to the Vice President and Senior Advisor to the Director of the Office of Management and Budget.

Mr. DeSeve has held senior posts at all three levels of American government and in the private sector. He has served as Chief Financial Officer of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Controller of OMB, and in 1997, he was appointed Deputy Director for Management at OMB, the highest management position in the federal government. He began his career with the City of Philadelphia serving as a junior budget analyst, Budget Director, Deputy Director for Finance, and later became Director of Finance. In 1990, he served as Assistant to the Governor of Pennsylvania.

Mr. DeSeve's private sector experience includes serving as chairman of Strategy and Solution Partners, partner and national industry director at KPMG Peat Marwick, and as Management Director of Merrill Lynch Capital Markets. His academic experience also includes serving as a senior fellow at the James MacGregor Burns Academy of Leadership at the University of Maryland School of Public Policy.

He holds a Master of Government Administration in Public Finance from the University of Pennsylvania, and a Bachelor of Science in Labor Economics from Cornell University.



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