



INSIGHTS FROM THE BDO PUBLIC SECTOR PRACTICE

MAKING A TRANSITION WORK: TOP TEN TIPS FOR FEDERAL CAREER EMPLOYEES

By Don Bice

Federal employees that have made their career in public service are the most valuable assets the federal government has and are crucial to a successful transition. While every department or bureau has specific program, policy and operational considerations, the needs of incoming political leadership are consistent across government.

Incoming political leadership often want objective analysis and a fresh perspective from career staff, while simultaneously seeking to ensure the continued implementation of critically important programs. By effectively sharing knowledge during a transition, career employees will benefit the incoming and outgoing administrations, the federal government at large as well as the Americans who are relying on a smooth transition for many of the programs that impact their daily lives. It is with that in mind that we offer ten quick takes on ensuring you contribute to a successful transition.

TOP 10 TRANSITION REMINDERS

10. Understand your vital role



Career federal employees chose their profession to serve the people of the United States of America. By letting that guiding principle inform their work during a transition, federal employees can be an invaluable contributor throughout the process.

9. Anticipate needs



Policy officials appreciate staff that foresee problems and reduce their workload. Think through all aspects of a problem before presenting it to policy officials for further action. No leader has the time to consider every phase of a question as thoroughly as someone who has been working closely with it for a considerable amount of time. When presenting a problem, aim to propose a solution or plan of action along with it.

8. Be professional



When discussing processes and issues, deal in facts and minimize the use of conjecture and hyperbole. Leveraging facts makes it easier to avoid opining on past policy approaches and decisions. An analytical approach will build long-term trust with new policy officials.

7. Objectivity is key



Every decision you make throughout a transition is representative of your organization and should not be clouded by personal beliefs. Demonstrate objectivity and avoid personalizing things or using phrases like “I think” or “you should.” Policy officials will have difficulty accepting your perspective if it is presented as opinion rather than an objective analysis.

6. Listen first



The purpose of the relationship between career employee and the incoming administration is to learn and understand appointees' goals and to carry out their policies. Do research on their priorities and be prepared to listen and ask informed questions to understand their perspective and direction.

5. Details matter



Be precise with language and accurate with numbers, and pay attention to even the smallest details. When asked a question you can't answer immediately, explain that you need to get back to them with the right answer, rather than just responding in the moment. First impressions are lasting, so keep that in mind with every interaction—it can be hard to overcome providing incorrect information.

4. Be organized



In a transition, you are often tasked with keeping a number of balls in the air at one time. Keep track of any and all requests and try not to let incoming officials become overwhelmed by day-to-day affairs. Your organizational skills and attention to detail will build confidence in the information you provide as you help appointed officials meet their goals.

3. Patience is a virtue



The most common questions from new policy officials are procedural in nature, as they often are encountering federal systems for the first time. You should treat these questions, no matter how basic, as important. Answers should be complete, and in plain, easy-to-understand language. You will never have credibility on substantive issues until you've established credibility on process, so these questions can be valuable opportunities to further develop relationships.

2. Empathize



Policy officials are human beings. Staff must be sensitive to their desires, moods and needs. Do not ask a tired or sick policy official to make a complicated decision, and don't overload them when they are just starting out. You only reinforce the stereotype of a government bureaucrat when you show up for the first meeting with an overwhelming armful of documents.

1. Don't defend the status quo



“That's how we've always done it” is never the right answer when working with new officials. It is not helpful to give appointees' ideas short shrift by reacting with a knee-jerk “we tried this before” response. Remember that appointees are new to the process, so be supportive and responsive, and you might be surprised by the new ideas they bring to the table.

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