

Needed: A New Approach for Onboarding Political Appointees

By Mark A. Abramson, Paul R. Lawrence, and Joseph Gurney

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Change is the new keyword of 2016. A new administration was elected in November on the promise of bringing change to Washington. To make this happen, the new team needs to carefully evaluate how Washington currently does business and what it should do differently in the future.

An immediate first step would be to reevaluate how government has traditionally undertaken the onboarding of new political appointees. We define strategic onboarding as "the systemic and designed approach over the first year of an appointee's tenure that will prepare him or her for success. The goal of strategic onboarding is to have new appointees become productive in a short amount of time."

Historically, the federal government's approach to onboarding can be characterized by:

- A centralized one-day White House Orientation program conducted during the second half of the first year of an administration;
- Few, if any, onboarding services provided at the departmental level; and
- A de facto "sink or swim" approach to new political appointees.

We believe that changing the current approach would help political appointees be more effective. In a recently-released report, [*The Onboarding of New Political Appointees*](#), authors Lilith Christiansen, Paul Lawrence, Mark Stein, and Mark Abramson, propose a new process. It is characterized by:

- A decentralized approach, in which each cabinet department assumes responsibility for onboarding new appointees;
- An increased number of activities undertaken between the time of nomination and confirmation of the new appointee;
- A variety of mechanisms to deliver onboarding, including briefings, small group seminars, training sessions, face-to-face meetings, site visits, and social events.

Why a New Approach is Needed

Based on interviews conducted with previous political appointees, we found that nearly all those interviewed felt that they did not receive the onboarding support they needed. One appointee told us, "I have had two presidential appointments and I did not receive any formal or informal orientations in either position." The experience of this appointee is common and significantly different from what goes on in the private sector, where onboarding services are typically provided to all new employees.

The incoming administration needs to take a new approach for several reasons. First, many new appointees are likely to come from the private sector, with many having no previous government experience. These individuals will need to receive key information about the differences between the public and private sectors as soon as possible. Second, since

many will be coming from the private sector, they will expect the same quality of onboarding services they received in the private sector.

What Do New Appointees Need to Know?

Based on our interviews, we have concluded an effective onboarding program must communicate needed information in the following categories.

1. The Basics: *How do I become an employee of the federal government?*

There are a host of actions that need to be taken during the first week. Although appointees will need to be briefed about getting on the payroll and signing up for health insurance and other benefits, there is much other work to be done during Week One. Several appointees noted that they had not received any advance information on such issues as where to park, how to get around the new building. Another aspect of the "basics" is to provide new appointees with assistance in finding housing, both temporary and permanent.

2. The Essentials: *What are the rules of government that I need to know?*

After the basics, the next set of information centers around the "rules" of government. These rules are important because mistakes in following them frequently can get a new (or even an experienced) appointee in trouble. Government is rule-driven and there are clear procedures to be followed in undertaking the business of government. Thus, the proposed onboarding office needs to determine the best way to explain the rules surrounding ethics, procurement, personnel and travel. These are not just good things to know. A lack of understanding of these rules can get a new appointee in serious trouble. The goal of the proposed onboarding unit is to avoid the "nobody told me" response by new appointees after they have inadvertently violated a rule. Potential rule violations include things such as accepting gifts of greater value than those allowed by federal ethics rules, telling friends about a future procurement and spending more money on travel than is permitted.

3. The Job: *What do I need to know about my job?*

After the basics and the essentials, new appointee will need a considerable amount of information about the job itself. Providing this will take time and require a customized onboarding schedule for each new appointee. This information can be summed up by "how does this organization operate?" This component of onboarding includes understanding the department and the federal government; the tools of the job; goals and strategic challenges; the major policy issues facing the new appointee; and Congress.

4. Becoming Effective: *How do I succeed in my job?*

While much of the information needed by a political appointee can be transmitted through briefings, group meetings, and orientation sessions, offering advice on becoming effective is more challenging. We have found that the most effective way to transmit this kind of information is through seminars or meetings with former political appointees who have been there. These individuals are very willing to share their experiences with new appointees. Former appointees can discuss what worked for them and what did not work.

Next Steps

The new Administration must quickly begin preparing for new political appointees who will start arriving in January and continue to arrive throughout the remainder of 2017. Agencies must prepare now to onboard new appointees.

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