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ABOUT

the Fels Institute of Government at the University of Pennsylvania

Founded in 1937, the Fels Institute of Government (Fels) is the University of Pennsylvania's graduate program in public policy and public administration. We are the most personal and practical program in public management in the Ivy League. Originally established for the purpose of training local government officials, over time Fels broadened its mission; it now prepares students for public leadership positions in city, state, and Federal agencies, elective politics, nonprofit organizations, and private firms with close connections to the public sector. Its 1,800 living alumni work in leadership roles across the U.S. and around the world. In addition, for more than 75 years, Fels has worked with clients at the local, state and national level on over 1,400 projects to strengthen the impact of the public sector.

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OVERVIEW

Ensuring a smooth succession of executive power during a gubernatorial transition requires coordinating many complex, politically-sensitive, moving parts. The state chief administrator sits at the epicenter of this vitally important sixty day period, and is often responsible for managing the transition, inauguration, and executive mansion. These tasks demand strong leadership and management skills, and draw on some of the most important core competencies required to be a successful state chief administrator.

- Planning for the transition begins months in advance, but painstaking preparation can be dismantled immediately once the new administration arrives. As a state chief administrator, how do you select and **prepare a team** that strikes a balance between diligent planners and nimble responders?
- Communicating necessary updates to your transition team and a diverse mix of partners and stakeholders, while ensuring confidentiality of sensitive information requires a well thought out **communications strategy**. How do you and your team communicate in an effective and efficient manner?
- Interfacing with the outgoing and new administrations, reporting to two Governors, dealing with the press, and transitioning the first family requires an important set of soft skills that are necessary for **cultivating relationships** with different stakeholders involved in the transition. How do you manage relationships with these key partners?
- Informing the Governor-elect of your department's existing and pipeline projects, and convincing him to adopt new initiatives requires negotiation and marketing skills. How will you prepare to **pitch your projects**?

These questions will be addressed in the following case study. The case study presented here is the story of the 2013 gubernatorial transition in Virginia, from the perspective of the state chief administrator. Part A describes details of the case with pause points for some of the major strategic decisions that the state chief administrator faced along the way. Part B, which will be distributed at the Institute, outlines the approach the state chief administrator took to lead his team through this transition. The information presented in this case study reflects our interpretation of events from the interviews conducted over the past several months.

PART A:

“There is a certain amount of transition that goes on all the time in Virginia.”

— Secretary of Finance

Imagine you are Rich Sliwoski. You have had a long career in public service after having spent time in the military. You’ve served as the Director of the Commonwealth of Virginia’s Department of General Services (DGS) since 2006, having been reappointed on two separate occasions. You have established a well-respected department, fondly referred to as DGS for its “Damn Good Service” and “Damn Good Staff.”

Gubernatorial transitions are nothing new for you. Virginia is the only state that has a constitutional provision prohibiting a Governor from succeeding himself, which ensures that a newcomer is installed in the Governor’s office after each election. You’ve served as Director of DGS under three separate administrations and have overseen the transitions between them. In addition to the Governor, you’re also responsible for transitioning the Lieutenant Governor and Attorney General as well. You have a veteran DGS transition team, but have recently recruited someone from the budget office to be the DGS team leader for the inauguration and transition.

In order to ensure that the new administration is operational on day one, planning for the 2013 transition and inauguration started months in advance. Your DGS team has been meeting with relevant parties, including IT and security, in order to cultivate strong relationships in advance of the election. You have distilled information gathered from months and months of planning into a comprehensive welcome packet, which outlines pertinent information, ranging from technology instructions to parking permits. The packet awaits the new administration’s transition team the morning they arrive in their transition offices, which you scouted out months in advance.

In addition to anticipated challenges, you encounter several unexpected challenges. The day after the 2013 election, a recount has been demanded for the closely contested race for the office of the State Attorney General. As a result, your team needs to set up an additional transition office overnight, equipped with desks,

phones, and computers so that both candidates have offices while the recount occurs. You're forced to reformat the transition space that had been set-up weeks in advance. Compounding this chaos, a neuro-virus erupts in the transition office, and once again, you have to quickly adjust the transition space in order to provide quarantined areas for those potentially infected. During all of these unexpected issues, the administration's transition team has had to continue with their day-to-day functions, including vetting applicants and interviewing staff for the new administration, meeting with the press, setting policy goals, and more. These examples demonstrate the full flexibility required when transitioning public officials.

While ongoing preparations have been taking place for the transition, you've been simultaneously coordinating the logistics for the inauguration. Because of the public nature of inauguration day, many stakeholders want to be involved in the planning process. Part of your responsibility is to manage expectations around the feasibility of some of their requests. For example, the Governor-elect's transition team appeals to change the parade route. After personally walking the newly proposed route, you deem the steep hill located in the middle of it as unsuitable and potentially dangerous for those participating in the parade, particularly members of the band carting heavy instruments. You decline the request to alter the parade route. This decision turned out to be a fortunate one, because inauguration day was one of the rainiest days that November, and the steep hill would have caused inevitable issues.

Throughout this period, you've interfaced with the outgoing administration and incoming administration. You've had to manage expectations of the Governor-elect's transition team, and coach your team through this turbulent, but exciting time. You've had to welcome the Governor-elect's family into the mansion while respectfully and in a timely manner moving the current family out of the mansion. You've also seized the opportunity to capitalize on the time you get with the Governor-elect in order to advance your department's top initiatives.

Despite several unexpected obstacles and amidst all of the competing priorities, the 2013 gubernatorial transition was one of the smoothest in Virginia's history. How did Rich Sliwoski, and his team at the Department of General Services do it, and what might you have done in his position to manage the team, communicate effectively, build and maintain strong relationships, and garner support for important projects?

MANAGING THE TRANSITION TEAM

For this effort to be successful you know you need to build a high performing team. In order to execute your role effectively, you must find the right leadership, engage the right partners, manage the team's growth (and growing pains), establish support systems, and keep morale and motivation high. However, there are several factors complicating these efforts.

BUILDING THE DGS TRANSITION TEAM

As the Director of DGS, you oversee more than 600 state employees, four divisions, and eight business units. While you provide opportunities for many of your staff members to get involved in various aspects of the transition, the dedicated DGS transition team is very small, and consists of only a few people. Your Deputy Director has had experience transitioning Governors, and is familiar with the logistical aspects involved. However, you have recruited a new Deputy Director of the Division of Engineering and Buildings, who you've tasked with spearheading the DGS transition team. Not only is she new to DGS, this is her first experience in gubernatorial transitions. Making sure you have the right person in this position is vital to the success of the transition.

CULTIVATING RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE WIDER TRANSITION TEAM

Since you've had experience managing several transitions, you know preparations must start over a year in advance. The purpose of such extensive preparation is twofold: you must allocate enough time to work out the immense amount of logistical considerations of a transition and inauguration, and you must build in enough time to cultivate meaningful relationships with all parties involved in the transition. This includes other support departments, such as IT and the various security teams including the Virginia State Police, the Richmond City Police, the Capital Police, and the Governor and Governor-elect's security details. You have found that reoccurring meetings with stakeholders foster the strong relationships among departments that are necessary for a smooth transition.

It is essential that you also build strong relationships with the new administration's transition team, which consists of the Chief of Staff, Deputy Chief of Staff, several appointed officials, including the Secretary of Administration and the Secretary of the Commonwealth, and several members of the House of Delegates. The 2013 transition team is actually the smallest transition team in living transition memory in Virginia. Since many of these people have had a career in state government, you have already established relationships with some of them. However, despite these existing relationships, you acknowledge that working with the Governor-elect's transition team after he is elected doesn't provide ample time to develop relationships to the extent you would have appreciated.

MANAGING GROWTH

As you anticipate the transition, you have to prepare for a continually expanding new administration. While your own DGS transition team remains consistent throughout the process, the new administration's transition team grows, as new Secretaries are appointed and their respective departments filled. You must take this into consideration when you scout transition offices and supply all office and technology necessities. You must also take necessary steps to ensure all new staffers are aware of the services and support your department offers. Constant communication and continual relationship building will be two key components to ensure all new staffers understand the role of DGS.

While the Governor's new administration is growing, you must also maintain relationships with the Lieutenant Governor and Attorney General throughout the transition period. You've secured three separate transition offices, and when you discover that a recount has been demanded after the historically close race for Attorney General mentioned above, you must quickly devise a solution that provides ample space for both teams, while respecting the obvious privacy needs of two competing candidates. Your team needs to be ready and available to assist the additional Attorney General candidate and his team.

“It’s a startup at the end of the day. You have the Governor and a handful from the campaign. After that, it explodes, and you have to hire 100-300 people in two months.”

— Confidential Assistant to the Chief of Staff and Secretary of Commonwealth during transition

ESTABLISHING POSITIVE TEAM MORALE

It is said that anything that could go wrong during a transition, will go wrong. Despite months of planning, inevitable setbacks occur, and your team must react swiftly and appropriately to them. For example, during this past inauguration you discover at the last minute that the sound vendor did not pass the background inspection and the DGS team has to scramble to find a replacement vendor with the appropriate security clearance. Additionally, you are notified that the teleprompter cannot operate in the rain, and the night before the inauguration the company backs out due to the inclement weather reports. These types of setbacks and oversights can take a hit on the team morale, particularly when they're already working long hours and under intense pressure. You know supporting your team and fostering and maintaining a positive learning environment throughout this time period is a top priority.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

1. What knowledge, skills, and abilities would you look for in your new Deputy Director who will be managing the transition team? What core competencies are most valuable for the team?
2. What steps would you take 12 months out from election to prepare for the transition? 9 months out? 6 months out? 3 months out?
3. How would you facilitate collaboration across agencies?
4. How would you establish and maintain positive team morale?

MANAGING COMMUNICATIONS AND PERSONNEL

From your past experiences managing transitions, you recognize the importance of communicating updates clearly and regularly to your department and the wider transition team. While there are instances where you must be direct in your delivery, when, for example, you provide instructions for clearing out transition offices, you're also responsible for communicating more sensitive information, including updates around staffing decisions. There are several aspects of this that are particularly challenging.

MAINTAINING CONFIDENTIALITY

During the 60-day period between election and inauguration, most of the crucial decisions regarding establishing and implementing communications procedures occur. Teams are setting the policy agenda and reviewing the biannual budget. Thousands of applications are being received and reviewed for hundreds of positions in the new administration. Dozens of people are being interviewed for senior positions throughout the administration, including Secretary-level positions. Much of this information is sensitive and confidential. Weeks into the transition, you are notified that Secretary nominations are being leaked to the press before the Governor-elect publically announces them. You also become aware that someone participating in the transition is posting confidential information on social media.

MANAGING HUMAN RESOURCES

While this is not the case in Virginia, many other state chief administrators are responsible for human resources and professional development for the state. During the transition period, the Governor-elect will make crucial decisions about staffing his administration. Employees serving at the pleasure of the Governor will be reviewed, and your team may be responsible for communicating the employment status of these at-will employees. This is a tense and stressful period, and clear, well-timed updates need to be presented to at-will employees. In addition to reviewing the status of current staffers, you may also be responsible for vetting new applicants. Many campaigners joined the candidate's team in hopes of securing a job if their candidate got elected. Devising a strategy for communicating updates to applicants maintains an image of a responsive government.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

1. What measures would you put in place to ensure confidential information stays private? How would you enforce these measures? How would you approach social media?
2. What structures would you create to deal with the Human Resources aspect of a transition – i.e. collecting and sifting through resumes, vetting and interviewing candidates, communicating with current staff members who might be impacted by the transition, etc.?

MANAGING RELATIONSHIPS

Throughout this process, you will interface with various key players. Understanding relationship dynamics, building rapport with stakeholders, and managing expectations of transition teams are important aspects of your role.

REPORTING TO TWO GOVERNORS

For 60 days, you and your team report to the current Governor and Governor-elect, and you must juggle these competing interactions. You've established a strong relationship with the current Governor and don't want to compromise it during his last two months in office. However, you need to utilize the transition period to build the foundation for your relationship with the Governor-elect and his team. You are given directions from both administrations. You have to coordinate information transfers between both administrations.

TRANSITIONING THE FIRST FAMILY AND THE EXECUTIVE MANSION

As just one example of a situation that requires you to coordinate between administrations, you and your team are responsible for transitioning the Executive mansion. This is one of the most challenging aspects of the overall transition. While one family is saying good-bye to their house of four years, another is preparing to move in. This requires speedy repairs and maintenance, decorating, and coordinating other logistics. On top of that, it is a personal experience for both families. Inevitably, your team becomes involved in providing support, mainly to the Governor-elect's spouse, who is intimately involved in the process. Additionally, the personal nature of transitioning the Executive mansion makes it an appealing topic for the press to cover. Any mishaps are subject to exposure by the media.

MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

While moving the new first family can provide a unique opportunity to establish strong, personal relationships quickly, you also have to be the bearer of bad news about state budget transition fund. There is very little money allocated for transitions in Virginia. The Governor-elect and his transition team are shocked to discover that low appropriations set aside for the transition team means the Governor-elect must dip into his campaign coffers and ask high-level campaigners to donate their time to the transition. Limited funds also mean that lodging can't be provided for members of the Governor-elect's transition team, many of whom are located in Northern Virginia, where the Governor-elect's campaign officers were situated. They are forced to commute long distances. Some even sleep on friends' couches.

Furthermore, this inadequate budget must be divided between the transition and inauguration for the Governor, Lieutenant Governor, and Attorney General. Many new staffers on these transition teams come

from the private sector and do not have a firm understanding of state government's budget constraints. You are often approached during the transition period with requests for more funding or resources. Your team must be prepared to respond accurately and firmly to the restrictions placed on your department's budget.

CULTIVATING PRIVATE SECTOR RELATIONSHIPS

The transition period also has the potential to change your relationships with some of your private sector partners. Throughout the campaign period, private sector institutions, including lobbying firms and contracting vendors, strategize to build relationships with one or more candidates. Private sector partners who have been particularly helpful to the candidate that has won the election try to influence who is tapped for the Governor-elect's cabinet. In Virginia, the legislative calendar places the executive branch at a disadvantage. The General Assembly is in session days before the Governor-elect takes office, which was designed specifically to thwart the power of the executive branch. Private sector vendors, conscious of this power dynamic, position themselves strategically to advise the executive branch and legislative branch in different capacities.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

1. How would you approach having two bosses? How would you maintain strong relationships with both? When is it appropriate to prioritize one Governor over another?
2. What do you think are the most important aspects of moving the first family into the mansion? How would you go about preparing your team? You have a unique relationship with first family, what are the things that are most important developing that?
3. How would you deliver bad news about the limited transition budget?
4. What advice would you give private sector vendors and lobbyists to help capitalize on the transition period or minimize the disruptions caused by it?

MANAGING PROJECTS

Throughout the transition, you get coveted face time with the Governor-elect. It is essential that you capitalize on these formal and informal meetings, and introduce your department's agenda. In order to maximize your time with the Governor-elect, you must clearly and concisely present existing projects you wish to continue, and pitch new projects that you are interested in starting. For example, you've wanted to rebuild the General Assembly (GA) building for the past 10-15 years. Prompted by a 2012 review indicating the GA building had structural and health-related issues, you draft a rebuilding plan and generate support of Senate democrats and most republicans around the proposal. Aided along by positive press about the rebuild, the GA building renovation looks promising. However, for political reasons the new Governor decides to suspend all activities to advance the replacement of the GA building.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

1. What strategies would you deploy to ensure a project started under the previous Governor is continued under the new administration?
2. What strategies would you deploy to pitch a new project to the new administration? How do you position new projects to the Governor-elect?
3. What tactics might you use to build support to renovate the GA building?