

DAPA Winter 2009 Event: The Role of Transition Teams

When it comes to transition teams, it is better to get things right than to do things fast. At DAPA's Winter 2009 Event, University of Delaware faculty and DAPA member Ed Freel moderated a discussion on the role of transition teams. The panel consisted of Paul Posner (professor and director of George Mason University's MPA program and ASPA president-elect), Tom McGonigle (Delaware Governor Jack Markell's Chief of Staff), and Jennifer Davis (University of Delaware Vice-President of Administration and former Director of the state's Office of Management and Budget).



According to Paul Posner, this is both “the best of times and the worst of times.” The federal government is facing problems that we have not seen before and cannot be fixed with the current knowledge we have—no one knows the solutions. These problems are accumulating. How do we get the banks to lend? How can we reduce the costs of health care? How can the government raise more revenue? Out of these problems comes a new role for government. Posner feels transition teams are critical, especially if the recently nominated/appointed cabinet secretaries have not taken over yet. At this time, the civil service steps in to lead. To accomplish tasks requires collaboration, so there is an increasing reliance on providers (e.g., state and local governments to carry out federal policies), contractors and networks. Making things worse at the federal level is the fact that the baby boomers are leaving the workforce (retiring), which increases workload demands for the remaining workforce. Unfortunately, the infrastructure of federal government—the hiring system—is broken. Posner believes a new human infrastructure is needed.

Jennifer Davis focused on the human side of transitions in a top-ten reflections on lessons learned.

1. Change is difficult.
2. Change creates new opportunities (new people and new perspectives).
3. You don't know what you don't know (especially if you are new to the organization).
4. History is important (it set the stage for the present).
5. You are only as good as every member of your team.
6. You can manage anything if you know about it (give me the bad news early).
7. Celebrate successes; reward the team.
8. You can have it all, but not at the same time (watch it lest you burn out).
9. Mistakes happen, and you need to learn from them.
10. Be accessible (leaders must take time to be with the team, to model behavior for them).

For Tom McGonigle, transition is what will define a successful administration. This is the period in which those elected go from campaign mode to the very different mode—governing. During the transition process, the

incoming administration seeks to capture the energy from the past campaign while looking forward to the policies it intends to implement and accomplishments for which it strives. To do this a solid team needs to be put in place: this team is what will make or break an administration. This requires balancing the campaign staff with new ideas and people who have governed before while ensuring diversity and party affiliation. Governing is difficult, as private-sector people soon discover. For the Markell Administration there are good policy ideas and a talented team in place; however, the team is still building relationships. Like any “all star” team, the players are great as individuals, but they have not worked together as a team. Teamwork comes with time.

McGonigle insists that over time, as it deals with the challenges facing it, the Markell team, too, will gel.

—by Bryan Sullivan