

A Team of 4,000: The Keys to Effective Presidential Appointments

By Claudio Fernández-Aráoz and Neil M. Hindle

Exceptional times require exceptional leadership teams. Now that the presidential election is over, the key to making America greater is a strategic series of presidential appointments. With just two months left before the inauguration and the success of the next four years at stake, how does the new administration build a massive leadership team of more than 4,000 appointees?

It is certainly a challenging situation. However, our experience suggests that by carefully adapting the definitive best practices for recruiting¹ to the special circumstances presidential appointment teams face every four to eight years, a scalable, proven blueprint exists for this opportunity.

Every year, Egon Zehnder supports hundreds of search assignments in the public sector, including work before the election with the Partnership for Public Service to analyze more than 100 of the most critical upcoming presidential appointments, interviewing incumbents and developing job specs for upcoming appointments. We supplement this work with our own research, interviewing dozens of senior public leaders to identify the frequent pitfalls in past appointments, as well as areas for improvement in the appointment process. The entirety of our findings points to several concrete benchmarks for making the right selections.

Look both inside and out

Research shows that when significant change is needed, outsiders usually do a better job, while for gradual change it is typically the insiders who perform better. As individual candidate quality varies, the best practice is to look both inside and out, with no particular biases, giving every candidate an equal chance. Overall, it will be imperative to avoid the natural biases we are all hardwired with, such as choosing those similar and familiar to us, with whom we feel comfortable. For building highly effective teams, we need complementary skills, which are the opposite of similarity and familiarity, and we also need to properly challenge each other, which is not comfortable.

Properly assess candidate potential

Jobs now change so rapidly that we cannot predict the competencies needed to succeed even a few years out. In addition, the need to adapt will be huge for those joining from outside of government. A candidate's capacity to grow and adapt to fundamentally different and increasingly complex

¹ Groysberg, B., N. Nohria, and C. Fernández-Aráoz. "The Definitive Guide to Recruiting in Good Times and Bad." Harvard Business Review, May 2009.

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responsibilities is critical and should be measured by assessing four traits: curiosity, insight, engagement and determination. Is the candidate someone who seeks new experiences, ideas, knowledge and self-awareness, who solicits feedback and who stays open to learning and change? Someone able to gather and make sense of new information and to use his or her insights to shift legacy views and set new directions? Can this person connect on an emotional level with others, demonstrate empathy, communicate a persuasive vision and inspire commitment to the broader organization? Is the person capable of persisting in the face of difficulties and bouncing back from major set-backs or adversity?

Possibly most importantly, can he or she successfully balance short term gains with long term priorities? While the new administration can and should appoint some great fighters to extinguish the most urgent fires, it should also choose strategists to start drafting the finest cadre of future public leaders.

Great public leaders need to be masters at influencing and collaboration skills.

Whenever we make people decisions, we tend to place more weight on “hard” factors (such as experience and educational background), when it has been clearly demonstrated that it is the “soft” competencies, based on emotional and social intelligence², which distinguish the best leaders. The complex governance and diffuse power structures in the public sector demands a different form of leadership from that of a private sector CEO. Great public leadership usually demands a superb mix of persuasion, political currency, and shared interest to create the conditions for the right decisions to happen.

Understanding the whole is greater than the sum of its parts

Often new administrations seek out “big names” to fill key appointee positions that oversee huge budgets, thousands of employees and complex systems (e.g. Veterans Affairs, GSA, HHS, DHS, etc.). The focus here should be on building teams that incorporate a proper mix of executive, functional and policy expertise amongst the leadership – the goal is to achieve collective excellence versus individual excellence. This team-building exercise is crucial to the overall success of the administration. Based on our firm’s 50 years of practice and research, we believe that team effectiveness explains perhaps 80 percent of leaders’ success. All effective teams rate high on six fundamental dimensions: balance, alignment, energy, openness, efficiency and resilience – and depending on the specific team’s challenge, some dimensions are more crucial than others.

It’s Not the How or the What but the Who³

In the corporate and political worlds, great journeys do not start with a brilliant strategy, but rather with a visionary leader putting together an extraordinary team with complementary skillsets. The leader will call upon this team to help devise the right plans and properly adjust when needed – but most importantly, this team will be integral in successfully implementing forward-thinking strategies that will benefit the greater good.

² Fernández-Aráoz, C. “Ignore Emotional Intelligence at Your Own Risk.” Harvard Business Review, October 2014.

³ Araoz, Claudio Fernandez. It’s Not the How or the What but the Who: Succeed by Surrounding Yourself with the Best. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2014. Contact the authors to receive a copy of It’s Not the How or the What but the Who compliments of Egon Zehnder.

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At the core, the leader needs to be able to make good people decisions, understanding how to unlock the best ideas and potential from people in a changing society and world.

In a role that is already limited to four or eight years, visionary leaders need a team capable of both solving for immediate and long-term needs, and considering alternative perspectives.

In closing, we look at lessons learned from previous presidents who led the country during challenging times. Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt are considered by most rankings to be the best two presidents in U.S. history. Both of them were in their time highly politically inexperienced, however they proved to be successful in part by leading exceptional teams, including Lincoln's famed team of rivals. This presidential transition team has the opportunity to incorporate and properly adapt these best practices to assemble a highly diverse team that could bring positive change to this country – it's imperative to get it right.



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