



Succeeding as a Political Executive

50 INSIGHTS FROM EXPERIENCE



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Chapter Two

The Right People in the Right Job

The Right People in the Right Job

Our key take away from our seven years of research is the importance of getting the right person into the right job. While this may seem obvious, we believe it is the key to success of any administration. There are many components to this simple equation.

The challenge of getting the right people into the right job is the responsibility of the Office of Presidential Personnel (OPP) within the White House. Much work on potential appointees, however, will take place prior to the formal establishment on a new OPP on January 20, 2017. The identification of potential appointees is likely to occur throughout the presidential campaign. The hard work of vetting, selecting, and nominating the first wave of presidential appointees will take place during the president transition from November 9, 2016, to January 20, 2017.

Based on our research and interviews, we believe understanding the following insights is crucial to the success of the president's personnel operation:

- **Insight 1:** All jobs are not the same
- **Insight 2:** Match the right set of experiences to each position
- **Insight 3:** Know that relevant experience really matters

Insight 1: All Jobs Are Not the Same

In order to succeed in getting the right person into the right job, the Office of Presidential Personnel must fully understand that all jobs are not the same. Each position has different experience requirements.

There are indeed several different ways to distinguish jobs that can assist OPP in making selections:

- **Is it a policy or management position?** A key first step is determining whether the predominant activity of the position is “making policy” or “managing an organization.” While those running organizations are frequently involved in policy-making, the skills and background needed for managerial positions are significantly different than those in policy positions.

Our research makes an important distinction between “policy” jobs and “management” jobs. Our research focused on management positions. While many come to Washington to “do policy,” much of agencies’ work is about executing—not making—policy.

The concepts of a “policy person” and a “managerial person” are archetypes that can be used in sorting candidates for the right job. A policy person is clearly appropriate for the position of Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) in the Department of Health and Human Services. Based on our observations over the years and research conducted for this book, a managerial person faces a high probability of being frustrated by “all the talking and debating” in a policy job.

Conversely, a policy person may find a managerial position frustrating. Managers, in contrast, find great satisfaction in serving in agencies where there are clear objectives and performance data. As William Taggart, former Chief Operating Officer, Office of Federal Student Aid, Department of Education, put it, “There are two separate sets of skills—the implementers are not the policy folks, and the policy makers are not implementers.”

Maurice Jones, former Deputy Secretary, Department of Housing and Urban Development, came to a similar conclusion to Taggart. Jones says, “The problem is that people don’t come to the federal government to do execution... You can have the greatest, most innovative policies ever, but without execution, these policies can’t succeed.”

- **If it is a management position, what type of organization is it?** Based on our research, we found it helpful to distinguish among the following types of agencies:
 - **Production agencies:** These agencies have clear deliverables to the public, such as providing student loans, veterans’ benefits, and transportation security.
 - **Regulatory agencies:** These agencies regulate the nation’s safety and health and include agencies such as the Food and Drug Administration and the Consumer Product Safety Commission.
 - **Scientific agencies:** These agencies conduct the nation’s research and development and include agencies such as the National Institutes of Health, the U.S. Geological Survey, and the National Institute of Standards and Technology.

Insight 2: Match the Right Set of Experiences to Each Position

One of the crucial roles of OPP is determining the set of experiences most needed in a specific position at a specific point in time. There is no doubt that nearly everyone on the long list for a presidential appointment is clearly qualified, in the sense of having a distinguished professional career and impressive educational credentials. But the key question is whether the person has the right set of experiences for a specific job at the point in time when she or he is selected.

An example of changing the desired set of experiences for a job is the White House decision in 1998 to seek a “manager” as the head of the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). Throughout its previous history, the IRS had always had a distinguished tax lawyer as its head. In 1998, a decision was made to look for a business executive who would be able to manage the information technology challenges then facing the IRS; Charles Rossotti was selected. The right set of experiences had changed for the IRS. In 2013, President Obama nominated another individual with extensive business experience, John Koskinen, to serve as IRS commissioner.

Another example of the White House deciding on a new set of desired experiences for a position was the selection of Michael Bromwich to take over the Department of the Interior's Minerals Management Service (MMS) in the aftermath of the 2010 Deep Horizon crisis in the Gulf of Mexico. Instead of seeking an individual with the traditional set of energy and natural resources experience for MMS, a decision was made to recruit an executive with crisis management and turnaround skills. In addition, at that point in the history of MMS, it was appropriate (and perhaps necessary) to select an individual who had *not* had previous experience with the energy industry.

Insight 3: Know That Relevant Experience Really Matters

After coming to agreement on the right set of experiences, the next challenge facing OPP is finding individuals with “deep” experience. While individuals can “learn on the job,” it is essential to find individuals with relevant experience to the job being filled.

An additional challenge for the OPP is anticipating problems ahead of time and making selections partly based on the question, “What type of individual and what type of experience would be necessary if the agency faced a major crisis?” In the case of the Department of Labor's Mine Safety and Health Administration, Administrator Joseph Main had the prior experience to deal with the Upper Big Branch mine explosion that occurred in 2010. Main recalls, “I’ve lived through these experiences before, so I knew what to expect ... My experiences earlier in my career were crucial.” Main began working in coal mines in 1967. In 1974, he joined the staff of the United Mine Workers of America, where he spent his career on safety-related issues. He had been involved in responding to the 2001 Jim Walter mine explosion and the 1984 Wilberg Mine explosion. So when the Upper Big Branch explosion occurred, Main knew what needed to be done because of his participation in previous mine explosions.

The need for relevant experience was emphasized by Michael Whitaker, Deputy Administrator, Federal Aviation Administration, Department of Transportation. He cautioned that individuals accepting positions (or offered a position) must have the right experience for jobs in government. “These are really big organizations to run,” comments Whitaker.

Another good example of experience making a difference is Edward DeSeve, former Special Advisor to the President for Recovery Act Implementation. In describing starting his new position overseeing the implementation of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (Recovery Act), he recalls, “I just dug in and got started. I had my experience as the Deputy Director for Management in the Office of Management and Budget, so I knew what to do.”

There are many other examples indicating relevant experience really matters. David Stevens, former Assistant Secretary for Housing, and Commissioner,

Not a Good Fit: The Case of Michael Brown

While there are probably numerous cases of “bad fits” for key managerial positions, they seldom become publicly acknowledged and receive national publicity. When a “bad fit” does receive national attention, it does not reflect well on the administration that appointed the individual. This was certainly the case with Michael Brown, former Administrator, Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA).

Brown’s performance during Hurricane Katrina received much attention during the immediate aftermath of the hurricane, and he resigned shortly after the crisis. In his book, *The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, and the Mississippi Gulf Coast*, Douglas Brinkley comments on Brown’s experience for the position of FEMA Administrator:

By all accounts, Michael Brown was an unlikely head of an emergency organization like FEMA...Nothing in Brown’s resume...recommended him to lead America’s disaster relief efforts. (pages 245–246)

Unlike Brown, the FEMA administrators who followed him all had extensive experience in emergency management. President George W. Bush appointed Robert D. Paulison as FEMA administrator in September 2005, replacing Brown. Paulison had previously served as head of the United States Fire Administration and the Directorate of Preparedness. Prior to his federal experience, Paulison served as fire chief of Miami-Dade Fire Rescue. He was responsible for the cleanup after Hurricane Andrew in 1992.

President Barack Obama appointed W. Craig Fugate as FEMA administrator in May 2009. He now has the second longest tenure of any FEMA administrator. Prior to his appointment, Fugate was director of the Florida Emergency Management Division, where he coordinated the state’s response to seven major hurricanes, including Hurricane Katrina.

There is wide agreement that one of the lessons learned from the federal government’s response to Hurricane Katrina is that experience matters.

Federal Housing Administration, Department of Housing and Urban Development, spent the early part of his career as a loan officer and had extensive experience in the banking industry. David Kappos, former Under Secretary of Commerce for Intellectual Property, and Director, United States Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO), Department of Commerce, spent his career working closely with USPTO and the intellectual property community to improve the patent application process. Both William Taggart, former Chief Operating Officer (COO), Office of Federal Student Aid (FSA), Department of Education, and current FSA COO James Runcie’s careers in the banking industry served them well in working with the student loan “ecosystem,” which includes the lending industry in a

key role. Allison Hickey, former Under Secretary for Benefits, Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), Department of Veteran Affairs, had spent 27 years in the military and had firsthand experience with the Department of Veteran Affairs as a retired military officer. John Pistole, former Administrator, Transportation Security Administration, Department of Homeland Security, had firsthand experience in airline safety as Assistant Special Agent in Charge, Boston. While in that position, he helped lead the investigation and recovery efforts for the Egypt Air Flight 990 crash off the coast of Rhode Island. So when it came to understanding the activities of their organizations, all had firsthand experience on the front line and understood the management challenges facing them.