

NATIONAL GOVERNORS ASSOCIATION

How to Recruit a Cabinet: A Governor's Guide to Executive Recruiting

By Ted Ford Webb

Introduction

A strong management team doesn't just happen. Building an effective team requires a thoughtful process of recruitment, screening, and decision-making. The challenge is particularly difficult for a new governor-elect who will be expected to make dozens of key appointments within a few weeks or months. Experienced governors urge governors-elect to make key personnel decisions a high priority and assign clear responsibility to a trusted senior staff member for developing and managing the recruitment process.

This management brief discusses one approach to the recruitment process that has proved successful in numerous administrations. Unlike some approaches that begin by describing the ideal candidate, this approach first examines the agency, diagnoses its past flaws, and articulates its future promise, before starting a search.

A New Start: Searching for the Right Match

My philosophy of hiring emphasizes finding the right match over finding the right credentials. What constitutes the right credentials for any cabinet office varies according to needs and circumstances. Finding the best candidate requires your administration to do the hard work of evaluating an agency's real needs, without shirking away from the divisions, the politics, and the problems inherent in any organization.

The best search confronts these problems head on and uses them as the basis for finding the right candidate. The worst hopes naively that the right candidate will solve all the agency's problems.

The Basics: Five Principles to Guide Your Search

1. The hiring process is an educational process. It is as much about you — and determining what type of administration you want to run — as it is about the candidates.
2. Be clinical. This is a diagnostic process, one that benefits above all from objectivity.
3. Engage stakeholders. The dialogue among them, your team, and others who understand the circumstances of the agency will help you to determine that agency's true needs.

4. Expect contradiction. The process will inevitably generate it — and it is far easier politically to unearth it now than down the line.

5. Above all, be open with all participants in this process. Direct communication now is the best strategy for generating the results you want later.

Starting Your Search: The Rolodex Fallacy

The best searches begin with internal diagnosis: what is going on in the agency now, and why? A recruiter needs to know what circumstances the new leader will be asked to handle before they can figure out what type of candidate can handle them.

Do not allow your recruiter to commit the fatal mistake: what I call "the Rolodex fallacy." This is the belief that some magical person exists whose qualifications will meet all your needs — if only your recruiter had a Rolodex thick enough to find him or her.

Using a set of fixed qualifications as a starting point rarely results in successful hires. Instead, hiring should be a dynamic process that engages with an agency's particular needs at a given point in time.

Diagnosis: The Doctor Is In

A recruiter's first task on the job is to look behind the defining set of circumstances in an agency and name them. The first thing I do when I start a search is to approach the agency's various stakeholders — everyone from the senior management team to the office staff to the unions and advocacy groups who interact with the agency. I make the same simple request of them: "I know nothing. Fill me in."

I once recruited a state secretary of transportation. The more people I talked to, the more it became clear that the previous leader had been brought in because of his political skills and was a poor manager who had lost control over his senior management team. As a result, the agency had evolved into a nation of Balkan states with no strong central leader. That knowledge allowed me to address the tension over the agency's leadership with the governor, and to offer a comprehensive assessment of the real-life conditions a future agency head could expect to face.

Finding a Candidate: Skip the Game of Cat-and-Mouse

A recruiter's next step is to bring in a group of candidates who personify the strategic and policy choices that the agency is facing. Defining the environment in an organization — rather than listing a specific set of qualifications a candidate must meet — is a very seductive way of recruiting. "I've talked to you about the challenges facing our agency. Do you know anyone you think might be able to meet those challenges?" Asking this kind of open-ended question opens people's minds in a way that asking them to track down qualifications on a resume does not.

Laying It Bare: Naming Without Blaming

As we have seen, a good search will bring out the tensions inherent in any organization. The key is to be willing to name these tensions openly during the search process, rather than hiding them away in the hopes the candidate will be able to fix them after the fact.

I was once hired to recruit the new president of a national family planning organization. Rather than hide these divisions, the hiring process became a discussion and growth process in which I encouraged the organization's board to use the search to determine which path they wanted to follow.

The Payoff

Out of this process arises a set of candidates who fit into the range of organizational directions you are considering. The additional payoff comes in the form of the education you and your interview team have just received. In the course of the interview process, you have heard from five or six different experts about the different strategies they would use to deal with an agency's particular challenges.

I once worked to hire the head of a human services system for a Western governor. When I returned to his statehouse, years after he left office, I stumbled upon a small bronze plaque that hung under his portrait. Out of all his myriad accomplishments, the plaque recognized, above all, the work he had done to reform human services. With clear choices in front of him, the governor was able to make the decision that became his legacy.

Ted Ford Webb is the founder of Ford Webb Associates, Inc. He has recruited cabinet officers for 47 governors and over 300 CEOs for nonprofit organizations, Fortune 500 companies, professional service firms, universities, national membership organizations, and many others.