

NONPROFIT QUARTERLY

Meet the Enemy: Considerations for Executive Transition

By Ted Ford Webb

Some years ago we were engaged by a national foundation with a criminal justice reform agenda. They paid our fee in order for us to assist governors who were looking for corrections leaders. The governor was our client. Our obligation to the foundation was to provide governors with a comprehensive search process. The foundation's hope was that stronger and more effective leadership would result.

Over a period of seven years we recruited 18 state cabinet officers — more than a third of all the leaders in the country — distributed over every region of the US. Taken as a whole, the project was a great success.

The issues that shape these jobs are incredibly difficult. Public safety, race, mental health and drug addiction, an odd mix of NIMBY and competition for prisons as a stimulus for jobs and the local economy, challenging workforce issues and "get tough on crime" add up to a very complex assignment.

Due diligence also revealed a striking difference between the role of most corrections secretaries and that of other major cabinet officers. Those who lead most other government systems — environment, transportation, public health, economic development, human services — are typically subject matter experts. They have run organizations and they understand the operational and practical challenges. As a cabinet secretary their role is often to use this knowledge, and professional credibility, to advocate for innovations and to influence policy makers and the public.

We saw a different construct with corrections secretaries. Governors usually view corrections as a third rail. Their tendency is to be risk averse, to maintain a stable system and invest their political capital in other more promising areas. Traditionally these positions were filled by institutional administrators — wardens who had worked their way up the system. Their orientation was towards institutional management and command and control.

For us, this raised a chicken and egg question. Was the candidate field dominated by operationally oriented managers, requiring governor's staffs to be more active in controlling policy and strategy, or did the risk averse and controlling approach of governors' staffs screen out more strategically oriented candidates?

It is in the nature of our approach to beg the question when preparing for a search. Who sets policy? What are the strategic, policy and political goals for the chief executive we are seeking? What authority rests with this person, what remains with the governor's office? Are we looking for a general manager or a more typical cabinet officer? The answers to these types of questions shape a search.

For the most part, we found governors receptive to these questions. They understood the value of cabinet officers who were capable of strategic leadership. As we signaled that our client was interested in corrections professionals who had skills in strategic leadership, public policy, legislative relations and the like, they were quick to appear. Over the course of these 18 searches we saw a new generation of leaders.

This was a terrifically difficult field. Sentencing policy was exploding the prison population. And while most of these talented candidates saw the madness of such policies, what I also saw was a generation of new leaders who made the case for a more nuanced and strategic approach. They promoted substantive inmate classification systems, mental health and drug treatment, education, and step down levels of community corrections and re-entry programs.

The Most Disappointing Outcome

I believe we made a very real contribution to this field. By "begging the questions" and facilitating a robust and open conversation about the circumstances that truly define these positions, we brought our clients to a far more thoughtful exploration of the issues. I could cite many positive examples, but to make the point I will describe what was perhaps the most disappointing outcome I have seen in my entire career. Happily, it was a rare occurrence.

One of the last assignments we took in this field was to recruit the administrator of one of the largest prison systems in the country. It is no exaggeration to say that this was (and still is) a big business in this state. Our client was an oversight board, appointed by the governor. The system was embroiled in a number of class action suits, with the real possibility of being taken into federal receivership. Our client's hope was that we could recruit a transformational leader who could bring about change from the inside.

Our client board was composed of members with a rich mix of ideologies and experience — reformers, victim's advocates, corrections experts and (a majority of) lock 'em up hyper-conservatives. Parts of this search were exhilarating. Removed from the public posturing by the necessarily private element of a personnel process, we found the board willing to entertain a more nuanced dialogue about strategy and policy.

Very long story short, we came to a point where we had two final candidates. One was an outsider — a tremendous candidate with impressive corrections leadership experience in another large, neighboring state. He was an inspirational leader. He had the management chops and the gravitas, and the communications and political skills needed to drive a reform agenda. The other candidate was an insider, who had been clear that he was for a status quo approach.

Our search came to a head in a conference room at the Four Seasons. The Board met for a final interview with the two candidates. The outside candidate was tremendous. He took in every concern about what change would mean. He articulated a thoughtful approach, and made the case for how he would carefully shape and implement this agenda in close collaboration with the Board, the governor and the legislative

leadership. The inside candidate was far less impressive, especially in contrast to the outsider.

That afternoon represented the best of what we had accomplished over those 18 searches. A genuine exchange of ideas, a deeply rational logic, a mutual respect for the ideologies that drive these systems and a savvy political strategy emerged from the conversation with the outsider. The discussion that followed the interviews was brief. The decision was clearly going to be for the outsider.

Before the Board was to vote, one member who had been largely quiet through the entire process asked us to pause for just a moment while he left the room. He stepped out, and came back in about 5 minutes later — with the Lieutenant Governor.

This is a "weak governor" state. The Lieutenant Governor controls the Senate, and arguably is the strongest politician in the state. He looked around the room and pointed at me. "Who is that?" "Our search consultant," said the Chairman. "He needs to leave," said the Lt. Governor, and the Chairman asked me to do so.

I waited in the hallway. I couldn't hear what was being said, but I did hear shouting. About 45 minutes later the Lt. Governor came out. He walked by without acknowledging me. The Chairman then stepped out and asked me to come back in. The room stunk of sweat and fear. As I scanned the room I saw long faces, and in some cases, tear-reddened eyes. The Chairman said, "Ted, we have already voted. We are hiring the inside candidate."

All I could muster was: "It is the Board's decision, but in all honesty I am surprised and disappointed. We found the candidate you all hoped for at the start. But best of luck to you all, and goodbye."

A press conference had been planned at the other end of the hotel. Using the service corridor, the Board and I walked towards the ballroom. About half way down the corridor we came to a large door that we thought was the correct one. We opened it, and found all of us reflected in a wall-to-ceiling mirror, in an empty ballroom.

In that brief moment, with all of us framed in that mirror, I remembered Pogo, and said, "We have met the enemy, and he is us."

More sobs, and the Chairman spoke up. "Ted, we have come far enough with you. We will take it from here."

And that was that. I recognize that we came so close to introducing change and reform that we unleashed an extraordinary intervention. All stops were pulled out to protect some very powerful and entrenched interests. I suppose that in a sense that is a tribute to the power of the process. But I think of this as a sad and disappointing outcome.

A few years later the insider who got that job was indicted for fraud and removed from his position.

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