

The Political Appointee's Challenge:

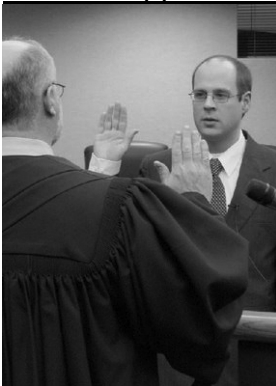
Minimize the time it takes for the career-political team to function well, enabling the Administration's agenda to be met.

Carol Bonosaro is President of the Senior Executives Association, a non-profit, non-partisan professional association. Since 1980, the association has served as the voice of the career Federal executive corps (the Senior Executive Service and executives in equivalent systems).

Each year, the Association brings together the winners of the Presidential Rank of Distinguished Executive, the nation's highest civil service award, given to only 1% of the career Senior Executive Service annually. One year, as the group discussed presidential transitions, one Distinguished Executive said, "Every transition eventually becomes a transformation. It moves from initial distrust from the political appointee to eventually saying, 'civil servants are great. Their contribution is invaluable, and I didn't realize it when I walked in.'"

The political appointee's challenge is to minimize the time it takes for that transformation to take place and for the career-political team to function well, enabling the Administration's agenda to be met. That challenge is especially critical this year, as the Obama Administration will face an almost unprecedented constellation of problems.

Political Appointees at the Starting Line



In 2004, the Association joined with the Brookings Institution and the Darden School of Business to present a conference, "Transitional Leadership." The program included a panel, with two teams of career executives and political appointees who had worked together. At that session, the political appointees described their arrival:

"I didn't go in with an open enough mind. I didn't realize I didn't know anything"

"I was inundated and had little time. Staff had 30 seconds to brief me"

“I accepted my appointment without knowing what the job really was”

“I arrived with a ‘quick strike’ mentality, and short term goals, many of which required substantial agency changes”

“I inherited a ready-made staff who I didn’t know”

These experiences are typical, but developing a solid relationship, early on, with career executives can help a political appointee get off to a solid start.

Career Senior Executives: Your Key To Success

Exactly who are career executives?

- They number almost 7,000
- They are the top career professionals in government
- They have an average of 26 years of experience
- They obtained their positions on the basis of merit



Gail Lovelace,
Transition
Director, GSA,
and a 2002
Presidential
Rank
Distinguished
Executive

And they are critical to high performing government.

They will be key to implementing your political and management agenda by:

- Providing an absolutely essential link between the Administration’s policies and agency implementation through rulemaking, enforcement and operations
- Mobilizing the 1.9 million Federal civilian employees (and millions more contractor support staff) to carry out new initiatives, reforms and improvements of existing programs.



Richard L. Greene,
Principal Deputy
Assistant Secretary for
the State Department’s
Bureau of Populations,
Refugees and Migration
and a 2007
Distinguished

Executive who dealt with humanitarian crises around the world – including Iraq, Afghanistan, the West Bank, Darfur, and Southern Sudan – directing more than 4 billion dollars in US refugee assistance to help more than 20 million victims. During the Hezbollah/Israel conflict, when almost 800,000 Lebanese were forced within days to flee their homes, he created and coordinated all aspects of our response, including securing a 48-hour humanitarian pause, to ensure that life-saving assistance was delivered quickly and efficiently.

What Do They Offer You?

- A long-developed understanding of the government process. “We know how to get something that is good moving”
- Functional expertise: they understand all of the systems – budgets, procurement, personnel
- Deep subject matter expertise
- A strong historical perspective, including
 - A strong commitment to an agency’s history and mission
 - A knowledge of methods that did, or did not, work in the past
- A responsibility to maintain the long-term capacity of the government
- A duty to accommodate the political program
- An ability to get your agenda moving by designing and implementing appropriate agency actions



Elizabeth M. Duke,
Administrator, Health
Resources and Services
Administration, Health
and Human Services,
and a 2006
Distinguished
Executive who oversaw

the separation of the Social Security Administration from the Department of Health and Human Services which required the division of the home office, 125,000 employees, and a budget of almost \$1 trillion, one of the largest reorganizations in the history of the government up to that time. She achieved this on schedule and without the filing of a single personnel grievance.

Don’t just take my word for it. The Brookings Institution Presidential Appointee Initiative reported the following:



- More than four out of five appointees found the career officials with whom they worked to be both responsive and competent
- Only 25 percent of appointees found directing career employees to be a difficult task. Indeed, every other task about

which appointees were asked was more difficult. More than a third of appointees, for example, found it hard to deal successfully with the White House

It will help if you understand the perspective of a career executive. For example, he or she:

- Sometimes needs to say: “Your idea isn’t good. Here’s why. But here’s how we can get to your objective”
- Sometimes can be caught between struggles between political appointees
- Sometimes needs to deal with the tendency of political appointees to lurch from one crisis to another, with a request that may stem from political overreaction
- May have invested 4 or 5 years in a major program or policy, then suddenly not see it to fruition
- Has to insulate from politics those who work for him or her, help them understand the new policy directions, keep them focused and reassure them that the overall agenda is important. In other words, he or she serves as a buffer, insulation, reassurance, and, to some extent, protection, helping the staff stay focused on the big picture
- Has to re-prove or reinvent him or herself over and over – each time a new party takes over



Edward C. Hugler, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Administration and Management, Department of Labor, and a 2005 Distinguished

Executive who led 10 agencies in a collaborative launch of GovBenefits, a website that enables citizens to complete an on-line questionnaire and matches their needs with, and eligibility for, nearly 1,000 Federal and state benefit and assistance programs.

It will also help if you understand how career executives will see you, namely, as

- The vehicles of the Administration’s political goals.



Political appointees are expected to be adept at advocating agency objectives to Congress and the media.

- Having political verve and being able to “manage the message” to outside stakeholders and the media
- Being able to build political coalitions and work Capitol Hill, garnering support for agency objectives
- Having an ability to

- fight the necessary political battles within the Administration
- Having limited time. They have to judge what is important for you to know and what you needn't be burdened with

Above all, career executives appreciate appointees who are "willing to learn the business."

Here's What You Should Expect Career Executives Will Do:

- Understand your agenda early on and present viable options for reaching the two or three critical policy goals that are crucial to the new agenda
- Identify major program issues requiring resolution within 30-90 days, flash points, and targets of opportunity
- Brief you on conflict-of-interest rules and ethics restrictions and keep you out of trouble
- Be sensitive to your work style
- Present both pros and cons of issues and program options in a neutral, balanced way
- Work within the agency to make certain that changing missions are understood

The cardinal role of the career Senior Executive is that of serving any and every Administration to the very best of his or her ability without regard to personal political beliefs. So it will help to follow a few rules to help ensure that they can do that:



Richard F. Moorer,
Deputy Assistant
Secretary, Office of
Energy Efficiency and
Renewable Energy,
Department of Energy
and a 2005
Distinguished

Executive who directed energy technology programs which had won, in four years, 33 R&D 100 Awards from R&D Magazine, the "Oscars of Invention," which are given for the most innovative new technologies in a worldwide competition.



William F. Feeley,
Deputy Under
Secretary for Health
for Operations and
Management, VA,
and a 2005
Distinguished
Executive who led a

health network with employee turnover rates 65% below that of the health care industry, with cost per patient 23% below that of U.S. health plan costs, and surpassing the world-class standard for Cancer Screening, and Diabetes, Hypertension, and Heart Disease management. 89% of veterans said they would return there for care even if care were free elsewhere.

How to Ensure Career Executives Can Enable You to Succeed

Do Not



- Assume that career executives are less able or hard-working than their counterparts in the private sector
- Assume that career executives are unwilling to make changes in policies and/or programs. In fact, they typically have many good ideas for beneficial change
- Hold career executives responsible for policy decisions of previous Administrations. They work under the direction of the President and his appointees and have a responsibility to implement policy decisions that are legal and within the mandate of their agencies
- Shield yourself from, or marginalize, career executives
- Misread career executives' laying out the possibilities and providing the options as a sign that they are "not on the team"

Do

- Build a strong working relationship with career executives on your staff
- Develop open and honest communication to build trust, confidence, and understanding of one another. Insist that your key political-appointee advisors do the same
- Schedule, early in your term, an off-site meeting with your career executive corps to establish working relationships and share information regarding policy directions and management issues
- Clearly articulate your vision, your objectives
- Have a realistic agenda
- Be willing to be told what you can't do
- Make clear whether you prefer a briefing and consultation or an executive summary and a detailed paper



- Ask that your staff help you anticipate and pre-empt problems
- Ask for options. Remember, any differences of opinion will likely be about means, not ends
- Remember that what you say will be taken very literally

Hopefully, you are convinced that the career/political team is one you want to make work as effectively as possible. In closing, the Association offers its best wishes for a successful term in office in partnership with the career Senior Executive Service.

To learn more about the Senior Executive Service, your responsibilities and your flexibilities as a supervisor of SES personnel, visit [The Senior Executive Service: A Management Primer](#) on SEA's website.

SEA will be pleased
to respond to any requests
for information or assistance.

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