

RUNNING A STATE AGENCY AIN'T ROCKET SCIENCE

1. You cannot be successful without the cooperation of your agency.

2. The top portion is rarely a problem. They are usually handpicked professionals (though not necessarily by you).

3. Even some of these are more key (though not more important) than others.

- o Deputy or Assistant Secretaries
- o General Counsel
- o Communications/Public Information Director
- o Inspector General
- o Legislative Programs Director
- o Executive Assistant
- o Personal Secretary

4. These people must be willing to be personally loyal to you and professionally loyal to the agency - if not, you have to find people to fill these slots who are.

5. If you need to make changes the agency will always prefer they come from within the ranks. If you fill them with only 'outsiders' you make a mistake and it will cost you in terms of agency loyalty.

If you fill them completely from within you probably made a mistake (in at least some cases) on the side of sentiment over performance. If you bring in people from the "outside" make sure they have requisite qualifications. If they don't or are perceived only as "paybacks" it will be ten times more difficult for them (and therefore you) to be effective. Removals don't have to be done with a meat axe. **BOTTOM LINE:** It takes a mix of new talent and inside experience.

6. The bottom of the agency (lower classifications) will almost always support you and what you're trying to do if they think you're trying to help them do their jobs. They usually are a typical cross-section of any employee group - some great, some unacceptable, most average. Count on them. Listen to them.

7. The middle of the agency makes you or breaks you. That's where policy becomes action (or inaction).

8. "Five Layers Down Rule" applies to all state government. "If the people five layers down the chain from the Secretary don't support the program, it will not happen". This may vary a layer or two by agency but is good rule of thumb. Learn who the best of these people are in your agency. Listen to them.

9. Reason: This is management level that directly combines technical expertise with policy responsibility. They are held responsible for turning your policy statements into a product or service. They are close to the hands-on worker. They have the technical knowledge about what your agency does. They were picked because they have proven to be good managers of people.

10. The "Five Layer" people must be listened to when they express concern about the ability to take policy and turn it into product. There's always reluctance to change and you will quickly learn to recognize the difference between that and true concern about making something work.

11. Ignore the "Five Layer" people and they will ignore you. Even when they see a problem, they will do what they're told and let you worry about the consequences when it reaps a whirlwind.

12. Secretaries come and Secretaries go but the average career service employee is forever (read retirement). They know that. In spite of it, they still want to do a good job, are proud of their work and extremely loyal to their agency.

13. It takes five miles to turn a battleship. If you think you can come into any agency and instantly turn it 90 degrees, you are kidding yourself but you aren't fooling the employees. Do the really important course corrections first. That starts the ship turning and doesn't cause undue alarm in the crew. Screaming down to the engine room. "Make a left, make a left!" causes concern (and tends to circle the wagons). Coming in and telling the agency that they have been doing it all wrong, they have been a bunch of dogs and you're now on the scene to straighten them out is the agency equivalent of "Make a left!"

14. Not everyone will cooperate. If they can be salvaged, do it. The state has an investment in them. If they can't be, they have to go. With Senior Management and Select Exempt Service, it's easy. With Career Service, it's hard but not impossible. With Career Service, you don't have to fire someone but once or twice. The word goes out (fast) that the Secretary (and agency) means it and that the Career Service System has obligations as well as protections and benefits to it.

15. Take the time and make the effort to learn the "Rules of the Game." Understand such mysteries as:

- Salary Rate
- Filling Vacant Positions Procedure
- Personnel Rules (in general)
- State Awards Program
- Minority Programs

Your employees wrestle (to put it mildly) with these everyday. If all they get from you is a blank stare when it comes up, they'll quit wrestling. Then you're in real trouble.

16. Never start a discussion with "Politically, we need Never allow anyone who works in your agency to do it in your presence (or elsewhere). The basis of every decision starts with the question "What's the right thing to do?" Otherwise, you will quickly find yourself with dozens of people who are making political "decisions" for you (and the Governor). That's a hard one to put back in the box. Any political consideration should be perceived by the employees as an Executive decision not an Agency decision.

17. Every state agency has parts of it that are "fat". That same agency will have parts that are truly understaffed. The trick is telling the fat from the lean - easy in bacon, tough in state government. The worst way to solve it is cut an arbitrary percentage from everybody. The "fat" aren't really hurt and the "lean" will simply stop doing parts of their job. If those type decisions really have to be made, never let the section head decide what functions don't get done. The best way to get people back is let the critical things go and do the easy ones. It doesn't take long to come back to haunt you. If you need to cut ask the employees where you are "fat". It will always be someone else's section but trends do emerge.

18. Thomas Jefferson said "The whole art of government is the art of being honest." If you don't understand that, you're in the wrong place. Apply it, period.

19. Most of all, enjoy the job. It can (and should) be the best and most rewarding one you'll ever have. Running a state agency "ain't rocket science." It's convincing a group of people that they personally, what they do individually and what they do collectively is truly important. The rest, they will then take care of for you. It's fun.

20. If you ever get up in the morning, sit on the side of the bed and say "I can't face that place again today," find a new job. Some days are better (and worse) than others but it can't get bad enough to feel that way and you still be effective.

Ben Watts 1/9/91

ADDENDA 1

RUNNING A STATE AGENCY AIN'T ROCKET SCIENCE

1. The fable of "The General Wants A Beer." It's the middle of field maneuvers and it's late at night. The final briefing of the day has just finished when the General leans back and says to no one in particular, "Wouldn't a cold beer be great?" The Colonel turns to the Major and says, "The General wants a beer."

The Major tells the Captain, "The General wants a six pack."

The Captain tells the Lieutenant, "The General wants a case of his favorite brew."

The Lieutenant tells the Sergeant, "The General wants a case of his favorite imported beer chilled to 43 degrees."

You get the point.

Finally, some poor Private who has been on guard duty all day and half the night is rolled out of bed and is last seen unhappily (and why not?) driving to the nearest town on mission impossible.

MORAL: Beware that a Secretary's "wish" does not become an Agency's "command."

It happens more than you know and you must be on the lookout for the symptoms - very unhappy people delivering work you don't remember asking for.

2. State agencies love to transfer telephone calls. Your first solid evidence will be a letter from an irate (and why not?) taxpayer who has been transferred to several (my record letter is fourteen) offices without ever getting helped. This letter is usually sent over from the Governor's office because the irate taxpayer writes him not you.

SUGGESTION: Never transfer a transfer call. One transfer is O.K., but that's all folks. If the recipient of that first transfer can't help, make them get the name, telephone number and nature of request from the caller and tell them that the proper person will call them back within a reasonable timeframe (not to exceed 24 hours). Hard to break old habits. Hard to enforce this one but customer satisfaction will go right off the chart.

3. State agencies are also famous for ignoring the "Theory of Holes." It says "When you find yourself in one, quit digging." Especially true in dealings with the press and legislative committees.

ADDENDA 1

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4. If you appear on television or in the newspaper, generally something should be wrong. State agencies are prone to shout good PR news and whisper bad (or let someone else break the news as the Governor noted).

SUGGESTION: When anything good happens, give somebody that the people vote for (Governor or local legislator) an opportunity to release it from their office. Sometimes they will, sometimes they won't but they always appreciate the option. Once you set this into place the public information people do it routinely.

That's why the newspaper and television are not attractive for the agency - it's usually to explain a foul-up.

Ben Watts 1/11/91