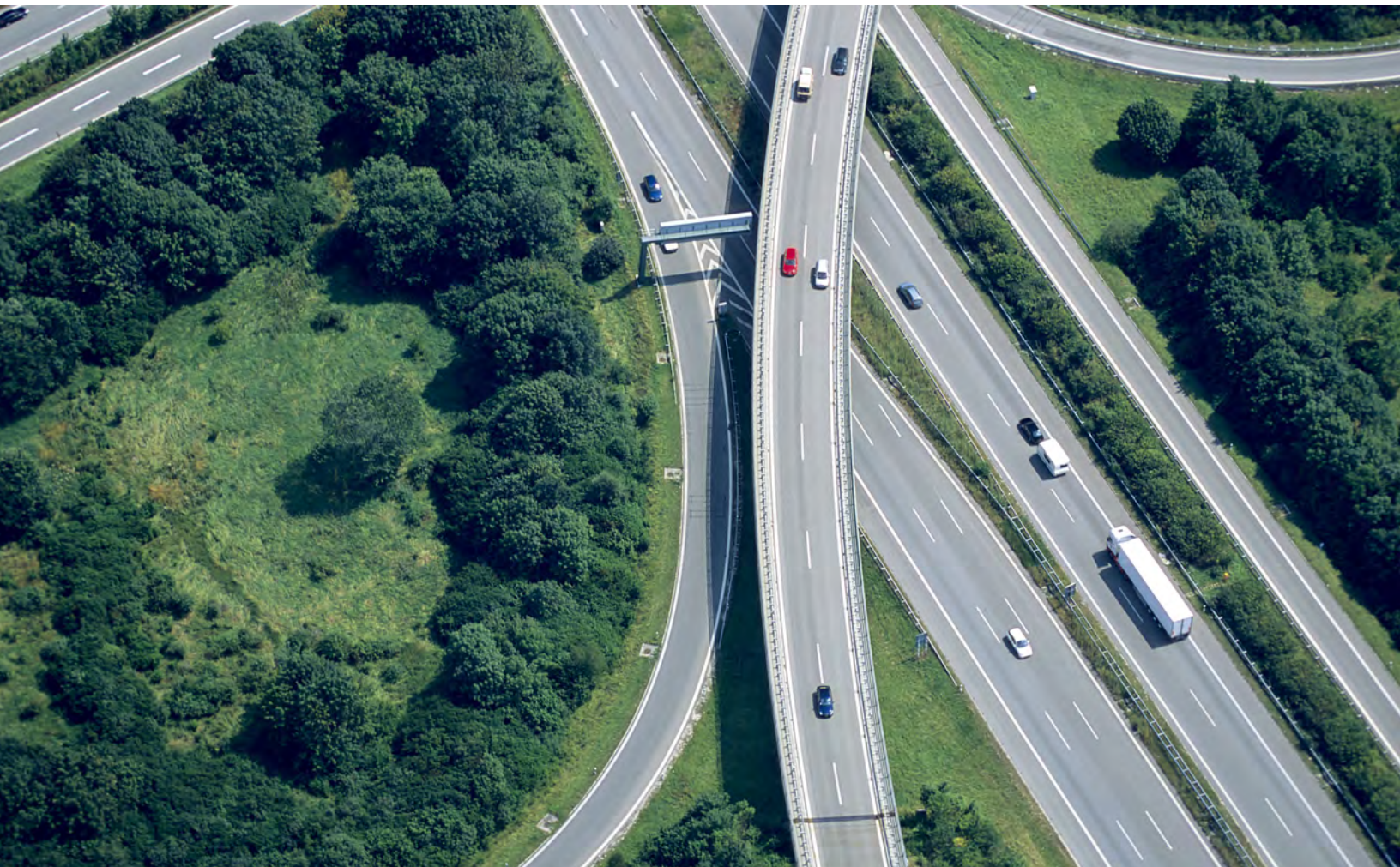


How to lead a successful government transition

The government transition period between an outgoing and an incoming government leader is a remarkable opportunity to capitalize on the momentum of the election and lay the foundation for success. A six-step approach can set an incoming administration on the right path.

Anusha Dhasarathy, Navjot Singh, and Sarah Tucker-Ray



The beginning of an administration's term is often exhilarating, but it is also incredibly complex. In roughly 60 days, newly elected officials have to set up their governments—which involves hiring hundreds of people, budgeting billions of dollars, and preparing to serve millions of constituents—and there's only one chance to do it well. New government leaders frequently plunge into this difficult season without the time or resources to prepare for it, as candidates' top priority up until Election Day is to get elected.

Fortunately, new government leaders don't need to reinvent the wheel come November. Looking back at more than 25 government transitions around the world, and thousands of senior executive transitions in both the private and public sectors, a few best practices emerge. Many of these best practices may seem obvious—but we are often surprised at how often newly elected officials skip crucial elements, to the detriment of their nascent administrations.

Best practices for a successful government transition

We have identified a set of core principles that drive success in government transitions:

- **Start planning before the election.** Identify a transition head, set up the team, and have a plan by inauguration.
- **Set a bold vision.** Translate campaign promises into “top 10” strategic goals and initiatives.
- **Start risk mitigation now.** Identify a broad range of risks (for example, cybersecurity, public safety, natural disasters) and develop incident-response and crisis-management plans.
- **Design the organization to deliver.** Consider how best to set up the new administration's organization for success based on priorities. If goals crosscut agencies, then it is key to fill roles such as COO, chief customer officer, and chief information officer.

- **Professionalize personnel selection.** Identify the top 20 to 30 posts to be filled early, develop a rigorous vetting process and team quickly, and match appointees based on skills and needs.
- **Look beyond current benches.** Several key positions will need the right skill sets, and private-sector organizations can be a great talent pool to tap.
- **Establish clear decision rights for policy making.** Draw distinct lines to efficiently reconcile any discrepancies between the transition policy team and incoming political appointees.
- **Don't ignore personal goals and aspirations.** Consider personal priorities, and make time for them.

Six steps for a successful transition

These core principles for success have informed a six-step approach to support an effective transition, consisting of aspire, manage, organize, plan, de-risk, and deliver.

Within each of these six steps are key actions that elected officials could take, deliverables for which they are responsible, standard considerations that their peers face, and important milestones for progress.

And yet surprisingly often, the tendency of many newly elected officials is to rush through these steps and fail to consider the best possible approach to accomplish even the most basic tasks. For example, a key aspect of the “aspire” step is to translate their campaign promises into the vision that will undergird their time in office. In reality, resource constraints in addition to, well, politics, can hamper progress toward certain goals. Therefore, defining exactly what success will look like—starting with articulating high-level aspirations for their term in office—can help leaders stay focused on their goals and achieve a lasting legacy.

Exhibit Six steps could improve transition success.



A key component of the “manage” step is to identify their transition head, which tends to proceed in one of two ways: a formal recruitment process in which party members tap their networks of experienced personnel or an informal process in which a candidate reaches out to personal networks. Both options have advantages and drawbacks. On the one hand, formal recruitment processes allow candidates to cast a net in a larger talent pool and naturally encourage candidates to select officials with strong party ties, which can be politically valuable. That said, as a large number of candidates is considered, formal recruitment often takes longer and usually entails a longer ramp-up period as the elected official and transition head may not be closely acquainted and need to build a rapport. On the other hand, relying on a personal network can enable candidates to quickly identify a close ally with whom he or she is familiar—but it might limit

the talent pool. Weighing these pros and effectively mitigating the effects of the cons is a delicate process that requires newly elected officials to consider the balance of a candidate’s credibility, dedication, and government experience—as well as the transition head’s post-transition role, whether that be chief of staff, a member of the Cabinet, or something else (including the possibility of no post-transition role).

Once the team is assembled and aligned, leaders typically turn their attention to structuring their organization, a key element of which is designing the top leadership team of the administration. Establishing a top team is not a simple process of hiring individual candidates but rather a process of considering the collective synergies among the top team leadership—and how those synergies complement the government leader. The skills and

styles of government leaders vary. Likewise, top team leadership candidates might have contrasting backgrounds, experiences, and leadership styles. The nature of the chief of staff, in particular, is worthy of deep consideration, as this person can function in a variety of ways—as an administrator, a gatekeeper, a counselor, an implementer, a proxy, or some mix of all the above.

Only after they have made these key personnel decisions can newly elected leaders effectively roll up their sleeves and begin planning the priority initiatives of their administrations. Once leaders and their teams have identified the key issues to address, they often become preoccupied with a specific agency or see the matter through a so-called policy-silo lens. But this narrow focus is insufficient given how many issues cut across multiple agencies and policies. Any potential solutions to the opioid crisis, for example, need to involve health, education, and unemployment. Similarly, any workforce education policy would need to consider labor policies, higher education, and infrastructure.

While determining root causes of problems is an exercise in tracing a complex web of cause and effect, sometimes the issue is simply difficult to foresee—as in the case of a catastrophic storm or act of terrorism. An analysis of news articles found that more than one-third of state administrations experienced at least one crisis (for example, natural disaster, social unrest) that merited a gubernatorial visit within their first 100 days in office. Without risk-management plans, a manmade or natural disaster at the beginning of a leader's term can move the administration into a reactive, firefighting mode and have a long-lasting impact on its ability to execute its agenda. While it is impossible to create an exhaustive list of risks, there are a set of common uncertainties that new administrations can consider and plan to mitigate. Once potential risks are identified, the transition team can categorize each risk in terms of likelihood of occurrence and severity of impact.

The final piece of the transition puzzle consists of government leaders executing on their plans and empowering their administration and government to deliver on its promises. Of course, this is easier said than done, and many governments tend to suffer from a set of common pitfalls, including over-prioritizing operational metrics. Excessive focus on numbers can lead to overlooking the underlying story of what resident needs are. Instead, newly elected officials can work to go beyond quantitative surveys and rely on design research to develop real empathy for residents and understand pain points.



The transition period is a time of celebration and preparation, but it can also be a difficult time. Using this six-step approach can help to set a government leader's incoming administration on the path to success by sorting through unnecessary complexities, understanding common missteps, and staying focused on what matters most. If government leaders thoughtfully engage with these steps during the transition, they will increase their ability to establish a rock-solid foundation upon which to build a successful administration. ■

Anusha Dhasarathy is a partner in McKinsey's Chicago office. **Navjot Singh** is a senior partner in the Boston office. **Sarah Tucker-Ray** is an associate partner in the Washington, DC, office.

Copyright © 2018 McKinsey & Company.
All rights reserved.