



Building the team that will run the state

How governors build the leadership system that turns priorities into results

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IN BRIEF

- **Great administrations are designed before they are staffed.** Governors must define how the executive enterprise will operate before determining who will fill individual roles.
- **Appointments should follow design, not drive it.** Effective transitions move from desired outcomes to required capabilities to leadership roles before selecting individual appointees.
- **Speed matters, but sequence matters more.** Filling every position quickly is less important than filling the roles that establish decision-making, flow-down coordination and execution.
- **The best transition teams build the leadership operating system.** Integrating political appointees, trusted advisors and career leaders into a cohesive enterprise delivers results on day one.

The objective is not to fill positions. The objective is to create a leadership system capable of delivering results.

As we described in “The 72-hour transition,” the organization that won the campaign has just hours to begin operating like the team that will govern. **That team cannot simply be inherited – it must be designed.**

This article supports leadership in building the leadership systems that will run the state.

The executive operating model takes shape before inauguration

The election is over. The campaign organization has shut down and the transition team is in full swing. Now comes the most important and challenging task, one that will directly impact how effective the administration is over the next four years: building the team that will enable the governor-elect to deliver the promises that got him or her elected.

The transition organization (including the governor-elect) makes a series of decisions that determine how the administration will operate before any policy is implemented, budget is proposed, or agency is directed. What constituent outcomes should define

success in the administration's first 100 days, first year and full term? What capabilities are required to achieve them? What capabilities already exist within the career government? Which leadership roles are needed to fill remaining gaps? These choices form the administration's leadership system that translates the governor's priorities into the capabilities, alongside roles and decision mechanisms required to achieve them.

Governors face a leadership design challenge. Rather than begin with names, transition leaders should first determine the capabilities needed to execute the administration's agenda and then build a leadership team around those capabilities.

The mistake many transitions make

Most transition discussions begin with names. Who should be chief of staff? Who should lead transportation? Who should run health and human services?

Before selecting leaders, a governor must prioritize what the administration is trying to achieve and when, which capabilities are required to achieve it, which capabilities already exist within the career government team, and, therefore, which skills and experience are needed in the political appointee(s). This enables the transition organization to build a slate of political appointees that meet the specific needs of the agencies they would join or lead. Only then can leaders be selected to fill the roles the system requires. In other words, start with the operating model, not the people that fill the roles.

Build the leadership architecture before filling the roles

Successful transitions begin by defining the outcomes they want to achieve, identifying the capabilities required to achieve them, and determining the leadership roles needed to deliver results.

A single desired outcome often requires multiple capabilities and leadership roles. If economic development is a priority, the administration may require fiscal analysis, legislative strategy, workforce expertise, infrastructure coordination and stronger cross-agency delivery. If workforce modernization is a priority, it may require operating experience, technology leadership, labor relationships and the ability to manage change across multiple agencies. Ultimately, the objective is to build a leadership team that collectively has the capabilities required, and one that enables accountability to produce results.



Sequence matters more than speed

Every transition faces the same constraint: available time is painfully limited. For critical personnel decisions, the instinct is often to move quickly and fill as many vacancies as possible. Instead, we recommend focusing on the key positions that unlock an operating rhythm that enables the administration to fulfill campaign promises, which we call the Governor's Operating Core.

The Governor's Operating Core typically establishes the operating rhythm of the administration and is comprised of the following individuals: chief of staff, budget director, general counsel, appointments lead, communications director and leaders responsible for the governor's highest-priority initiatives.

The objective is not to fill every seat before inauguration, but to staff the positions that enable decision-making, hiring, coordination and execution. While structures vary by state, the table below presents a practical sequencing pattern:

Critical day-one roles Governor's operating core	Early administration leadership Priority agency leaders	Remaining appointments Extended leadership team
Chief of Staff	Priority agency secretaries and commissioners	Deputy agency leaders
Budget Director	Legislative affairs leadership	Remaining boards and commissions
General Counsel	Policy and implementation leaders	Lower-priority agency appointments
Appointments Lead	Enterprise operations and performance leaders	Positions requiring extensive recruitment
Communications Director	Intergovernmental and stakeholder relations	Specialized advisory roles
Leaders responsible for the governor's highest-priority initiatives	Technology/digital leadership (or CIO if appropriate)	Organizational refinements based on emerging priorities, restructuring



Sequence matters more than speed

Incoming administrations often focus on political appointments and overlook an established and valuable asset: experienced career leaders. These individuals understand agency operations, state and federal requirements, workforce challenges, technology limitations and the practical realities of implementation. They know where previous reforms succeeded and where they stalled. They “know” the agency. They will be critical to the success or failure of initiatives within an organization.

Retaining institutional knowledge does not mean preserving the status quo; it means avoiding unnecessary relearning. The strongest administrations pair fresh leadership with operational memory, using continuity to strengthen and not impede the momentum of change.

Selection is only half the job

Many transitions invest significant effort in identifying appointees and relatively little effort in integrating them; but a cabinet does not become a team automatically. Agency leaders bring different experiences, assumptions, leadership styles and personalities. Left unmanaged, those differences can create friction and fragmentation.

Strong governors treat appointments as a lifecycle and onboard leaders as a cohort. Recruitment, vetting and ethics reviews prepare individuals for service; shared priorities, decision-making processes and accountability mechanisms prepare them to operate as an executive leadership team.

What “good” looks like before inauguration

By inauguration, a transition team should be able to answer five questions with confidence:

1. Which constituent outcomes should the administration achieve in its first 100 days, first year and full term?
2. Which enterprise capabilities are required to achieve them?
3. Which leadership roles are needed to provide those capabilities?
4. Which strengths and institutional knowledge already exist within the current government workforce?
5. Where are the most important leadership gaps that must be addressed to achieve the administration’s desired outcomes?

If those answers are clear, the transition has accomplished something more important than staffing an organization. It has designed the executive operating model that will govern the state starting on day one.

Voters will never evaluate the quality of an appointments process, but rather whether government works. Do priorities advance? Or stall? Are services functioning? Improving?

Those outcomes depend not simply on the individual leaders a governor appoints, but on whether the team collectively has the capabilities to deliver.

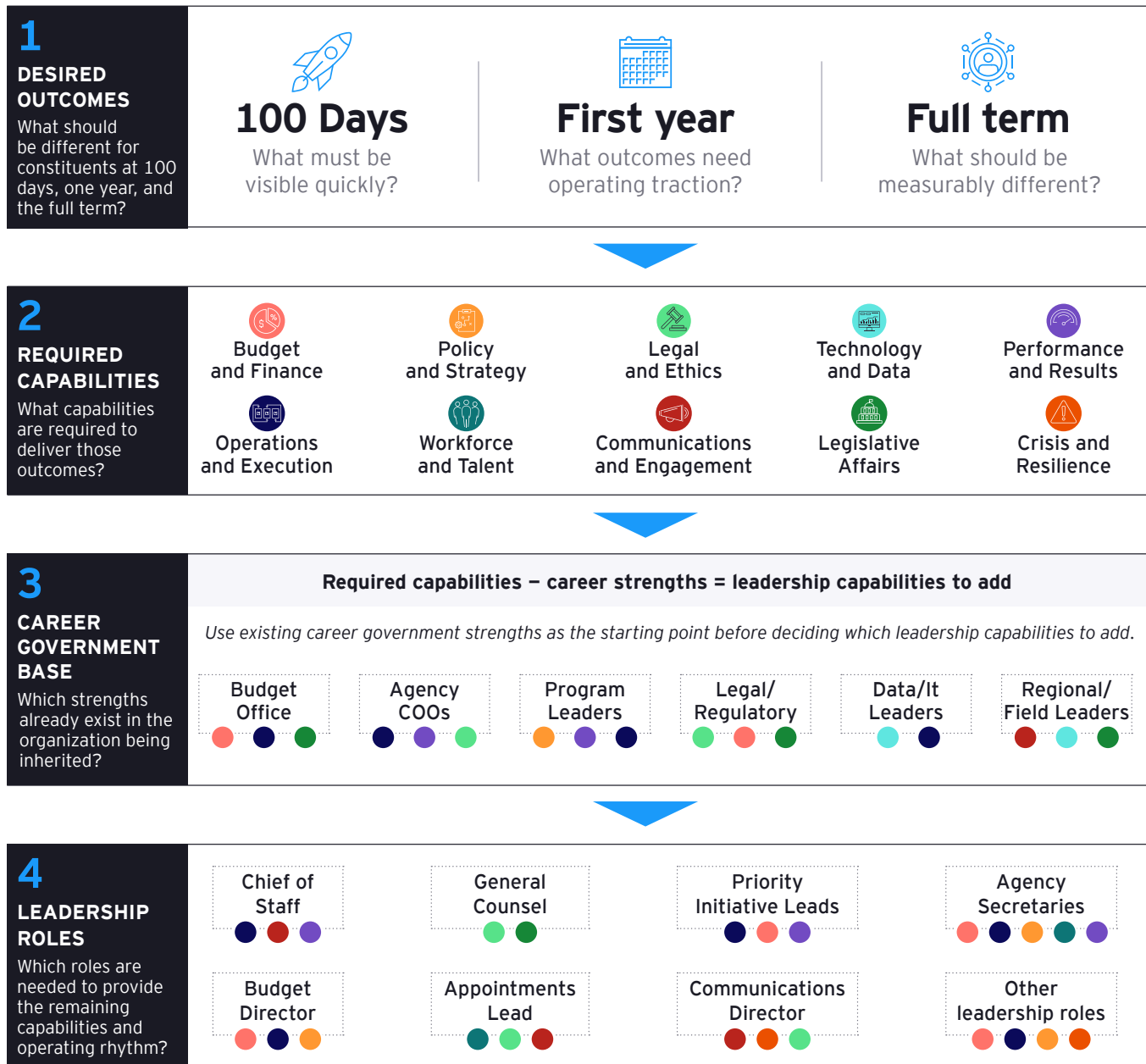
A governor is not assembling a collection of stars, but a balanced executive team capable of turning campaign promises into results.

This is the third article in our multi-part gubernatorial transition series. Our first, “Ready to lead with the rolling start readiness score,” focused on what candidates can prepare before election day; our second, “The 72-hour transition,” focused on the immediate shift from campaigning to governing. Next, we’ll look at “Budgeting for outcomes: turning the first budget into governing strategy.”

GOVERNOR'S LEADERSHIP ARCHITECTURE

A blueprint for building the executive team that delivers results.

This article supports leadership in building the leadership systems that will run the state.



Does this leadership system have what it needs to deliver?

- Are desired outcomes clear across **100 days, one year and the full term**?
- Are the capabilities **required to achieve those outcomes** understood?
- Which capabilities are **already strong within career government**?
- What leadership needs should **shape individual appointments**?
- Which important **leadership gaps** remain?
- Do proposed roles collectively **provide what is needed to deliver**?

AUTHORS



Mike Slattery

EY-Parthenon Americas Government & Public Sector Industry Leader, Ernst & Young LLP
mike.slattery@parthenon.ey.com



Mark Vineyard

Principal, Ernst & Young LLP
mark.vineyard@ey.com



Nita Bhat

Senior Manager, EY-Parthenon, Ernst & Young LLP
nita.bhat@parthenon.ey.com

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US SCORE no. 32563-261US_2
2609-10069-CS | ED None

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