Delivering Public Service for the Future

Hit the ground running
Three priorities for human services leaders taking office in 2015

Congress. You’ve earned one of the most rewarding and challenging jobs in the US. You’re responsible for delivering health and human services programs that provide protection, rehabilitation and a better quality of life for our most vulnerable individuals and families. Bottom line? You’ve got the potential to make a real difference in your community and the lives of the individuals and families you serve.

But, you need to be ready. From the moment you take office, you’re going to be confronted with some unprecedented challenges. Based on our experience working with health and human services agencies, and co-workers who have held similar positions across the country, here’s three immediate considerations to take into account so you can be sure to hit the ground running in delivering public service for the future.

1. Articulate your vision
Where do you want to take your department? How do you plan to implement the Governor’s vision? How will you achieve more with less? As you set out to answer these questions, secure an understanding of where your agency is now—in terms of business capability, technology and service delivery (using the Human Services Value Curve©, a guide to help you envision a path for your organization). Then map where you want to take it next. And remember, people and families in the communities you’re serving are not one-dimensional. So make sure your vision can address their multiple complex needs.
2. Build your team (and energize it)

Assemble your team and make sure that their goals are in alignment with your vision. Use the Human Services Value Curve to help your executive staff assess their present capacities and identify both their individual program goals and how their effort aligns to the agency’s “big picture” value journey.

As you build your team, remember the skills that are going to be critical to your success:

- **Management:** You’re running a major business – besides being entrusted with up to half of most state and local budgets, you’re a major employer, and you have the power to change and improve lives. To meet people’s needs, improve outcomes, and increase efficiency, you need seasoned management on the team. It’s a compassionate business, but a business nonetheless.

- **Understanding:** Do you understand business needs and program requirements? Although you don’t need to be a categorical program expert in each area, you do need to familiarize yourself with the various programs, their challenges, performance and opportunities and, perhaps most importantly, where they fit in the enterprise. What are the best practices and how do you define success? To get the answers you need, be ready to challenge institutional thinking and support creative thinking every step of the way.

- **Politics:** You’re operating in a political environment and you need to understand the political landscape. Always relate to public policy leaders in a manner that affirms your vision. Don’t lose sight of the bigger picture in a partisan environment.

Critically assess your own competencies and those of your executive team. Make sure you build a team that complements and enhances your skillsets. Getting the right “mix” of skills and experience is critically important to successfully fulfill your goals and objectives. The “I’m going to run this place like a business” leader who doesn’t understand the business; the program expert that alienates a legislature’s appropriations chair; or the politician that can’t manage or balance a budget are all doomed to at least a temporary failure.

Make sure your program leaders know they’re accountable and take time to celebrate their successes. Lastly, always remember that it’s your leadership, skills and integrity that set the tone and create the collective urge to succeed.

3. Create buy-in through “quick wins”

Make an impact from the outset. Try to identify some longstanding issues that were previously not addressed, especially those that may have been raised by elected officials, advocates and co-workers. Grab these low-hanging fruit and achieve some quick wins. Use these to build credibility with the general public (often through the media), with the legislature—and to build trust from career staff within the agency. First impressions help set the tone for the administration.

While it’s important to achieve quick wins, maintaining a client focus and keeping the “big picture” in mind at all times is essential to your vision fulfillment. And remember that success should be measured by overall agency performance, not by a single program’s outcome.

One other important consideration, be prepared for the unknown. Test the agency’s disaster response and critical communications plan (especially in child welfare) early in your administration. Make this a top priority. It’s essential that you and your team know in advance how to react when the unexpected happens. And it will. If and when disaster strikes, you want to be the one briefing the Governor, advising how you’re responding and communicating through the right channels. Being caught by surprise and failing to respond quickly and decisively can have long-term negative consequences.

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