



The Political Appointee's Challenge:

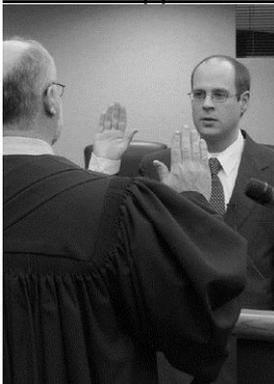
Minimize the time it takes for the career-political team to function well, enabling the Administration's agenda to be met.

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.

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



Margaret Gilligan, Associate Administrator for Aviation Safety, Department of Transportation and a 2012 Distinguished Executive who led a team of FAA experts and private-sector team members in developing and implementing a plan to retrofit more than 6,000 commercial airplanes with hardened cockpit doors following the September 11 terrorist attacks.

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.



Dr. Isaiah Blankson, Senior Technologist, John H. Glenn Research Center, NASA, and a 2012 Distinguished Executive who was awarded a patent on his turbine-based MHD energy bypass engine that is capable of extending the operation of a conventional jet aircraft engine to Mach 7.



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



John P. Roth, Deputy Comptroller (Program/Budget), Office of the Under Secretary of Defense and a 2012 Distinguished Executive who effectively managed \$7 **trillion** in Defense resources over the past decade; with four separate military services, hundreds of accounts, thousands of programs, a three-million person military and civilian workforce, countless information systems, and multi-billion-dollar acquisitions, no career official in the U.S. Government has been responsible for a larger budget.

- A duty to accommodate the political program
- An ability to get your agenda moving by designing and implementing appropriate agency actions

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



Elizabeth Tucker, Deputy Commissioner for Operations Support, Internal Revenue Service and a 2012 Distinguished Executive who led the successful completion and deployment of the Customer Account Data Engine which has revolutionized tax administration, allowing the IRS to process returns daily rather than weekly. She also spearheaded the Identity Theft Assessment and Action group, developing filters which screen and stopped hundreds of thousands of questionable returns with fraudulent refunds of over \$1 billion.



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



Ralph R. Roe, Jr.,
Director of Engineering
and Safety Center,
NASA and a 2012
Distinguished Executive
who provided real-time
technical support to the
Chilean Minister of
Health for the design of
the escape module used
to rescue 33 trapped
Chilean miners in 2010,
including producing a
detailed set of design
requirements for the
module in only 4 days.



Rebecca Spitzgo, Associate
Administrator, Health
Resources and Services
Administration’s Bureau of
Clinician Recruitment and
Service, HHS and a 2012
Distinguished Executive
who developed and
implemented Grants.gov, a
single electronic grants
system unifying hundreds of
billions of dollars in federal
grants from more than 35
grant-making agencies; the
website has received eight
major honors and awards.

- 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

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

- The vehicles of the Administration’s political goals.
- 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."



Gilbert S. Rothenberg, Chief, Appellate Section, Tax Division, Justice and a 2012 Distinguished Executive who served as lead attorney in several landmark tax cases that have been widely studied by law students and frequently cited by courts, legal scholars, and tax practitioners and has won virtually every corporate tax shelter appeal his Division has litigated, establishing significant precedents and safeguarding billions of dollars in tax revenue.

He also led the charge to end the proliferation of abusive individual and corporate tax shelters which threatened to drain tens of billions of dollars in tax revenue and to secure the court's willingness to penalize taxpayers who participate in them.

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



Charles A. Casto, Regional Administrator, Region III, Nuclear Regulatory Commission and a 2012 Distinguished Executive who served for 11 months in Japan as Director for Site Operations after the Fukushima nuclear plant accident, leading the U.S. government efforts to provide support to the Japanese, including identifying and securing vital equipment, assisting in the development of criteria to support the restart of nuclear plants. The U.S. Ambassador to Japan said "His leadership and the work of the NRC in response to Fukushima will not soon be forgotten by the Japanese."

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:

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"



Larry J. Goldberg, Principal Deputy Inspector General, Department of Health and Human Services and a 2012 Distinguished Executive who spearheaded efforts to establish Medicare Fraud "strike force" operations, with almost 1200 defendants charged for having falsely billed Medicare for more than \$3.6 billion.

His investigation of Pfizer led to a criminal and civil settlement of \$2.3 billion, the largest recovery in history in a health care fraud case.

He also identified "off-the-charts" Medicare home health care claims, resulting in a physician's indictment for a \$374 million fraud scheme, the largest recovery in history in a health care fraud case.

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.

Senior Executives Association
77 K Street N.E.
Suite 2600
Washington, D.C. 20002
202.971.3300
www.seniorexecs.org