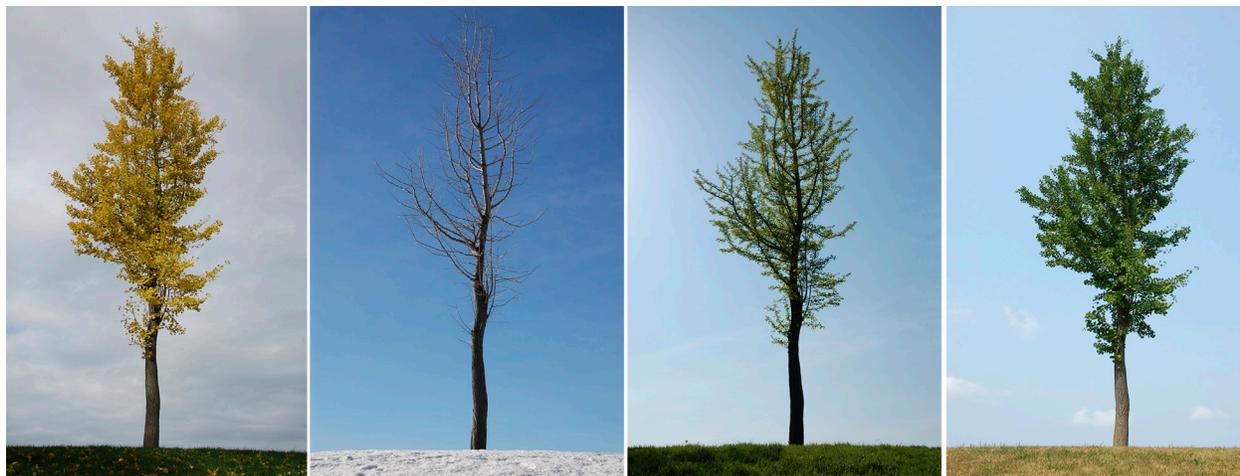


Tips for Navigating Government Transitions

By Beth McGrath



Administration transitions are infrequently easy for government leaders. Regardless of what you think of the party coming into power, new leadership normally means change. Change in who you report to. Change in how you talk about the work you do. Change, in many cases, in the programs that you lead.

There are a tremendous number of exciting transformative programs underway across the Federal government. While we're still more than a year away from the official passing of the presidential baton, many of these programs will require many years to complete, and will require support from the new administration. Therefore, it's already time for government officials to start thinking about how they can best position their programs to continue to succeed in the next administration. In my more than 25 years in the federal government, I experienced a number of administration transitions. While each transition ushered in a new cast of characters with specific intentions and circumstances, a few rules of thumb consistently helped the new administration see the value of transformative efforts and increased the likelihood of those programs remaining part of the future agenda.

#1: Good government is good government (regardless of who's in the White House). Projects that were successful under the previous administration can—and should—be effective under the new one. That's because the fundamentals of good government are not the domain of just one administration. If you have a program that has a consistent record of achievements, it's important to be prepared to share with your new leadership what an asset the program is and how it helps achieve your organization's desired outcomes. Have the data ready, speak clearly, and prepare your team to do the same when they meet with relevant appointee staff. Your program may not be adopted wholesale—language may change slightly, some programmatic elements may be tweaked. Remember, change is hard. Be flexible. Some amount of change may be worth accepting if it means that a good program with strong results continues.

#2: Stakeholders are important. Government officials fresh to a posting have a tendency to focus only on what they can do directly from their new perch. Given that the U.S. Government is one of the most powerful institutions on earth, that focus is understandable. But anyone who's been in government for long knows that the government can't do everything on its own. It depends on a diverse ecosystem of partners to achieve its aims, from private sector industry to academic institutions to civil society. So, it is critical that leaders start to think now about who their program stakeholders are, and how those stakeholders may change as a result of the change in administration. There's often significant risk associated with poor stakeholder relationships, and potentially tremendous opportunities created by strong ones. As you continue in your role, (before, during, and after the change of administration) it's important to keep engagement with stakeholders (both old and new) solid. Inform them about the upcoming transition and what they can expect. Communicate changes in a timely manner—and if there's protracted uncertainty that's pertinent, communicate about the delay, too. Listen to their input and strive to understand their perspective. Empathizing with your stakeholders helps signal that you can be trusted as a partner, and you'll likely see the benefits of that trust in your collaboration down the line. Actively developing and sustaining relationships with stakeholders (both inside and outside the government) throughout the life of a project can not only reduce potential risk, but can also help the project achieve better outcomes. When the new appointee arrives, convey the importance of internal and external stakeholders to the achievements of the project. Quickly introduce the appointee to the group to help create a strong sense of "team" for the overall program.

#3: It's all about the data. My many years in government have taught me that there's no better time to have a good handle on the data than when the "new team" comes to town. It is important to start on this now because while the data you need may exist, ready access to it may not. The data you need differs, of course, on your mandate. But it's

normally critical, and it's **not** political—it helps to tell you and your stakeholders an objective and compelling story about what's working and what's not and where you stand on a particular program or initiative. In my work implementing performance management at the Department of Defense, that meant understanding assets, resources, spending, budget trends, workforce composition, and other mission-essential data sets. And it meant returning to those data sets again and again to assess progress toward our goals.

When it comes to data, transparency is key. Transparency helps provide clarity and enables accountability. Take the opportunity before the transition to review your data sources and analytic capacity and make sure you have the information you need. Your programs ought to be judged by how well they meet their objectives. Having good, reliable data will help set up you, your leadership, and your program staff to have an accurate and fair picture of their progress.

#4: Use your voice. New government leaders brought into agencies after changes are typically inundated with information. They're also expected to hit the ground running and demonstrate some big wins. Given these demands, they may not be best positioned to sense when their decision-making process is missing key perspectives. Government enterprises, such as Defense, tend to be large, complex organizations aiming to achieve mission outcomes and take on the applicable balance of risk. New leaders may need guidance and information from experienced staff to fully understand these factors—even if they're not aware of it. Be sure to "speak truth to power" – be transparent about where things are. At the end of the day, Deloitte plays a part in supporting the government as stewards of taxpayer dollars, and we should share our best thinking with our leaders. That means speaking up even when our conclusions may depart from the consensus position.

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