



Key Takeaways:

- Hiring decisions are among some of the most important that an incoming mayor will have to make. Ensuring the right person in the right role can make or break a policy agenda.
- These decisions will have a major impact on how the government is structured and there are a variety of models for structuring a mayor's leadership team. The key is to pick a model that will best complement the leadership style of the mayor. Build the team and internal processes around the strengths and weaknesses of the mayor to put them in the best position to be successful.
- An executive search firm can be a critical tool in helping an incoming administration fill leadership, staff and board and commission positions.
- The community can also be a great resource for identifying potential candidates, by targeting subject matter experts and stakeholder groups associated with the role you are looking to fill.
- Given the number of positions that an executive must hire for, it is important to be decisive and communicate once the team has identified their chosen candidate. Time is a precious resource and shouldn't be wasted conducting interviews when the right candidate has already been identified.
- Communicate the decision promptly to the hiree and unsuccessful candidates once it has been made.

Column 2 – Hiring and Inspiring Great People

Only those who have seen local government up close can truly appreciate the difference hiring the right person to run a city department or initiative makes. Managing in the public sector is challenging, filled with rules designed to prevent corruption and favoritism. Need new equipment in a hurry? Procurement rules will slow you down. You want to create new positions, or reassign staff? You'll have to work within civil service rules and union contracts. There's never enough money, and there are always political issues to navigate, not to mention bureaucratic inertia.

When Michael DiBerardinis took over a demoralized and underperforming Philadelphia Recreation Department in 1992, the transformation was breathtaking, even though the city was

in a fiscal crisis and money was tight. He worked with city unions and raised private funds to expand sports programs and pool hours, and repair playgrounds and recreation center roofs.

The ultimate success of an administration starts and ends with the people working in it. That's why when the Committee of Seventy planned training sessions to help mayoral candidates manage their transition to governing, the second session focused on "Hiring and Inspiring Great People." The session was attended by now Mayor Cherrille Parker and her team, including her top advisors, Sinceré Harris and Aren Platt.

One of the speakers was Leigh Hanson, chief of staff to the mayor of Oakland and a veteran of government transitions. Hanson noted that hiring for a new mayoral administration is a daunting task. In Philadelphia, it means finding the right candidates for dozens of key managerial positions and filling hundreds of mayoral appointments to countless boards and commissions, all in a compressed time frame.

"Can you imagine if you were building a startup company and your investors said, 'okay, you need to go from zero to 80 employees in six weeks?'" Hanson asked. "That's essentially what we put in front of mayors." But, Hanson said, the task is critically important.

"I would say about 90 percent of your success is determined by the team you develop," she said, "and retaining them is probably the remaining 10 percent." Hanson advised that the incoming mayor should engage an executive search firm to aid in the hiring process (the Parker team has).

While search firms bring valuable skills and contacts, Hanson said, they're most effective when integrated with community participants in the transition process. When she worked on the transition for Pittsburgh Mayor Bill Peduto, his team "tried to democratize the [hiring] process." The idea was to cast a wide net and "crowdsource the community's best ideas" for key government positions.

An example of the technique paying off was finding the candidate who would become the city's planning director. She recalled that the candidate "was recruited specifically by one of our architecture professors at Carnegie Mellon University who posted the job on his LinkedIn site."

Matt Gallagher, who was not a speaker during this session, but worked on transitions for Maryland Governor Martin O'Malley, advised that a transition team act decisively when a course of action is clear. "If there are decisions you've already made or candidates that you feel strongly about, move on them as quickly as you can," he said. "Don't leave other candidates, including the incumbent who may be in the job, hanging and wondering."

For example, he said that after interviewing Gary Maynard for the job of corrections chief, "we found he checked all the boxes, so we cleared [then] Mayor O'Malley's calendar that day and drove him out to the airport where [Maynard] was about to leave and hired him on the spot."

"Your time is very precious," he cautioned, "and sometimes you have to be nimble. You don't want to interview a half dozen people for every position if you don't have to."

Closely related to finding the right people for a mayor's team is deciding how power and decision-making in the government will be structured. When Wilson Goode was mayor in the 1980s, his regular cabinet meetings were small, since the City Charter then defined the cabinet as just four officials besides the mayor. One of the four, the managing director, had responsibility for all the major city operating departments.

When Ed Rendell became mayor in 1992, he pretty much worked around the Charter's structure. His administration was centered around a powerful chief of staff in the mayor's office, who convened meetings as needed with other senior officials. The managing director had far less influence than in previous administrations.

Michael Nutter, as one of his first acts as mayor, ushered through amendments to the Home Rule Charter to allow him the desired flexibility at shifting from a strong Managing Director form of leadership to a Deputy Mayor-led system.

With examples of the various models of her predecessors to reflect on, Gallagher said Parker has options on how to organize her government. "I've worked in a strong chief of staff model. I've worked in a deputy mayor model," he said. "There's no magic chart. The most important thing is just clarity in terms of how you want things to operate."

After winning the general election in November, Parker [announced the appointment of three top advisors](#) to posts in the mayor's office that would be "the leaders at the top of the Parker administration's organizational chart." She named Harris chief deputy mayor of intergovernmental affairs, sustainability and engagement. Platt was appointed chief deputy mayor of planning and strategic initiatives. And Tiffany Thurman was appointed Chief of Staff.

Leigh Hanson, chief of staff for the mayor of Oakland, said lines of authority and communication should be organized to fit the mayor's preferences and work habits. "You need to structure your city government and your mayor's office around the mayor you have, not the mayor you wish you had," she said. "So you need to know what kind of briefing documents work for the mayor, what kind of organization you need to give the mayor some control over their own life."

Hanson shared an interesting thought. "I always recommend that a mayor, throughout transition, have an executive coach and also have a therapist," she said. The executive coach seems obvious, but why a therapist?

Everybody should have a therapist, she said, but "for mayors, I think the consequences for a mayor of being emotionally dysregulated are severe, and that's not just the personal consequences. There are consequences on the staff around them, and on their decision making."

Dave Davies is a journalist who spent decades covering Philadelphia politics and government. He is currently a contributor to NPR's Fresh Air with Terry Gross.

Additional Resources:

- [Pew Charitable Trusts - Hiring and Employment in Philadelphia City Government](#)
- [\(Background on\) Executive Search Firms](#)
- [Previous Administration's City Government organization chart](#)