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APPLYING ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE MANAGEMENT TO PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITIONS

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Introduction

A presidential transition is a complex and multifaceted process, requiring meticulous planning and execution. While the logistical aspects of these transitions have been extensively documented,^{1,2} another critical dimension often gets overlooked: the people who direct and are most impacted by such significant change.

Organizational change management is a process and framework that addresses the people component of change. It involves a series of activities designed to generate support for the desired change by focusing on the attitudes, behaviors, and emotions of the people involved. When applied to a presidential transition, change management increases the likelihood of satisfying the four core principles involved in managing transitions:³

- Organizing for success
- Planning for change
- Building relationships and taking care of people
- Establishing effective agency communications

The potential benefits of applying change management principles to presidential transitions are significant. They include increased engagement from all stakeholders, smoother transitions with less disruption, and quicker alignment with the new administration's goals. Essentially, effective change management can help reduce the time it takes for everyone to accept and fully commit to the required changes, enabling the new administration to hit the ground running.

Purpose and Structure of This Document

This document introduces the concept of change management and explores its relevance and application in the context of presidential transitions. We propose a perspective that transcends traditional transition checklists and timelines, focusing on preparing three major stakeholder groups for the impending change: outgoing political appointees, senior career staff, and incoming political appointees. Integrating change management principles with traditional transition activities can enhance the effectiveness of the transition process, accelerating the journey to a well-functioning new administration and committed state for all involved.

This document is intended to assist both Agency Transition Teams⁴ and President-Elect's Transition Teams⁵ in applying change management as they plan and execute the presidential transition, as well as the new political appointees and senior career staff who will guide the transition after Inauguration Day. We provide an overview of the discipline of organizational change management and illustrate how the major phases of the presidential transition can be viewed through the lens of a commonly used change management model, the Commitment Curve. Using this model, we outline the people-related goals the new administration and the agency should pursue during each phase of the transition (Pre-Election, Post-Election, First 100 Days, and Normal Operations). We then distill those goals into a set of change management objectives and recommendations tailored to each of the three stakeholder groups.

We encourage Agency Transition Teams and President-Elect's Transition Teams (and new political appointees and senior career staff when appropriate) to embrace the change management principles and strategies presented in this document as vital and integral parts of the transition process. We believe adopting this approach will enable those responsible for the transition to enhance their management of presidential transitions, leading to more successful outcomes for all involved.

Overview of Change Management

Research has shown that the most significant barriers to implementing change within an organization are related to people rather than resources, processes, and technology.⁶ To address this challenge, organizations should apply change management, a systematic approach that prepares people for changes in an organization’s strategy, operations, and technology. By effectively managing the people component of a major change effort, an organization can triple its chances of achieving and sustaining its desired outcomes.⁷ The benefits of successful change management include:

- Higher rate of adoption for the change
- More rapid adoption of the change
- Smoother, more effective rollout
- Shorter timeline to fully leverage new capabilities
- Reduction in problems, mistakes, and waste

Change Management Activities

Essentially, change management prepares people to adopt a new way of doing business through the planning and execution of activities in the six categories shown in Table 1.

This approach ensures that the people involved in the change are adequately prepared, informed, and engaged, thereby facilitating a smoother and more effective transition.

Emotional Factors

To prepare people for a major change, it is important to consider the emotions they may have about what is happening to them. New situations mentally prompt people to categorize the change as either a threat or a reward. People may react strongly to being told about a change or experiencing the change, even to the point of experiencing a flight or fight response.⁸ Organizations can mitigate or reduce the level of fear and in some cases create a sense of enthusiasm by understanding and addressing the following factors as part of their change management strategy:

- **Status** – Where one believes they stand in the pecking order relative to others
- **Certainty** – One’s perception of how well they can predict the future
- **Autonomy** – Feeling that one has choices
- **Relatedness** – Feeling a sense of trust and safety with others
- **Fairness** – A feeling of fair exchange and fair connection with others

It is also important to recognize that individuals typically undergo a predictable transition process when shifting from a current to a future state. This process begins with a sense of ending, loss and letting go, followed by a “neutral zone” where individuals are adjusting to the change. The process







	Leadership Mobilization	Leaders provide clear strategic direction and visibly support change through meaningful action.
	Training/Education	People are prepared and confident to implement a new way of doing work through effective training and education.
	Stakeholder Engagement	People affected by the change are actively involved. Their needs, concerns, and expectations drive the change process.
	Communications	People are well informed through timely, relevant, and accurate information. Their feedback is incorporated into change strategies and messaging.
	Organization and Workforce Alignment	Structure, roles and responsibilities, staffing, policies, and reward systems are aligned with the goals of the change.
	Assessment	The organization is assessed on factors such as readiness for change, organizational agility, and impacts on the workforce and the organization. The results inform and drive overall change management activities.

Table 1 - Organizational Change Management Categories

finishes with a fresh start, where individuals form a new identity, experience new energy, and discover a new sense of purpose.⁹

Commitment Curve Introduction

The change management process can be effectively visualized through a simple model known as the Commitment Curve, as shown in Figure 1.¹⁰ The fundamental concept behind this model is that people's support for most major changes can be secured only in a gradual and incremental manner.

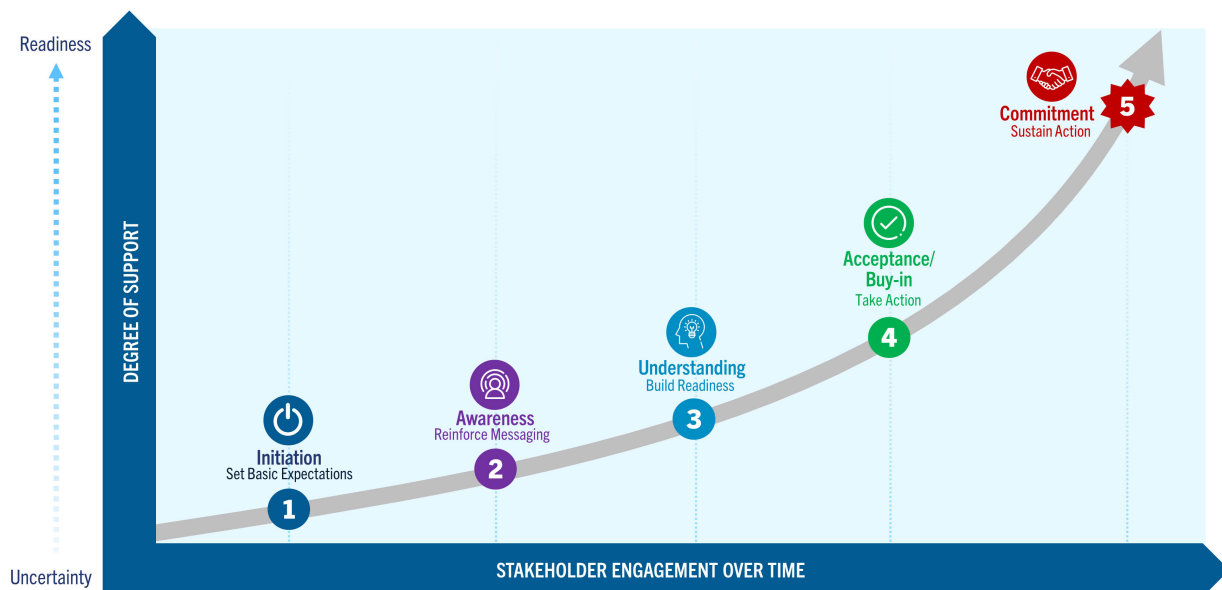
Over time, employees will progress through five stages of change, each representing an increasingly higher degree of support for the change. The process begins with the Initiation stage, when individuals start to hear about the impending change, thereby setting basic expectations. The next stage is Awareness, during which people recognize the basic scope of the change expected for the organization, reinforcing the initial messaging. Following this is the Understanding stage, when individuals comprehend the impact of the change and what it means for them, thereby building readiness for the transition. The fourth stage is Acceptance/Buy-In, in which individuals are

willing to take action in line with the new direction, marking the start of a new way of doing business. The final stage is Commitment, when individuals are fully committed to sustaining the new way of doing business, establishing it as the new norm. The Commitment Curve model underscores the importance of managing change in a systematic and phased manner to ensure a smoother transition and higher levels of commitment.

Commitment Curves and Presidential Transition Phases

The Commitment Curve can be effectively applied to the stages of a presidential transition. This application provides valuable insights, especially in the early stages of the transition, and demonstrates how the use of change management principles can expedite the process of achieving buy-in and commitment from career civil servants in a new administration.

In Figure 2, the Commitment Curve is overlaid with a presidential transition timeline. The grey curve represents the natural progression of support in most presidential transitions, while the blue curve illustrates how this timeline can be shortened through a well-executed change management effort.



Source: Adapted from Daryl Conner, *Managing at the Speed of Change* (2006), Commitment Curve.

Figure 1. Change Management Commitment Curve

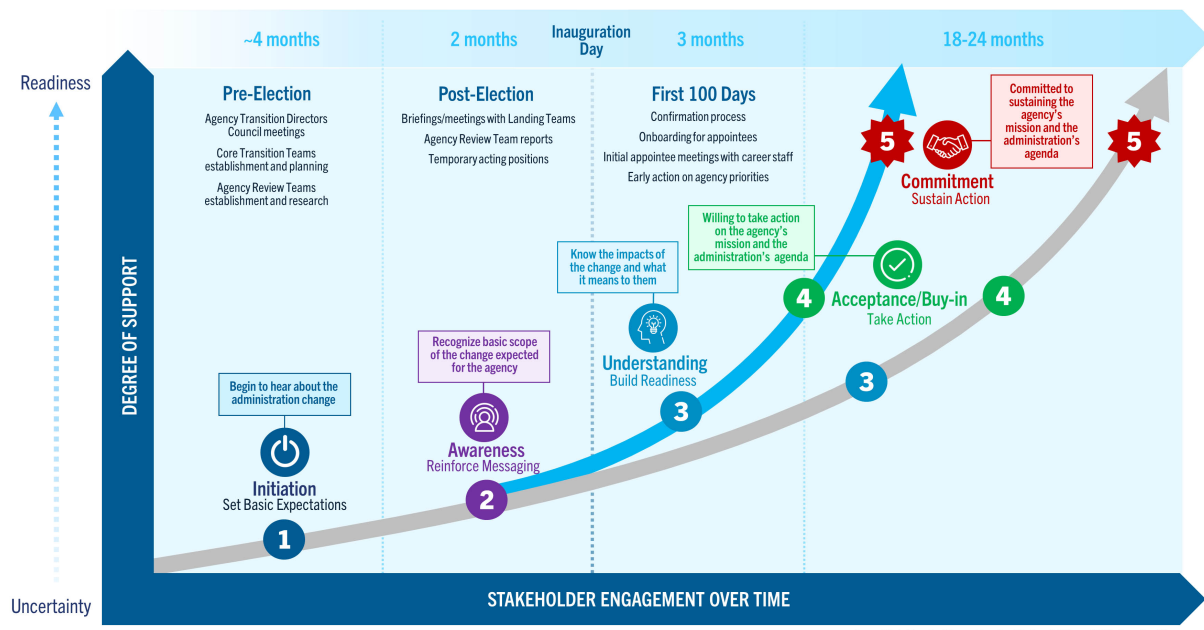


Figure 2. Commitment Curve Overlaid with Presidential Transition Timelines

This combined model serves as a strategic framework for preparing agency staff for the presidential transition. Those tasked with managing their agency's transition should design and implement a series of activities aimed at guiding the three key stakeholder groups—outgoing appointees, senior career staff, and incoming appointees—through five progressive stages of support for the impending change. These stages each denote an increasing level of commitment throughout the transition timeline:

- **Initiation** – All three stakeholder groups start to become aware of the (potential) upcoming administration change. This stage sets the groundwork for their basic expectations.
- **Awareness** – Stakeholders begin to grasp the fundamental scope of the expected change within the agency, reinforcing initial messaging.
- **Understanding** – Stakeholders gain insight into the impact of the change and its implications for them, thereby building readiness for the transition.

- **Acceptance/Buy-In** – Stakeholders show a willingness to align their actions with the agency's mission and the new administration's agenda, marking the commencement of a new operational approach.
- **Commitment** – Stakeholders demonstrate full commitment to upholding the agency's mission and the new administration's agenda, solidifying the new operational approach as the standard practice.

It is crucial to understand that the need for change management attention extends well beyond Inauguration Day. Contrary to common belief, the transition does not end when new appointees take over positions in federal agencies (and transition teams begin to expire). By Inauguration Day, all parties should be advancing toward Understanding. However, substantial work remains for new political appointees and senior career staff to guide everyone to reach Understanding, Acceptance/Buy-In, and ultimately Commitment.

Focusing on guiding all parties through these stages, including assessing change readiness and addressing change barriers, can significantly accelerate the transition process. This approach compresses the timeline to Acceptance and full Commitment, enabling the new administration to swiftly focus on its mission and agenda, rather than on managing the transition. To achieve this, those managing the presidential transition at each agency should plan and execute activities that are directly tailored to the specific needs and concerns of outgoing appointees, senior career staff, and incoming appointees. Some activities will be limited to a particular stage on the Commitment Curve, while others will be repeated in multiple phases. Regardless, the focus will tighten over time, as will the levels of detail and complexity.¹¹

Putting Change Management Concepts into Practice in a Transition

Applying the principles of change management strategically during each of the four phases of a presidential transition is crucial for facilitating a smooth and accelerated shift to the new administration and its priorities. Neglecting to do so can result in significant drawbacks and risks, including resistance to change, disruption of operations, delayed alignment with the new administration's goals, and reduced stakeholder engagement. This section introduces overall goals for change management and then breaks those goals down into objectives and recommendations tailored to outgoing political appointees, senior career staff, and incoming political appointees. Being intentional about change management and engagement can help mitigate these risks and enhance the effectiveness of the transition process.

Overall Change Management Goals for Each Transition Phase

This subsection describes the overall change management goals for each phase of the presidential transition: Pre-Election, Post-Election (to Inauguration Day), First 100 Days, and Normal Operations (Remainder of Term). Setting clear objectives for each phase helps ensure a smooth transition, foster stakeholder engagement, and expedite alignment with the new administration's goals.

Pre-Election Phase

The overarching change management goal during the Pre-Election phase is to initiate preparation for a potential administration change within each of the three groups impacted: existing political staff, careerists, and (potentially) incoming political staff. This phase corresponds to the Initiation stage on the Commitment Curve, when individuals begin to hear about the administration change. The emphasis here is on acknowledging the potential for change and setting the stage for transition preparation. This stage should focus on cultivating awareness and fostering understanding of the impending transition.

Without proactive and intentional initiation and preparation during this phase, stakeholders may find themselves unprepared for the subsequent phases of the transition. This lack of readiness could hinder the transition process, making it more challenging for stakeholders to progress to the phases of Understanding, Acceptance, and ultimately Commitment, emphasizing the importance of a deliberate approach to change management from the transition's outset.

Post-Election (to Inauguration Day) Phase

The primary change management goal during the Post-Election phase is to ensure all three groups (outgoing political appointees, career staff, and incoming political appointees) fully comprehend the scope and implications of the impending change

within the agency. This phase corresponds with the Awareness stage on the Commitment Curve, in which individuals recognize the basic scope of the change expected for the agency. The primary objective is to equip all parties with a comprehensive understanding of the transition, its rationale, and its potential impact on them.

Simultaneously, it is essential to acknowledge and celebrate the outgoing administration's successes and contributions, reinforcing a sense of accomplishment and value among the outgoing political appointees and the career staff who will remain. When progressing from post-election to inauguration, the focus should intensify on deepening everyone's understanding of the transition process, their specific roles within it, and the importance of their contributions to a successful transition.

Without a deliberate focus on enhancing understanding during this phase, stakeholders may not fully grasp the scope and implications of the impending change. This could lead to misalignment, uncertainty, and slower progression along the Commitment Curve. It is at this juncture that the two timelines depicted in Figure 2 begin to bifurcate, with the lack of intentional change management potentially leading to a more protracted transition process.

First 100 Days Phase

The First 100 Days represent a pivotal period for establishing the tone and direction of the new administration. By accelerating the change management process during this phase, incoming political appointees and career staff can swiftly transition from mere awareness of the change to a deep understanding of its implications, ultimately leading to acceptance and buy-in of the new administration's objectives. This phase aligns with the Understanding stage of the Commitment Curve, when individuals recognize the change and its impacts; and the Acceptance/Buy-in stage, when individuals are willing to support the new administration's agenda.

The emphasis during this phase is fostering readiness for the new direction; proactively implementing the desired change; and establishing effective, collaborative working relationships. This is where effective change management makes the biggest impact, propelling incoming appointees and senior career staff through later phases of the Commitment Curve more quickly and smoothly than would otherwise occur. This acceleration is demonstrated by the difference between the trajectory of the blue curve (use of change management) and the grey curve (no change management) in Figure 2.

A lack of intentional change management during this phase may cause delays in the progression from Awareness, to Understanding, to Acceptance of the new administration's objectives, hindering the establishment of effective working relationships and slowing down the implementation of the new administration's agenda.

Normal Operations (Remainder of Term) Phase

The primary change management objective during this phase is to facilitate the agency's transition into regular operations as quickly and seamlessly as possible, if this has not already been achieved. This phase corresponds to the Commitment stage on the Commitment Curve, in which individuals are committed to sustaining the agency's mission and the administration's agenda. The focus during this phase is fully integrating the new direction into regular agency operations and maintaining the momentum of change. The aim is to progress beyond the transition period and establish a "new normal" where the changes introduced during the transition are fully embedded in the agency's operations.

During the Normal Operations phase, the emphasis should be on solidifying the changes made during the transition and embedding them into the agency's regular operations. This phase marks the end of the transition and change management periods and the beginning of "business as usual" under the new administration.

Lack of intentional change management during this phase may result in lingering resistance to the new direction, disruption to regular operations, and a slower progression to the Commitment stage on the Commitment Curve. This could delay the establishment of the “new normal” and hinder the successful execution of the agency’s mission under the new administration.

Change Management Objectives and Recommendations for Each Stakeholder Group

This subsection describes the change management objectives and associated recommendations for each of the three key stakeholder groups as they move through the four phases of the transition. We also highlight a key transition activity within each phase that is most critical for change management attention, offering insightful guidance for successful execution.¹²

Outgoing Political Appointees

Pre-Election Phase
Overall Change Management Objective: Understand and acknowledge the change on the horizon due to the upcoming presidential election and subsequent transition. Lay the groundwork for a successful transition within the agency.
Overall Change Management Recommendation: Initiate discussions about the upcoming transition, emphasizing the importance of maintaining continuity in government operations and the necessity for a seamless transition.

The highlighted transition activity is the initiation of agency transition planning. This is an important first step that outgoing appointees must take to emotionally prepare career staff for the end of their work under the current administration and the commencement of their work under the new one. It is important to acknowledge that this process will begin with a sense of loss and letting go, progress through feelings of uncertainty and tentativeness, and culminate in commitment to a new beginning.¹³ These outgoing political appointees should stress to career

staff the importance of managing this emotional process while simultaneously supporting a seamless transition that ensures continuity of government. This dual approach is key to navigating the transition effectively.

Post-Election (to Inauguration Day) Phase
Overall Change Management Objective: Simultaneously “sprint to the finish” with the outgoing administration while facilitating a smooth transition to its successors for the agency and its career employees.
Overall Change Management Recommendations: Communicate the important role outgoing appointees play in ensuring continuity of government. Celebrate the outgoing administration’s achievements with career staff. Recognize the good work and valuable contributions of career staff while conducting transition activities with the incoming administration, including the Agency Review Team and Landing Team. Identify critical tasks that will need to be accomplished over the next few months by careerists (in the interim) or new political appointees. Facilitate these tasks to ensure they can be successfully completed with minimal effort.

The highlighted transition activity is to conduct dedicated events and other activities to celebrate the outgoing administration’s achievements. It is important to plan and execute formal events and/or less-structured activities that commemorate the achievements of the past four years.¹⁴ Outgoing appointees can acknowledge the conclusion of their service and prepare for their next steps, while career staff can positively mark the end of their work under the outgoing administration and begin their emotional transition toward working with the incoming administration.

For these celebrations to be most effective from a change management perspective, consider the following guidelines:

- Create an environment where individuals can express any feelings of loss or grief.

- Clearly define which priorities, policies, and projects are concluding and which ones continue.
- Encourage individuals to carry forward the positive elements from the outgoing administration.
- Frame the celebration as the end of a special four years and the beginning of a new and exciting chapter.

Senior Career Staff

Pre-Election Phase
Overall Change Management Objective: Acknowledge the potential upcoming change, comprehend the pivotal role of career staff in the transition process, and ensure staff understand that their interests and well-being are a top priority.
Overall Change Management Recommendation: Launch training and awareness efforts about the transition process, highlighting the indispensable role of career staff in ensuring a smooth transition.

The highlighted transition activity is the creation of internal communications plans. It is important to develop an incremental communications approach that aligns to the phases of the Commitment Curve. Early communications activities should focus on the following core messages:

- There is a likelihood of a change in administration.
- Career leadership is aware of the concerns that agency staff may have (identify these concerns). We have plans in place to address those concerns (describe how).
- Career leadership is committed to the staff’s best interests and will ensure their well-being.
- This upcoming change in administration is an exciting opportunity for both staff and the agency (provide some examples).

This approach to communication ensures that staff are well informed, feel valued, and are prepared for the upcoming changes, thus facilitating a smoother transition.

Post-Election (to Inauguration Day) Phase
Overall Change Management Objective: Prepare to navigate the duties immediately before and after inauguration, which can be the most important tasks of anyone during the transition timeline. Support the outgoing administration through inauguration, while preparing subordinate staff to be ready to support the incoming administration on day one.
Overall Change Management Recommendation: Focus extensively on subordinate career staff, who will be experiencing significant uncertainty and will have many concerns regarding what will happen to their programs (and to themselves individually) in the next administration.

The highlighted transition activity is the implementation of internal communications. It is important to recognize that this is a period of emotional transition during which subordinate staff may experience feelings of uncertainty and concern. Regular check-ins to gauge staff sentiments are crucial, as is adjusting communications accordingly. The aim should be to alleviate fears and foster enthusiasm. Consider incorporating the following core messages:

- Assure staff that the transition will be managed effectively. Tell them senior career leadership is committed to ensuring a smooth transition.
- Acknowledge that feelings of worry and uncertainty are normal. Assure staff that the transition will be navigated together, as has been done during previous presidential transitions.
- Inform staff that early conversations with the incoming administration are starting soon (provide anticipated timing, if possible).
- Promise to provide updates on discussions with the incoming administration, as well as the anticipated schedule for specific transition activities leading up to the inauguration.
- Emphasize the transition as an opportunity for rejuvenation, a renewal of the agency’s work, and preparation for a fresh start.

- Provide a positive outlook that the impending transfer of power could open new avenues for success and unlock untapped potential within the agency.

This approach to communication can help manage the emotional transition, reassure staff, and keep them informed and engaged, thus facilitating a smoother transition.

First 100 Days Phase

Overall Change Management Objective: Understand the priorities and working style of the new administration, adapt to new leadership, and foster acceptance and buy-in among subordinate career staff.

Overall Change Management Recommendation: Conduct regular communication sessions to update staff on changes, provide opportunities for dialogue and feedback, and celebrate early wins under the new leadership to foster acceptance and buy-in. Encourage career staff to actively engage with incoming political appointees, sharing their expertise and insights to support the new administration’s objectives.

The highlighted transition activity is supporting early action on agency priorities through collaboration. Career staff should be encouraged to let go of past affiliations with the previous administration and focus on a fresh start with a renewed sense of purpose and identity. They should also be reminded they are integral parts of the new administration’s agenda for the agency.

One of the most effective ways to do this is to involve career staff in high-priority efforts that appointees will be carrying out to demonstrate early wins for the new administration. Although the new appointees will most likely try to achieve these independently due to time constraints, consider the following steps to increase the chances of getting staff involved right away:

- Acknowledge that appointees are expected to achieve results on a very aggressive schedule while still learning about their position and the agency.

- Communicate and then demonstrate that career staff are:
 - The nation’s foremost experts in the agency, how it works, and the topics it handles
 - Ready to assist appointees in harnessing the agency’s capabilities and overcoming obstacles for a fast and productive start for the new administration
 - Prepared to get involved and share the workload
- Anticipate the areas where new appointees may likely need support.
- Prepare to provide resources, subject matter experts, and advice when requested, or proactively suggest them when appropriate.
- Help bridge any knowledge gaps appointees may have regarding the agency’s mission, capabilities, constraints, and legal boundaries that could impede early progress.

This approach fosters collaboration, accelerates the transition process, and ensures a smooth handover of responsibilities.

Normal Operations (Remainder of Term) Phase

Overall Change Management Objective: Fully adapt to the new administration, support the implementation of its objectives, and maintain a state of acceptance and buy-in.

Overall Change Management Recommendation: Continue to engage with new political appointees, providing expertise and insights to support the administration’s objectives. Maintain a focus on celebrating accomplishments, both large and small, to maintain high morale and reinforce the value of the new direction.

The highlighted transition activity is continuous engagement with new political appointees. Career staff should persistently provide their expertise and insights to support the administration’s objectives.

This ongoing collaboration not only aids in the successful implementation of the new administration's goals but also strengthens the relationship between career staff and political appointees.

Additionally, celebrating accomplishments, both large and small, is a crucial activity during this phase. Regular recognition of achievements helps maintain high morale among staff, reinforces the value of the new direction, and fosters a sense of unity and commitment to the new administration's objectives. This focus on positive reinforcement is a key aspect of change management, helping to ensure the changes introduced during the transition become a fully integrated part of the agency's regular operations.

Incoming Political Appointees

Pre-Election Phase
Overall Change Management Objective: Begin to understand the scope and responsibilities of the potential roles within the agency and evaluate how the agency may contribute to fulfilling campaign promises.
Overall Change Management Recommendation: Begin the process of becoming familiar with the agency's operations, existing policies, career leadership, and key challenges, even before the election results are finalized.

The highlighted transition activity is the establishment of the Agency Review Team and researching relevant agencies using publicly available resources. This is the stage in which the incoming administration lays the groundwork for the knowledge it needs to run the agency. It marks the beginning of a learning process that will ultimately equip incoming appointees to lead effectively, demonstrate knowledge, and make a positive first impression.

During this process, it is crucial to analyze the last four years of the outgoing administration, with a particular emphasis on identifying the following:

- Successful initiatives, programs, and other activities that should be continued or expanded

- Accomplishments that should be recognized at both the agency and the organizational levels
- Potential issues and concerns raised by career staff that should be addressed

This thorough analysis helps incoming appointees understand the agency's past performance and current state, enabling them to make informed decisions and plans for the future. It also shows respect for the work done by the outgoing administration and career staff, fostering a positive transition environment.

Post-Election (to Inauguration Day) Phase
Overall Change Management Objective: Gain an understanding of the respective agencies' operations, policies, challenges, and opportunities. Prepare to make a positive first impression on career staff and political superiors.
Overall Change Management Recommendation: Thoroughly understand the agency (e.g., staff, activities, upcoming actions) and the incoming administration's objectives. Prepare initial messages to share with senior and other career staff immediately after being sworn in. This proactive approach will help establish positive relationships from the outset.

The highlighted transition activity is to prepare to serve in assigned roles as political appointees within the agency. It is crucial that incoming appointees take full advantage of the research completed by the Agency Review Team and the briefings and materials it has developed. As part of their preparation, they should take steps to make a positive first impression on the organization's career staff, including being ready to:

- Demonstrate knowledge of the organization and the work of the staff.
- Acknowledge prominent successes and deliver kudos to the career staff on their prior work.
- Show awareness of the major issues and challenges the organization faces.

- Introduce their leadership approach.
- Identify areas where they would like to immediately collaborate with career staff to secure early wins and success.

This preparation not only equips incoming appointees with the knowledge and understanding they need to lead effectively but also helps establish a positive relationship with career staff from the outset. This can facilitate a smoother transition and foster a collaborative working environment.

First 100 Days Phase
Overall Change Management Objective: Rapidly understand the operations, policies, challenges, and opportunities of the respective agencies; begin implementing the administration’s agenda; and establish effective, collaborative relationships with career staff.
Overall Change Management Recommendation: Facilitate intensive onboarding, including in-depth briefings, meetings with key personnel, and review of critical agency issues. Acknowledge the expertise and value of career staff and proactively work to establish a collaborative working environment with them. Initiate early collaborative actions (in partnership with career staff) aligned with the new administration’s priorities to build momentum and demonstrate progress.

The highlighted transition activity is conducting initial meetings with career staff. It is important to meet with career staff within the first two to three days of the administration. Establishing a positive first impression with career staff from the onset will significantly expedite the development of robust working relationships in the long term. Given the hectic pace immediately after inauguration, the incoming appointee should plan for a very short introductory meeting (as short as 15 minutes) that will be followed within a week by a longer meeting.

This meeting is likely to be emotionally charged for all involved, and it is a pivotal moment for the new political appointee because it sets the tone for progression through the remaining steps on the

Commitment Curve (Understanding, Acceptance/ Buy-In, and Commitment). Consideration of the previously identified change management emotional factors can be a guide:¹⁵

- **Status:** New political appointees should clearly communicate their roles and responsibilities from the start. They should articulate their position in the hierarchy to their team and ensure that everyone understands their role. They should also respect the status of others, acknowledging their expertise and contributions.
- **Certainty:** Appointees should strive to provide as much certainty as possible in an inherently uncertain environment. This can be achieved by setting clear goals, regularly communicating about progress and changes, and being transparent about decision-making processes. They should proactively address rumors and misinformation.
- **Autonomy:** Appointees should empower their team members by giving them the autonomy to make decisions within their areas of responsibility. This involves setting clear expectations, providing necessary resources, and then stepping back to allow individuals to do their jobs while being available for guidance and support when needed.
- **Relatedness:** Building trust and a sense of safety within a team is crucial. Appointees can foster this by being open, honest, and transparent in their communications. They should also take the time to get to know their team members on a personal level, showing genuine interest in their lives and concerns.
- **Fairness:** To foster a sense of fairness, appointees should ensure that decisions are made transparently and that everyone is treated equally. This means avoiding favoritism, being open about decision-making processes, and ensuring that rewards and recognition are distributed fairly. They should also be willing to listen to and address any concerns about unfair treatment.

Additionally, in this unique situation it is also important to set a positive and collaborative tone. Avoid negative comments about the previous administration and the agency’s work under it. A draft roadmap for this concise first meeting follows:

- Acknowledge that this meeting will be brief, but as a new political appointee coming into the agency, you felt it important to meet everyone as soon as possible. Building relationships right away is crucial.
- Share your positive impressions of the agency’s activities and results over the past four years, highlighting specific areas that particularly impressed you or that you are looking forward to expanding.
- Communicate that a new administration means different priorities and some different ways of doing things, but ensure the career staff that these changes will be navigated as a team.
- Highlight your role as a bridge between the new administration and the agency’s career staff.
- Express appreciation for the work done in preparing for this transition and ensuring the continuity of government.
- Acknowledge each staff member as a critical partner, emphasizing that the success of the agency depends on its career staff.
- Assure the career staff that you will provide more details and set up longer meetings very soon. Request their patience and understanding as you settle into your new role.

During follow-up meetings, the appointee should provide staff with more details about the administration’s agenda and their specific goals and expectations for this organization. One of the most effective ways to build a new team is to begin involving career staff in the efforts needed to secure early wins and successes for the new administration.

Use initial meetings to get that started. Although it will be tempting to bypass career staff due to immediate workloads and the pressure to quickly demonstrate results, strive to balance this urgency against the long-term value of engaging them in critical work from the start. This approach fosters collaboration and ensures a smoother transition.

Normal Operations (Remainder of Term) Phase

Overall Change Management Objective: Achieve full integration into roles; propel the administration’s agenda; and sustain effective, collaborative working relationships with career staff.

Overall Change Management Recommendation: Continue strengthening the relationships established with career staff, maintain open lines of communication, and work collaboratively to implement the administration’s objectives. Regularly review progress against goals and adjust strategies as needed.

An important transition activity during the Normal Operations (Remainder of Term) phase is the continual review and adjustment of strategies based on progress against goals. Incoming political appointees should regularly assess the implementation of the administration’s objectives and make necessary adjustments to strategies. This not only ensures that the administration’s agenda is being effectively pursued but also allows for course corrections as needed.

Additionally, maintaining and strengthening the relationships established with career staff is crucial during this phase. Open lines of communication should be maintained, and collaboration should be encouraged to ensure the successful implementation of the administration’s objectives. This ongoing engagement fosters a positive working environment, ensures the continued successful execution of the agency’s mission, and solidifies the changes introduced during the transition.

Conclusion

In conclusion, applying change management principles to presidential transitions can significantly enhance the effectiveness of these transitions. Focusing on the people involved—outgoing political appointees, senior career staff, and incoming political appointees—and guiding them through the stages of the Commitment Curve can expedite the process of achieving buy-in and commitment.

This approach not only mitigates resistance and disruption but also allows the new administration to swiftly focus on its mission and agenda. We encourage those involved in managing presidential transitions to view the strategies presented in this document as integral parts of the transition process. Transition leaders can greatly enhance each agency's efforts to organize, plan, build relationships, take care of people, and communicate while establishing support for the new administration's agenda.

We believe that adopting this approach enables more successful outcomes for all involved and ensures a smoother, more effective transition to the new administration. This comprehensive approach to change management in presidential transitions can lead to a more efficient transition process, a quicker alignment with the new administration's goals, and a more engaged and committed workforce.

About the Authors

Joe Jockel is an organizational change management principal in The MITRE Corporation's Enterprise Strategy and Transformation Innovation Center. He has more than 30 years' experience helping federal organizations—including the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, Department of Energy, Federal Aviation Administration, Census Bureau, Veterans Benefits Administration, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, and Forest Service—align their people to changes in strategy, processes, and technology.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Presidential Transition Guide. 2023. Center for Presidential Transition, <https://presidentialtransition.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2023/11/2023-Presidential-Transition-Guide.pdf>
- ² Agency Transition Guide. 2023. Center for Presidential Transition, <https://presidentialtransition.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2023/11/2023-Agency-Transition-Guide.pdf>
- ³ Agency Transition Guide.
- ⁴ These are groups within governmental agencies responsible for preparing for a presidential transition. This includes planning for the transition, creating briefing materials, and coordinating with incoming administration representatives.
- ⁵ These are groups from the incoming administration that works with the current administration to understand agency operations and prepare for the transition. They review agency information; ask questions; and seek to understand the status of ongoing projects, budgets, personnel issues, and more. They are also referred to as Agency Review Teams.
- ⁶ H. Jorgensen, et al. Making change work...while the work keeps changing. 2014. IBM Global Business Services Survey, <https://www.ibm.com/thought-leadership/institute-business-value/report/making-change-work>. Last accessed: March 15, 2024.
- ⁷ D. Jacquemont, et al. How to beat the transformation odds. 2015. McKinsey, <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/successful-transformations#section-header-2015>. Last accessed: March 15, 2024.
- ⁸ David Rock. SCARF: a brain-based model for collaborating with and influencing others. 2008. NeuroLeadership Journal, Issue One, ed. David Rock (Sydney: NeuroLeadership Institute) 1-11.
- ⁹ William Bridges. Managing Transitions. 2016. Boston: Da Capo. p5.
- ¹⁰ Daryl Conner. Managing at the Speed of Change. 2006. New York: Random House. p148.
- ¹¹ The actual rate at which change management will help achieve Acceptance and Commitment will vary for each agency based on a wide range of internal and external factors, with the blue curve serving as a “best case” target. The more important point is that well-executed change management will facilitate progress that is much closer to the blue rather than the grey curve.
- ¹² Many of the tasks called for in the 2023 Agency Transition Guide could benefit from the incorporation of change management. In this paper, we have chosen to focus on a single transition activity for each stakeholder group within each presidential transition phase. We selected activities for which applying change management would have the biggest impact on accelerating each stakeholder group’s progress up the Commitment Curve.
- ¹³ William Bridges. Managing Transitions. 2016. Boston: Da Capo. p5.
- ¹⁴ D. Blackburn. Effective EOP Leadership – Learned Guidance for an Incoming Appointee. 2024. MITRE, https://www.mitre.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/Effective%20EOP%20Leadership-2_AM508.pdf
- ¹⁵ David Rock. SCARF: a brain-based model for collaborating with and influencing others. 2008. NeuroLeadership Journal, Issue One, ed. David Rock (Sydney: NeuroLeadership Institute) 1-11.