

THE POWER OF CULTURE

***Four Steps to Delivering Success
During Government Transition***

The Wagner Innovation Labs are a new series of policy experiments that marry theory and practice to promote informed, evidence-based decision-making in a complex world. Each project reflects NYU Wagner's broad commitment to bringing scholars, thinkers, and practitioners together, both figuratively and literally, to improve the way policy is made.

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Executive Summary

If you want to change what happens in your state, change the culture of your state

EACH YEAR IN AMERICA, at least one of the 50 states elects a new governor. Then the governor-elect has just a few weeks to prepare to run the state for the next four years.

Prior to election, while on the campaign trail, gubernatorial candidates tend to talk about policies and their vision, not the inner workings of government. Their campaign teams, and the policy director in particular, are oriented on policy recommendations for education, infrastructure, families, and so on.¹ These are the issues that resonate with voters, and crafting compelling policy positions is critical to getting elected.

Yet once elected, governors-elect can be surprised to learn the operational side of government is just as important as the policy side. Even a detailed policy proposal is of

limited use, if it falters on an unrealistic understanding of implementation.

When it comes to delivering for citizens, people and processes matter just as much as policies and priorities. There's no shortage of transformative ideas, but most government transformations actually fail to achieve their goals – in fact 80% do not succeed.²

Successful transformation depends on the “infrastructure” of the transformation – leadership, communication, and capabilities.

Underlying these elements is culture. Transformative policies can be impossible to deliver without a transformational culture.³

While the transition period is relatively short – from the day after the election through inauguration and into the first 100 days – transition teams have a huge opportunity if they focus on shaping culture from the start.

Civic Consulting USA, a nonpartisan nonprofit, has seen this opportunity firsthand. For the past several US election cycles, we have advised six Governors-elect and Mayors-elect across parties and regions. From serving these transition teams, we gained a nuanced understanding of the levers that governors-elect actually use to enact change, both within their administration and across their state – and we saw how a focus on how culture gives new leaders an advantage.

This paper outlines:

- Why culture matters in government – particularly during transition
- Practical steps to shape culture and promote effective governing practices, beginning with transition.

While this paper focuses on gubernatorial transitions, we believe these principles apply equally as well to transitions of other elected officials, including mayoral transitions and those of other executives.

A time for change: Transition offers crucial opportunities for shaping culture

Leadership change presents the opportunity for culture change, as the new leaders change processes and hire new executives.

What is culture anyway?

Citizens and public officials alike can observe organizational culture in how government workers behave, interact, and make daily decisions.

To define it simply: **culture comprises the values and norms, often implicit, that define how work gets done.**^{2a}

Culture is deeply rooted within all facets of government: Culture empowers people to behave in certain ways when they perform their jobs and influences their overall performance.

Culture change in government is not just a challenge; culture is an important operational tool for an elected official, whether governor, mayor, or other executive.

Setting the right culture will help focus every worker on the administration's mission, spurring people to go the extra mile – and inspire the workforce to strive towards excellence, to innovate, to increase adaptability, and to drive the overall results in government performance.^{2b}

But compared to the private sector, government transitions offer an even greater opportunity for culture change. Unlike a carefully planned CEO succession at a public company, a gubernatorial transition is more like the private turnaround of a distressed company:

- Almost complete turnover in senior leadership, as the governor-elect plans to replace the cabinet and most agency heads in a matter of weeks
- Mandate for change, with widespread perception that "business as usual" will no longer be accepted
- Forward-looking opportunity window, with other elected officials and organizations seeking to advance ideas or positions that did not progress previously.

These features make the transition a uniquely powerful time to set the tone for the upcoming years of the administration. At the same time, the risks of not getting culture right are significant:

- Weak or negative cultures make it harder to attract top talent, which is one of the key focuses of most transitions
- Misalignment between policy goals and organizational culture can doom new initiatives before they even get started, especially for programs designed to reform government itself
- When a crisis arises, as inevitably they do, teams without a strong culture rarely respond as cohesively or as well, increasing the likelihood of public stumbles and disappointed expectations.

Despite these risks, most of what's written about government transformation describes culture as a barrier to change: complex goals, an emphasis of process compliance, lifetime tenure of employees, and departmental silos are oft-cited obstacles.⁴

Rather than a challenge, our perspective is that culture is an opportunity for accelerating change.

We live in a time when there's great interest in paradigm-shifting structural changes. By considering the cultural elements of ubiquitous technology or customer service, to name two paradigm shifts, government officials are more likely to see their policies succeed – and endure for future administrations.

Setting the stage for success: How leaders can build strong cultures during transition

When entering office, newly elected officials should have a clear vision on the values they want their cabinet to operate under and how these values will translate into norms. When it comes to how you manage, whom you hire, and how you communicate, an attractive culture can be one of your strongest competitive advantages.⁵

When thought through and put in place intentionally, the framework of culture and culture change can power a leadership team to undertake tremendous transformations – and cascade into the rest of the organization to shape how the government's work will get done for years or even decades to come.

Since the transition period is short, the main opportunity for building culture lies with building the leadership team's own culture.

A unified, even if small, leadership team, guided by shared values and behavioral norms, can effectively and successfully bring transformational change to an entire organization.

The key to unleashing this power is a shared culture well matched to the vision and aspirations of the newly elected leader.

After inauguration, a stronger, more unified culture at the leadership level will enable

faster, more effective changes throughout government.

The unique nature of each state and administration will determine the most effective combination of actions to build a strong culture – and even what cultural features will best contribute to a successful term in office.

Following the November 2018 US elections, Civic Consulting USA served six Governors-elect who were transitioning into office. They asked us to help in:

- Creating an effective structure for the transition itself
- Developing a framework for personnel and appointments
- Providing best practices and strategic options on high-value policy areas
- Supporting development of a 100-day plan.

Some of the states we worked with consciously (re)shaped culture during the transition period; they successfully executed their transition plans and built strong foundations for governing effectively from Day One. Success in these early days provided the momentum even after the first 100 days to enact their goals.

Through our engagements during the 2018 election cycle, we saw that leaders who prioritized culture were ultimately rejuvenated from reflecting on, and promoting, values within their government.

From this varied experience, we are able to draw a few overarching lessons for how transitions can leverage the power of culture change:

Four takeaways

- 1. Set your values early**
- 2. Embed culture into every process**
- 3. Model the culture personally**
- 4. Keep at it: continuously evaluate and improve**

The purpose of this paper is to help new administrations apply these takeaways to more effective governance. Throughout, we share specific examples and general techniques that make each of these four takeaways practical.

We hope that by sharing these insights we generate feedback, comment, and even a public dialogue about how best to support our elected leaders as they embark on their journeys of public service.

Building a strong culture during transition

First week after election	Before inauguration	First week in office	First 100 days
#1 Set your values early			
Define your values through self-reflection & conversations with staff	Create visual tools in the transition office to keep the values top-of-mind	Transfer visual tools from the transition office to support communication	Reflect on your transition values & modify as needed
#2 Embed culture into every process			
Consider values when sourcing candidates Check for culture fit during interviews	Ensure all major speeches, meetings, & events point to a key value	Discuss culture & expectations when onboarding cabinet members Create images & slogans to reference values	Offer training within departments around values & new norms Follow-up with cabinet around cultural change & challenges
#3 Model the culture personally			
Include values when orienting all staff Set expectation that transition team embodies cultural norms	Remind agency leads to model values & norms visibly during the first week in office	Identify culture champions at all levels Recognize culture champions at internal & public events	Infuse values into performance review process
#4 Keep at it: continuously evaluate and improve			
Summarize the current state of culture: inherited values, behaviors, & change readiness across the public workforce	Prioritize 1-3 key ways to shape culture, values, & norms in the first year	Begin assessing & shaping culture through informal tools (personal involvement, town halls)	Use formal tools to assess & shape culture (surveys, training) Launch employee pulse survey – then share the results & ensuing changes

Takeaway #1: Set your values early

The groundwork for an effective transition starts early. Immediately after election, incoming officials should intentionally select and articulate their values as guideposts for their administration.

Candidates often implicitly incorporate core values into their campaigns. The period immediately after the election presents an opportunity to reflect on the campaign, the values that were communicated, the feedback received from citizens, and one's vision for how the administration will operate.

As important as spending time on self-reflection, a newly elected executive talk personally with top advisors about the values that matter to them. By agreeing on a few key values, the leadership team overall will work more cohesively to carry out the governor's expectations even when she or he is not in attendance.⁶

The transition director or chief of staff could be tasked with facilitating an exercise in an early meeting to discuss values-oriented questions, such as:

- What should success look like at the end of the term?
- What will be different compared to past administrations?
- How do we want our constituents to feel about us?
- How do we want our team to operate? How do you want our team to perceive each other?
- What do we want our relationship with stakeholders to be? How do we want them to perceive us?

Sometimes creative exercises create memorable moments for transition teams to understand both the emotional and logical elements of their intended culture. For example, in an early meeting following election day, one team was asked to envision the ideal headline and corresponding newspaper article that they would like to see at the end of the administration. This activity brought up both the goals they hoped to

achieve and also how they wanted to be perceived overall.

After identifying potential values, effective teams prioritize and select three to five values to guide the transition. Example answers to the above questions and resulting values include:

*The last administration was insular and often engaged just with “the usual suspects.” We believe the community is important. We will bring new and diverse viewpoints into our administration, reflecting our value of **inclusion**.*

*Our state is lagging on many dimensions. We campaigned on a promise to modernize our government. Given the turnout, we have a strong mandate to pursue it and to embody our value of **accelerating innovation**.*

Selecting your values is just the start. Until values are communicated and inculcated, they are mere words.

Practical steps to developing culture during transition include begins with explicitly writing out the values, in clear and memorable language. Consider

creating visual tools to keep values top-of-mind, for example, posters in the transition headquarters or printing values on everyone's access badges.

Memorable events and activities greatly help to instill values, for example, meeting at a special venue to discuss the culture and values in depth. This could take the form of a “go and see” visiting a local company that is a leader in one of your values or represents an aspirational culture.

Creative activities tap both sides of the brain, reflecting the emotional and logical aspects of culture. For example, if the value is innovation, have groups build towers out of straws and paper clips and give the tallest a gold star.

It is worth noting that articulating values is not a once-and-done activity confined to the early days of transition.

In several states we worked with, a conversation around values was held again after all main cabinet members had been hired. This allowed for the inclusion of new staff members' opinions, while allowing for the broader team to reflect upon how the transition period may have changed their view on values of focus.

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#1 Set your values early			
Define your values through self-reflection & conversations with staff	Create visual tools in the transition office to keep the values top-of-mind	Transfer visual tools from the transition office to support communication	Reflect on your transition values & modify as needed

Takeaway #2: Embed culture into every process

Elected officials can and should integrate core values into almost every process of government. The consistent and comprehensive a culture change effort is, the more likely it is to succeed.

Too often in government, leaders undercut their own culture change efforts by posting their values and not looking at how key units actually operate. This approach risks painting the effort as mere words. After all, most government workforces are characterized by the long tenure of their employees, who can adopt a wait-and-see attitude to transformational changes.

To make culture real, the incoming leadership team should embed values into every aspect of the transition, from hiring to managing to communicating. The following sections offer practical steps and examples for the transition team to put these recommendations to work.

Hiring and culture

Building strong values starts before any potential hires are interviewed.

Elected officials often have leeway to shape values by determining the set of positions within the Governor's Office or Mayor's Office.

Newly created roles can affirm office values. For example:

- Create a new Chief Performance Officer role focused on evaluating and improving performance of the executive branch could signal the value of **accountability**.

- Creating a Chief Innovation Officer (CIO) can signal an **innovation**-focused administration.
- Creating a Chief Operating Officer (COO) who has delivered on similar efforts for another government or in private sector can communicate a culture of **operational excellence**.

Values can also be embedded in existing roles by altering the job description. A team heavily focused on improving citizen experience may alter the job description for leaders of citizen-facing agencies so that the

role involves significantly more on frontline operations and feedback from citizens.

After outlining roles, teams need to identify the talent pools from which they will search for potential hires. These talent pools can reflect team values; for example, in selecting an Education Commissioner, teams would promote different values by interviewing traditional public schools leaders vs. charter school leaders vs. business executives. (See table below: “Values correspond to relevant talent pools”)

When interviewing candidates, teams should evaluate individuals based on their alignment with core values.

Teams can assess potential candidates fit with core values in the interview process.

One of the states we worked with created a culture-focused interview guide as a supplement to role-specific interview guides. This additional guide included questions that elucidated each candidate’s values, while also signaling to potential hires the new administration’s own values. Candidates

were scored on their responses, just as they were on other more technical aspects of their career history.

After selecting candidates, teams should offer onboarding materials that encourage leaders to adopt processes that align with team values.

We observed one state doing this particularly well: the transition team created a packet for each new agency lead with a values-based checklist. To reflect their valuing a decision-making process oriented around stakeholders, the onboarding guide asked new leaders to take steps such as: mapping out all potential stakeholders, creating a plan to meet with the most relevant ones, and prioritizing stakeholders for ongoing engagement.

The benefit of this approach is two-fold. One, the cabinet-onboarding guide translated a cultural value (inclusivity in decision-making) into concrete actions (stakeholder mapping). Two, the checklist made it easier for the Governor and Chief-of-Staff to check-

Values correspond to relevant talent pools

Example: Hiring Commissioner of Education

Values	⇒ Potential talent pool
Reverence for public institutions	⇒ Public school superintendents
Importance of personal experience	
Preference for market-based solutions	⇒ Charter schools leader
Innovation focus	
Data-driven approaches	⇒ Business executives
Managerial efficiency	

in and see how the values were being reflected in the departmental processes.

Managing and culture

As both elected official and the team are new to their roles, transition teams are often expected to bring a fresh perspective to managing key processes.

During this “honeymoon” period, teams can translate the culture into action by defining how key office activities or decisions should reflect their values.

One state we worked with created a simple one-pager that served as a policy decision-making workflow covering governance and decision rights, including:

- Who runs point on key policy questions?
- What information will be shared with the broader team?
- How will input be gathered across multiple teams?
- What needs to be prepared prior to meeting the Governor for a decision?
- What are the key elements of the execution process?

The list of which processes to codify will vary by jurisdiction and administration.

Two important and common areas of focus are the budgeting process and crisis response planning.

The budget process is an inherently challenging and complex task. And it is even harder for new teams – who often lack experience in the nuances of the legislative budgeting process and yet are expected to make key strategic changes based on campaign promises. Moreover, budget choices powerfully signal how the new Governor is planning to govern.

The budget process can reflect the new culture in different ways. A team focused on

transparency may emphasize opportunities to include individuals across departments, stakeholder organizations, and the public in developing budget priorities and allocations. In contrast, a team focused on efficiency might require cost reductions, more administrative data, and a more tightly controlled process.

Crisis management is a second key activity in which to embed values.

Crises are inevitable, and these situations are often when values are most tested. Crises require rapid response, often from multiple leaders within an administration. As a result, leaders have little time to refer to written guidelines, and the speed of decisions can overwhelm a central point. A team with shared values is more likely to respond in a unified way.

The best prepared transition teams take time before a crisis hits to identify potential issues, e.g., snow storm, shooting. They then identify key elements of the response that reflect their values. For example, responding to a public health outbreak, a team valuing data and transparency might emphasize frequent, widespread data sharing, holding daily press updates, and opening certain meetings to the public.

A crisis can reveal an administration’s true culture, and the crisis response mode can come to affect other more routine decisions:

- Who *actually* is involved in your decision-making process and to what extent?
- How *actually* do you communicate with your cabinet, key stakeholders, and the public?
- What *actual* changes do you make, whether in personnel, executive order, appointment a commission, etc.?

Strong values can ensure that teams weather these crises successfully by deploying the

right set of resources, keeping staff engaged, and building trust with the public.

Communicating and culture

Frequent, consistent communication is one of the “must-pull” levers of culture change. In the absence of information, stakeholders will make up their own explanations of the changes they see happening. Therefore, it is crucial to control the narrative not just of *what* is changing, but *why* – in short, your vision and values.

An easy way to communicate “the why” is to include one sentence on the value being demonstrated in each press release or speech event. This is of even greater importance for communications firsts: the first press conference, the first cabinet meeting, the first “State of the State” address, the first department addresses, the first meeting with a key stakeholders group, and the first government-wide email.

By including the communications leads in early discussions around culture and culture

change, the transition team can help ensure that the new culture and values are properly reflected in all communications.

Over time, communications leads may consider creating a small toolkit that includes a list of images, mantras, and stories that can promote values in internal and external communications. Teams should integrate this toolkit into various touchpoints, including social media posts, Q&A sessions, and lunch-and-learn events, among others.

To help spread culture-based messaging throughout the organization, the elected official can require cabinet members to participate in communication training. Transition teams can also consider implementing a “values check” on press releases across departments in which leads are asked to indicate how the release communicates key values.

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#2 Embed culture into every process			
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Takeaway #3: Model the culture personally

It is not enough to require others to live the culture. Leaders must also model the culture – formally and informally – for it to be credible and for the transition to embody it.

In addition to internalizing the values, there are practical ways to encourage leaders to model the new culture:

- Set expectations that all leaders model the culture
- Elevate change champions
- Celebrate values leaders.

Set expectations for leaders

As senior leaders begin their new roles, instill the expectation that they set the example of living the values in their day-to-day actions and interactions with staff. How government executives behave, even in informal settings, has ripple effects throughout the department.

One transition team we worked with valued business-like accountability. This meant that the team used tracking documents and regular status meetings – two strategies that are common in the business world for steering complex processes. Senior leaders attended these meetings and engaged with tracking documents, signaling to other employees that senior leaders truly valued

accountability. The paperwork, in this case, was a symbol of the value.

Longer term, this expectation that leaders model culture can be reinforced by including it as part of performance evaluations.

Elevate change champions

Opinion-shapers and influencers among staff can serve as formal champions of the new culture. Whether or not they have a senior-level title, these individuals command strong levels of respect from their peers.

Change champions can model the culture at all levels of the organization and provide feedback on how the new administration is doing in promoting the culture.

Establishing a cohort of change champions begins with identifying a few common things the change champions will do. You might ask them to hold weekly or monthly brown bag lunches with colleagues to discuss the values. In other cases, change champions might ask key questions to advance values in regular department or team meetings. Or they might discussion or brainstorming sessions to infuse values into operations.

Often change champions effectively nominate themselves by volunteering for a new role or giving particularly insightful feedback to an email, townhall, or survey. Change champions can also be identified by managers or even through an open process.

By convening the change champions together, a new executive can get the “pulse on the ground” regarding the culture of the

organization, culture change, ongoing challenges, and ways to improve.

Celebrate values leaders

While the public sector may be less able than the private sector to offer monetary rewards for exceptional performance, there are often more options for recognizing employees.

Being invited to a press conference with the Governor, getting a preferred parking spot, being called out by name in a public meeting – these are all low-cost ways to celebrate those who are modeling the culture in practice.

When celebrating these value leaders, it is critical to show how the individual is modeling the new culture. This explicit connection between the Governor’s agenda and the individual’s performance is what makes that person a “values leader.”

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#3 Model the culture personally			
Include values when orienting all staff Set expectation that transition team embodies cultural norms	Remind agency leads to model values & norms visibly during the first week in office	Identify culture champions at all levels Recognize culture champions at internal & public events	Infuse values into performance review process

Takeaway #4: Keep at it: continuously evaluate and improve

Sustainable cultural change does not end with the 100 days; that's just the beginning. In fact, changing a culture takes years of effort, most if not all of a four-year term, and beyond.

There are many opportunities to embed the administration's values and ethos. The most successful efforts begin with disciplined prioritization:

- What values and behaviors have we inherited
- How ready and willing are people to change?
- What elements of the current culture are the most important to change when it comes to setting a new state of culture?

Once in office, there are several practical ways to assess and shape culture, both formal tools managed by staff and informal techniques done personally by the Governor and other senior executives.

Some of the most frequent informal techniques involve simply spending time where their employees work. By observing their behavior and chatting, the Governor or

Chief of Staff can gauge how well the workforce is actually living the new culture. "Management by walking around" or "leadership rounding," as this is often called, is most effective when there is meaningful follow up.

Formal tools can be managed by staff, including department town halls, surveys, new performance evaluations, and targeted training programs.

One increasingly prevalent tool is the employee engagement survey. But too often these turn into very long, very unused data compilation exercises.

A more actionable approach is to focus on only a very few questions:

- Overall employee satisfaction, e.g., "How likely are you to recommend this organization to a friend?"
- Current performance on core values

- Organizational readiness for change.

To make such a survey truly useful, leaders should do a readout with employees to show survey results and indicate how the administration plans to improve on the previous administration.

Failing to show employees how you are working to improve on the findings of the survey can lead to demoralization among

staff and counter the overarching goals of the exercise. Often the simple things, e.g., setting printers to double-side to reflect environmental concerns, can be cost-effective ways to reinforce the administration's values. Surveys can also surface longer term opportunities to shape the culture, e.g., creating a leadership development program to demonstrate commitment to the workforce.

First week after election	Before inauguration	First week in office	First 100 days
#4 Keep at it: continuously evaluate and improve			
Summarize the current state of culture: inherited values, behaviors, & change readiness across the public workforce	Prioritize 1-3 key ways to shape culture, values, & norms in the first year	Begin assessing & shaping culture through informal tools (personal involvement, town halls)	Use formal tools to assess & shape culture (surveys, training) Launch employee pulse survey – then share the results & ensuing changes

Conclusion: Putting culture to work

The transition is a busy, stressful time. Especially as the Governor-elect is vetting finalists for key positions, the demands of the upcoming job can overwhelm a small team. In some ways it's a crash course in radical pragmatism, and values and culture might seem like an idealistic luxury.

Yet there are quite practical ways to unleash the benefits of culture change from the moment the election results are announced:

- Set your values early, to align your entire team around the “whys” of your administration
- Embed culture into every process, ensuring that each new hire reflects the culture of the administration and communicating values in each key press event and stakeholder meeting
- Model the culture, from senior leaders to frontline change champions
- Keep at it, continuously evaluating and improving

We have focused throughout on Governors. These approaches apply equally to other newly elected officials. In fact, we've applied them quite successfully during transitions of new Mayors, and in organizational transformations with prosecutors and other offices.

The election and transition is also a time of promise and expectation. Enacting policies without shaping the underlying culture to reinforce them will often lead to flash-in-the-pan results, enough for a press release but not enough for enduring results. By improving culture, a new Governor can bequeath a true legacy for successors.

This paper is intended to help transition directors succeed in their special roles by taking the first steps on cultural transformation. Share this article with the Governor-elect and the broader team and build culture directly into the scope of your transition.

About the Authors

Alexander Shermansong is the founder of Civic Consulting USA, a nonpartisan nonprofit committed to public-purpose innovation. He serves on the faculty of NYU Wagner Graduate School of Public Service.

Norah van der Meer is a sociologist and business designer. At Civic Consulting USA, Norah works with governments on strategic transformations and is passionate about collaborating with others to bridge gaps in society by translating complex questions into innovative solutions.

Layout by Candace Shermansong, Smart Stuff NYC.

¹ OnTheIssues.org for example analyzed candidates' websites during the 2018 gubernatorial races and identified 24 specific issue clusters in ranging from abortion to welfare and policy.

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⁵ Groysberg, B., et al. "The Leader's Guide to Corporate Culture." *Harvard Business Review*. January-February 2018.

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