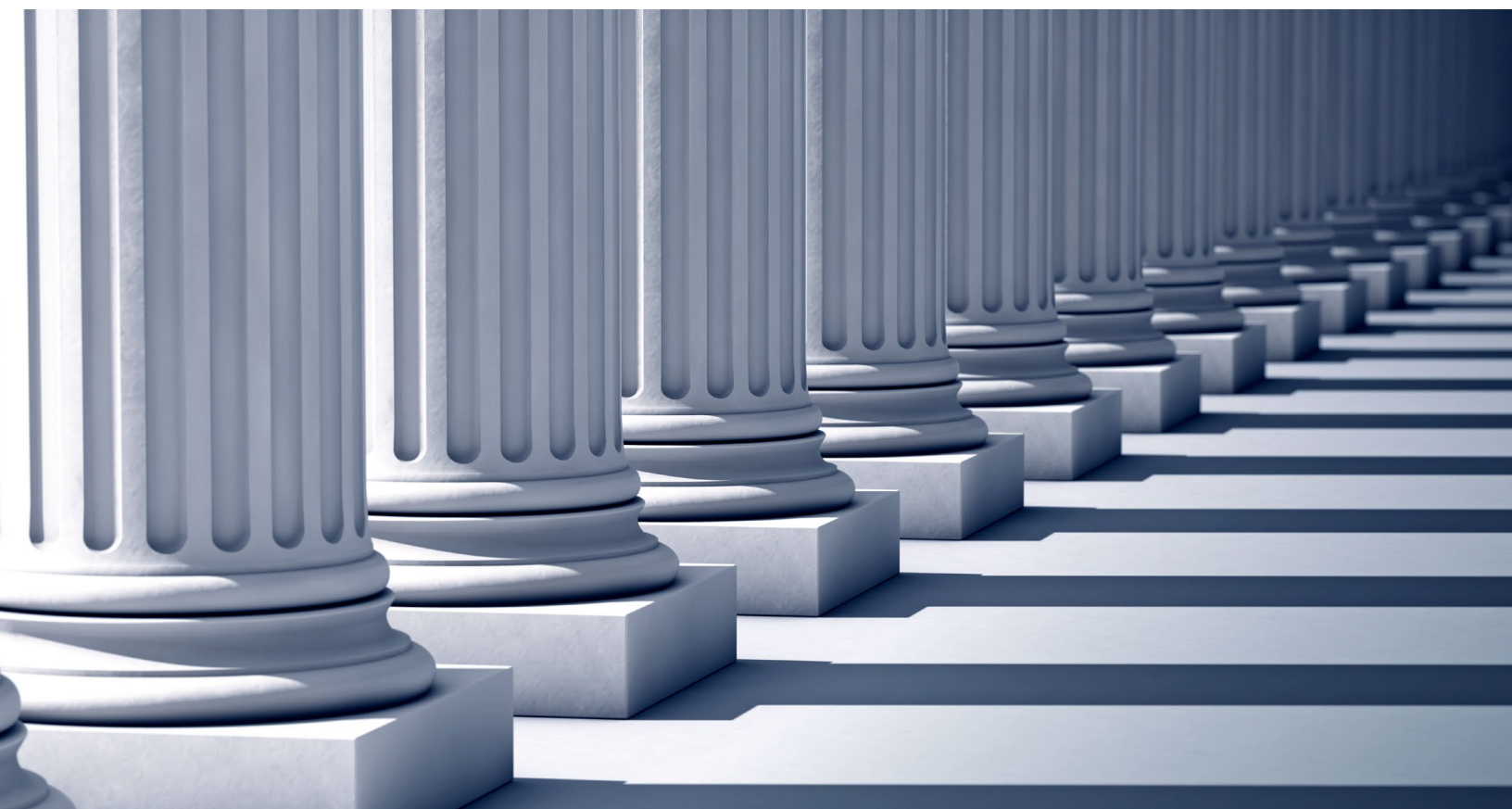


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From campaigning to governing: Mapping a governor's first transition

A successful governor's transition doesn't end at inauguration day—or even after the first 100 days in office. Rather, it involves designing and putting in place the new governor's operating model.

by David Nuzum, Drew Erdmann, and Trey Childress



Election day brings enormous joy and satisfaction to the winning side—and also, after the celebrations are over, a sense of trepidation. It's not unusual for governors-elect to wonder, "Just what have I gotten myself into?" First-timers know the rough contours of the job—budgeting, enacting legislation, overseeing operations—but as those activities and more come into sharper focus, governors-elect and their teams also need to focus on running a state government enterprise.

The scope of the job is truly massive, with state government expenditures ranging from \$5 billion to \$500 billion and with thousands of employees. The number of responsibilities is similarly staggering, including managing natural disasters, complex social programs, and economic development. Not only must transitioning from campaigning to governing happen in a matter of weeks, but decisions must also be made under intense public scrutiny—and getting things right can be critical to achieving long-term success.

This article combines firsthand experience, extensive research in both government and private sector executive transitions, and core McKinsey insights to detail a governor's first transition, dispelling common myths and breaking the transition down into individual phases. From there, it provides a comprehensive view of the essentials of getting to day-one success.

A 'CEO transition' like no other

Governors in the United States are often described as the CEOs of their states, meaning they and their teams oversee a state government enterprise with management challenges analogous to those of other top executives. At the same time, US state governors—like other senior public-sector leaders around the globe—navigate political and operational complexities quite different from those business CEOs face.¹

In terms of the similarity between governors and CEOs, consider the level of relentless public scrutiny,

the oftentimes diffuse or divided accountabilities, and the limitations on directing resources that define the waters government leaders navigate every day. US governors also have a host of distinctive governing responsibilities defined by the state's unique constitution, statutes, and traditions. These duties include declaring and managing emergencies, setting budget priorities, approving (or vetoing) new legislation, and providing important ceremonial speeches, such as an inauguration address. Furthermore, a new governor's transition combines scale, scope, speed, and stakes unlike any other CEO transition—except, perhaps, the country's president.

Scale

The scale of a state government's responsibilities can be massive. In fact, the economies of the six largest states would each rank among the top 20 economies in the world when compared by 2024 nominal GDP.

The scale of the state-level apparatus is likewise enormous. All US state governments are multibillion-dollar operations, with annual expenditures ranging from more than \$5 billion in Wyoming to around \$500 billion in California.² If state governments were a business, all but the smallest would meet the threshold for membership in the Fortune 500. In addition, they are often the largest single employers in their respective states.

Scope

The scope of work for a state government is more diverse than any holding company or conglomerate. A new governor inherits a staggering range of responsibilities, including overseeing healthcare programs; delivering social assistance; responding to natural disasters; protecting air, soil, and water quality; supporting lifelong education and workforce development; promoting business and trade; and issuing licenses for drivers, businesses, and even hunting and fishing.

Speed

The time between election and inauguration is a matter of weeks. Deadlines are inflexible

¹ Julia Klier, Roland Dillon, Scott Blackburn, and Tarek Mansour, "Honing leadership excellence in the public sector," McKinsey, April 4, 2025.

² For an overview of each state's budget, see *2024 state expenditure report: Fiscal years 2022–2024*, National Association of State Budget Officers (NASBO), 2024.

and set by statute or by state constitution. Governors are therefore required to act quickly. Necessary activities often include proposing an initial budget and delivering a State of the State address. However, unlike the formal preelection support provided for US presidential transitions, gubernatorial transitions typically move from campaign to administration in an ad hoc manner lacking an established transition infrastructure.

Stakes

Last, a governor's transition has particularly high stakes. The clock is ticking from day one. Most state constitutions set the timer to four years. Budget cycles are likewise rigid. Consequently, early mistakes can have a disproportionately large impact on the administration's ability to succeed. One poor personnel appointment, for instance, can sideline an administration priority for years. With gubernatorial transitions, the margin for error is slim.

Three common myths about transitions

A successful gubernatorial transition begins with understanding what is involved and how long it will take. Doing so helps to dispel three common myths about transitions. Like most myths, however, these notions also contain kernels of wisdom.

Myth #1: The transition ends at inauguration day

One myth views the transition as the period from election day to inauguration day. Through this lens, the transition ends when a governor formally assumes executive power and responsibilities. Although this period is certainly important, critical work is required to be ready for inauguration as well as to set the stage for longer-term success.

In our experience, the period leading to inauguration day is part of—not the entirety of—a successful transition. A new governor can therefore understand that reaching their inauguration day, while important, is more like getting to the starting line of a long race rather than the finish.

Myth #2: The first 100 days determine success

Another myth views the transition in terms of a governor's first 100 days, judging the success of a new governor by what they accomplish in this period. In US government, this idea traces its roots to the Great Depression and then-President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who led the passage of sweeping legislation and took executive action to launch the New Deal during his first 100 days in office.

This concept is also used in business executive transitions, which are often framed around the first 90 or 100 days. Of course, executive transitions

A successful gubernatorial transition begins with understanding what is involved and how long it will take.

benefit from speed, including quickly getting the right people into the right roles, building momentum, and rapidly communicating a clear vision. As the saying goes, “You never get a second chance to make a first impression.” That said, it usually takes more than 100 days to complete the transition to governing.

With these points in mind, a new governor can focus on governing and management milestones that establish their operating model, rather than a day marked on the calendar.

Myth #3: Legislative success defines governing

The third myth equates governing with legislation. From this perspective, a successful gubernatorial transition is defined by the passage of the new governor’s legislative priorities.

New laws often embody commitments made during the election campaign. Furthermore, legislation can create new programs or improve the quality of existing services. The successful passage of a governor’s legislative priorities provides visible signs of progress to the press, politicians, and the public. Success on the legislative front, therefore, can signal a governor’s effectiveness to stakeholders.

New legislation, though, usually does not affect most of state governments’ day-to-day work that touches citizens’ lives. How well the state government is managed, operated, and delivered outside of the public eye is what matters to most citizens—such as whether call center operators pick up the phone to answer questions about tax returns, unemployment benefits arrive on time, Medicaid eligibility is easy to navigate, bridges get replaced, state government websites work securely, or state parks are clean and safe.

It’s important that new governors not underestimate the importance of legislative success to their agendas. At the same time, they shouldn’t disproportionately concentrate on new legislation

at the expense of management and oversight of government programs and agency operations. A successful transition to governing typically considers all the unglamorous but critical management and coordination to design and deliver services for citizens.

A transition in three phases

Combining these insights, three interrelated phases define a new governor’s transition from campaigning to governing (Exhibit 1). Each phase entails more-visible governing actions and less-visible—but no less important—organizational and management milestones. In addition, each phase builds momentum that accelerates progress into the next phase, with work typically beginning before the prior phase is complete.

Phase one: Getting to day-one success

For some teams, phase one begins before election day with preliminary planning (such as identifying a transition leader). For everyone else, phase one begins as soon as the election is called. This encompasses all activities that ensure the governor-elect is ready for inauguration day, from writing the inaugural address to planning the day’s festivities.

In addition, phase one involves first steps toward governing, such as honing first-term priorities, defining the governor’s office organization, reviewing the first budget, and beginning to fill critical roles in the administration.

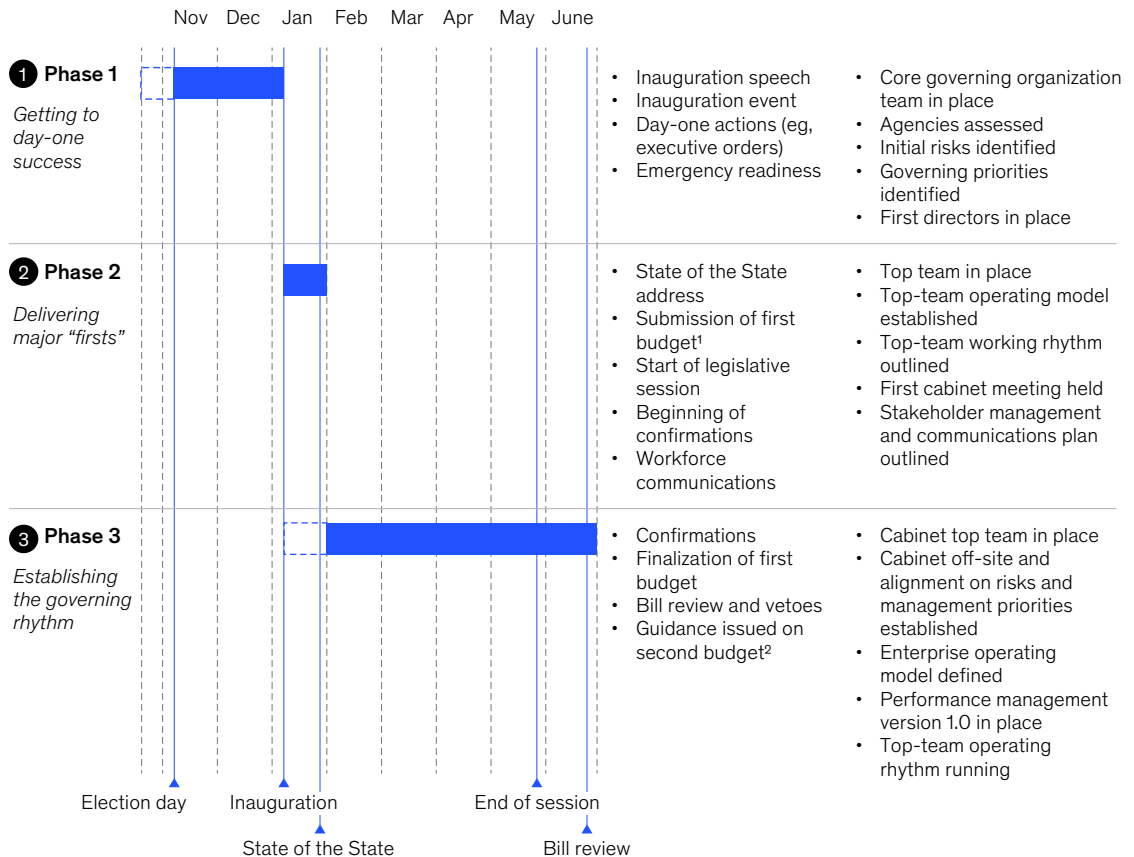
Phase two: Delivering major ‘firsts’

Phase two marks the governor’s first formal governing actions. In most states, this includes submitting the first budget, delivering the first State of the State address, communicating legislative priorities to the general assembly, and nominating cabinet leaders. These actions typically take place in an intense burst of activity within a month or so of inauguration, during which the governor’s office can start to establish its own work rhythm.

Exhibit 1

Three phases define a governor-elect's first-term transition.

Illustrative governor transition calendar



Note: Dates are illustrative.
¹Some budget activities start during phase 1.
²For states following a one-year budget cycle.

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Phase three: Establishing the governing rhythm

Phase three encompasses engaging in the legislative session by way of finalizing the budget and reviewing bills, putting in place the governor's cabinet team, and defining the operating model for the state government enterprise to deliver the governor's priorities. The nature of phase three's transition activities often differ from phase one's in intensity, and those performing said activities also differ—namely, members of the governor's office, cabinet team, and state government staff, as compared with phase one's more ad hoc, temporary, and sometimes volunteer transition team. The transition is essentially complete when these basics are in place.

Significantly, each transition phase includes governing and management milestones, which can be synchronized and mutually supportive. The visible "outside game" of public addresses and engagements—often related to the legislative process—risks overshadowing the needs of the "inside game" of managing the enterprise.

A new governor will likely want to stay focused on "how to run the business" throughout the transition, which entails an awareness of the shift from so-called start-up management (such as that of the campaign) to that of large-scale management (such as running the government enterprise). The team's

The team's habits and rhythms that drove success during the campaign are often not well-suited to governing.

habits and rhythms that drove success during the campaign are often not well-suited to governing. A new governor will likely want to adapt their own mindsets and behaviors to support this new approach. Change indeed begins at the top.

A state CEO's six major workstreams

The transition from campaigning to governing is unique for each state CEO, yet every new governor has much to learn from other CEOs and their transitions. In fact, the foundations for a governor's success are analogous to—or sometimes the same as—those of other senior executive transitions. This perspective builds upon a combination of firsthand experience, extensive research in both government and private sector executive transitions, and core insights from McKinsey research.³

The major workstreams that define a governor's success mirror those of CEOs. Both share much from a management perspective: They lead large, complex enterprises to deliver services and goods for customers while operating under the spotlight of public scrutiny and accountability.

Perhaps the most significant difference between governors and business CEOs is in the formal governance relationship itself. In the private sector, a CEO's formal governing relationship is with the organization's board of directors. In a public company, the board has the ultimate power to hire and fire and must support a company's strategic direction. By contrast, the constitutional separation

of powers in state government defines governance relationships. Akin to a board of directors, the general assembly or its equivalent plays a critical formal governance role in supporting a governor's strategic priorities (such as legislation or other formal reviews), resource allocations (such as budget), pivotal personnel appointments (such as confirmations), and even removal (via impeachment).

Distinctive leaders often bring distinctive mindsets to their work in each stream (Exhibit 2). The work of governors, similar to other CEOs, thus flows in the following six major workstreams:

- setting the direction
- aligning the organization
- mobilizing through leaders
- engaging the legislative “board”
- connecting with stakeholders
- managing personal effectiveness

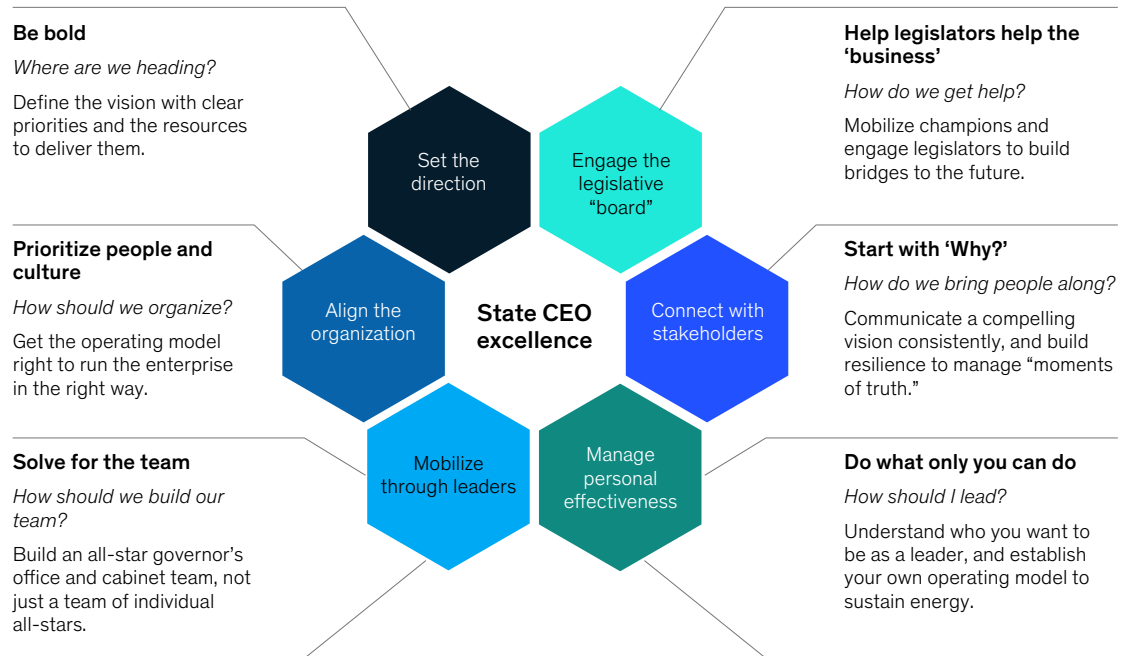
As detailed in previous McKinsey analysis, all six streams are essential to maximizing the odds of long-term success,⁴ with many governors attending to all streams weekly or even daily. In this way, a governor's strengths can help shape how a team synchronizes these different streams. Similarly, a governor's policy priorities and decision-making style can inform the enterprise operating model.

³ For more, see Carolyn Dewar, Scott Keller, and Vikram Malhotra, *CEO Excellence: The Six Mindsets that Distinguish the Best Leaders from the Rest*, Scribner, 2022; see also the follow-up article: Julia Klier, Roland Dillon, Scott Blackburn, and Tarek Mansour, “Honing leadership excellence in the public sector,” McKinsey, April 4, 2025.

⁴ “Everyday habits: How CEOs navigate their six core responsibilities,” McKinsey, February 28, 2025.

Exhibit 2

State CEO governors are like other successful top executives in their mindsets and how they accelerate their agendas.



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Although the streams' intensity and priority may wax and wane with the annual cycles of an administration, a governor typically invests more energy in setting this direction at the start of their first term as well as when preparing subsequent years' budgets and State of the State addresses. Likewise, a governor's engagement with the legislative board and connection with other stakeholders typically takes center stage during a general assembly session.

The transition's design can therefore start with what generates long-term success to define specific actions and their sequence.

The essentials of getting to day-one success

The first phase of a governor's transition—from election day to inauguration day—is uniquely

stressful and exciting. From the perspective of the governor and their staff, these weeks can be a blur of setting priorities, building a new team, preparing to deliver the most important speech of their careers, and moving into a new home, as well as a host of other activities. The holiday season may complicate the transition further.

One way to jump-start the transition is by conducting a simple survey to assess where senior leaders stand on each of the six dimensions of the state CEO excellence framework. This includes the governor, chief of staff, and other important staff (such as the potential future COO, policy director, and general counsel). Overall, the survey can be completed in ten to 15 minutes, and compiling the results can provide a snapshot of where these leaders are aligned (or not) in their initial assessments and priorities.

This input can then provide the starting point for a discussion with the governor and their team to establish priorities for the transition effort. A facilitated discussion can be conducted in one to two hours, resulting in a prioritized list of “focal points” for the transition, such as questions for the team to explore further or topics that should be addressed. These focal points typically range from general direction and priorities to specifics, such as how the governor wants to define the state government’s operating model and culture, the structure and staffing of the governor’s office, or expectations for individual leaders. Last, the conclusions reached can help tailor a team’s transition efforts to fit the unique strengths and needs of the governor.

Together, this identification of priorities can help the transition team focus its most important resource—

the governor-elect’s time and energy—on those tasks that only they can do. With this in mind, the transition effort will likely have a long list of must-do tasks to get the governor-elect and their team ready to assume the responsibilities of executive leadership on inauguration day.

A few specific activities are noteworthy because of their importance as well as the possibility that they may not receive the attention they deserve in phase one.

Organizing for success from the start

A transition’s first few weeks are inevitably frenetic, with many transition teams feeling like there is too much work to be done in too little time by too few people. With so many simultaneous activities, the risks of confusion, crossed lines of communication, and conflict with a transition team can be high.

Deep dive: What needs to get done in the transition’s first phase

Main governing actions a governor-elect should accomplish by inauguration day include the following:

1. *Set the direction.* Initial priorities are confirmed, resources are identified in budget, and the vision of success is woven into the inaugural address.
2. *Align the organization.* The main elements of the new operating model are defined, and the tone for how the enterprise will operate is set.
3. *Mobilize through leaders.* The governor’s office staff and the main cabinet agency leaders are named, bringing to the game the right mix of skills and will to become an all-star team.
4. *Engage the legislative “board.”* Legislative leaders are engaged in person to listen, set expectations, and begin identifying potential champions.
5. *Connect with stakeholders.* Critical stakeholders are engaged, and the governor’s team is ready for emergencies.
6. *Manage personal effectiveness.* How the governor will be as state CEO is signaled via day-to-day interactions and personal operating rhythm.

Every transition can therefore establish a figurative air traffic control system to avoid accidents, major delays, and missed deadlines. Often called a transition management office (TMO), this small team stands at the center of the transition activity with a high-level view of the various workstreams and activities. It then helps coordinate and synchronize these activities, ensuring smooth information flow across silos and teams. The guiding objective is to position the governor-elect and their team to manage their time and use the right information to make the right decisions. In this way, the TMO team can be closely linked to the governor-elect's transition team leader, communications leader, and scheduler, which can help reduce mistakes or missteps.

Shaping the budget

Strategy is ultimately about translating ideas into resource allocations. In state government, the annual or biannual budget is one of the most important elements of any strategy. Depending on the state constitution or statute, an incoming team typically needs to present a budget to the general assembly in their first few weeks in office.⁵ Further complicating matters, the incoming team often cannot start from scratch because the budget development process sometimes begins the previous summer and requires months to work through countless details. The new team thus inherits a draft budget compiled by the outgoing administration, which sometimes does not reflect the governor-elect's new priorities.

The challenge, therefore, is to conduct a rapid budget review to find opportunities to support the administration's priorities over the next fiscal year. With this in mind, the governor-elect can consider establishing a budget review team as soon as possible. The scale and scope of this challenge essentially makes it a full-time job. Therefore, the governor-elect and transition team leader will likely need to identify a trusted and skilled executive to lead the effort, usually working with the state's budget director and team. Ideally, this executive will have previous financial and budget

experience in large, complex enterprises, as well as the credibility that comes with it. This person should also possess a clear understanding of the governor-elect's top priorities and how to achieve them, in addition to a "constructively skeptical" mindset to probe budget submissions, business plans, and performance measures. The role can also be filled by a secondment from a business or by a retired executive, if necessary. Last, the transition's policy director and staff can be integrated into the budget review sprint and can operate in support of a dedicated leader.

Identifying pivotal roles

Another early priority should be identifying what specific roles will exert outsized impact on achieving the governor-elect's agenda. This process is not about personalities or patronage; rather, it is about staffing pivotal roles critical to building momentum and long-term success. Many of these roles in the governor's office are obvious, such as chief of staff, general counsel, policy director, legislative affairs director, communications director, or press secretary. However, not all cabinet agencies have equal importance in advancing a governor-elect's agenda. Viewing roles through this lens can help identify which agencies are the highest priority for leadership appointments.

The next step is a rapid assessment of what kind of leadership is needed in priority agencies and departments. Some agencies may require a focus on fixing a few specific burning operational issues, while others may require deep policy expertise and established networks to set direction and engage with stakeholders over the long haul. Still others may require a tested "transformational" leader with proven ability to wade into how the work gets done and then shift the agency to new, more efficient and effective ways of delivering services. Consideration can also be given for how a cabinet leader and deputy might combine complementary skills to work together as a team. Identifying these profiles can help narrow candidate lists, focus recruiting efforts, and accelerate the hiring process.

⁵ For an overview of each state's budget process and calendar, see *Budget processes in the states 2021*, NASBO, 2021.

Finding the right people to fill an administration's pivotal roles is a critical phase-one activity.

At the same time, the transition team can identify pivotal roles according to priority and potential impact—not just by formal title or tradition. In developing the enterprise operating model to move the governor-elect's priorities forward, the team can consider which roles may be out of the limelight but are nonetheless decisive.

Foremost among these staffing decisions is identifying the person to help the governor focus on the management and operations of the state government enterprise from “morning to night.” One common solution is establishing a COO in the governor's office, which has the added benefit of lightening the workload of the chief of staff. The COO can help lead the development and implementation of an “enterprise” across government operational improvement efforts. In some cases, governors have individual departments, and agencies report to COOs regarding management. Another approach involves appointing a chief transformation officer (CTO) who is responsible for providing expertise on select management priorities. This role is often related to improving citizen experience or operational efficiency in specific situations.

Last, instead of a COO or CTO, a governor can rely on a chief administrative officer (CAO) who, by skill and reputation, can serve in the cabinet as “first among equals.” Other enterprise roles that can punch above their formal weight class when delivering a governor's agenda, oftentimes working within the CAO's team, include chief information officer, chief data officer, chief procurement officer, and chief talent officer.

Staffing the administration

Finding the right people to fill the pivotal roles is a critical phase-one activity. The transition team

will likely need to establish a structured process to build an all-star team (not just a team of individual all-stars) for the governor-elect. The prioritization of roles should inform the recruiting effort. In parallel, the recruiting team will likely require a vetting process and, where appropriate, engage with important legislators involved in the confirmation process. To stay on track, the recruiting team can establish a regular operating rhythm that includes tracking goals and milestones for each batch of roles and appointees.

In addition to setting up a recruiting and vetting process for professional talent, the transition team can look beyond the most familiar pools of talent, such as campaign staffers, members of previous governors' offices, and former legislative leaders and staff members. In fact, many of the challenges of running the state government enterprise can benefit from the skills, experiences, and mindsets of so-called outsiders. These potential recruits include experienced government leaders from other states, executives from the private and nonprofit sectors, technology practitioners, and policy experts from think tanks and academic institutions. Clear guiding principles for the transition recruiting team can help ensure the new top team has the diversity and depth to succeed.

Preparing for the worst

Among a governor's most important responsibilities is overseeing emergency response to disasters, which can strike unpredictably, even within days of inauguration. Many governors face ice storms, blizzards, floods, tornadoes, or droughts in their first months in office. Almost every governor confronts at least one major natural disaster in their first year, not to mention the ever-present risks of manmade disasters, which range from cyberattacks to civil disturbances.

Citizens and other public officials expect new governors to demonstrate executive confidence and competence from day one. Therefore, during phase one of the transition, the governor-elect can prioritize preparing for so-called moment-of-truth contingencies.

The governor-elect, the transition team leader (or candidate for chief of staff), the communications director, and the transition's legal counsel can block time for briefings by the state government's emergency management leaders. Newly elected leaders and their teams should therefore be familiar with the formal processes for declaring an emergency and mobilizing state resources, and such meetings will likely include leaders from the state's department of transportation, the National Guard, and, in some states, the highway patrol. These meetings can also detail standard operating procedures for providing updates to a governor

and to the press. Furthermore, it may help to receive these briefings at the state's emergency management command center. Overall, such efforts should build on the National Governors Association's guidance for new governors, which includes an introduction to emergency management from the perspective of working with the federal government.

The governor-elect's team can also hold a tabletop exercise with the state's emergency management team. This session should be held closer to inauguration day—ideally after most members of the governor-elect's staff and cabinet team have been named. Although it's frequently seen as inconvenient, holding these exercises between the Christmas and New Year's holidays has the advantage of relatively clear schedules.

Deep dive: Four decisions to position the transition team for success

A governor-elect can make four types of decisions to stand up their transition organization and position it for success.

1. *Choose a transition chair and team structure.* The transition chair or lead plays a central role in any formal transition period. Choosing the right person is among the governor-elect's most important decisions. Governors can therefore look for candidates with a combination of experiences and traits. An ideal candidate will have the trust, judgment, and personality to counsel the governor-elect. They will also possess the skills and mindsets to help the transition team's operations make swift decisions. In some cases, a transition chair can commit only to the first phase, thereby remaining neutral and above the day-to-day jockeying for permanent positions in the administration. In other cases, the incoming chief of staff will be the logical candidate for the role. Working together, the governor and transition chair can fill other important roles in the team. Designated leaders can manage operations such as legal, legislative, communications, recruiting, budget and policy, and agency reviews, as well as other transition operations such as staffing, resourcing, and IT.
2. *Form a legal counsel and compliance team.* The formal prescription of a legal team for the transition process varies by state. Regardless, legal teams play critical roles in keeping the transition on track. Every transition team member should aim to receive appropriate guidance and training on topics such as public records, procurement, and other transition regulations. Many governors and their teams stand up legal entities to support their transitions, including the social events surrounding the inauguration. With this in mind, the legal counsel should have some experience navigating campaign finance law, government ethics laws and regulations, and powers and duties unique to the executive, as well as proficiency in drafting legislation (in contrast to litigating established law, which is a decidedly different mindset). The leader of this team often becomes the governor's permanent general counsel.

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3. *Create a support capacity.* Small support teams can help governors manage the transition's operations, particularly when it comes to ensuring the transition budget is consistent with state provisions, setting up secure facilities, and standing up IT and cybersecurity protocols, among other tasks. Some states have established budgets, working spaces, and other processes to support transitions. Part of these responsibilities include supporting the governor with transportation and advance work.
4. *Develop the process to engage stakeholders with “one voice.”* This process includes managing the human resources aspects of the transition organization, including resume intake, hiring, onboarding, and volunteer management. Governors can also form a team to manage external stakeholder engagements and the processes to ensure a regular and disciplined communications rhythm. Future legislative affairs and communications directors often step into their roles during this phase, thereby providing important continuity once inauguration day arrives.

Setting a personal rhythm for success

Amid the fast pace—and the process, politics, policies, and personalities involved—there is a risk of neglecting the most important dimension of a successful transition: the personal one. A governor's transition is inevitably stressful for both the governor and first family. It often involves moving into a new home and can even include finding new schools for children in the middle of the school year. Public attention will undoubtedly reach new levels for the entire first family. Guardrails must be set. Governors-elect often need to adapt their workday or adopt new rhythms. They should identify the practices that will help them be their individual best for the relentless series of short, intense sprints that define governing, which can require mindsets and muscles that differ from the long march of a campaign.

Among the most important “firsts” for any transition is how a governor-elect sets precedents with their staff, the cabinet team, and themselves to preserve their personal sources of energy. This is important to achieve sustainable leadership success.

A well-structured transition sets the stage for long-term success. This transition from campaign to governing extends over months of firsts. The days leading up to the inauguration, however, are especially important. A comprehensive approach to state CEO excellence helps a governor and their team start with the momentum needed to succeed.

McKinsey & Company is an apolitical, independent organization that does not take public-policy positions. This article focuses on management lessons and does not endorse any political party or policy action.

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