

# Obama Should Heed the Advice of George H. W. Bush

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There has been much talk about President-elect Barack Obama looking to Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt for inspiration and insight on building his administration and charting his first 100 days in office.

But some of the most helpful guidance available could come from an over-looked source -- George H. W. Bush.

Just days after his Inauguration 20 years ago, the first President Bush gathered hundreds of the government's senior career executives at Constitution Hall in Washington to praise their dedication, extol public service and to ask for their help in governing.

"I'm coming to you as President and offering my hand in partnership. I'm asking you to join me as full members of our team. I promise to lead and to listen, and I promise to serve beside you as we work together to carry out the will of the American people." Bush said. "Our principles are clear: that government service is a noble calling and a public trust."

Obama has signaled his own strong commitment to fostering public service -- to "make government cool again." Now it would be smart for him to follow Bush's example, personally meeting with senior civil service executives early in his administration to explain his priorities, set expectations and let them know their expertise and hard work will be needed to meet the many daunting challenges ahead.

Such a simple yet profoundly important gesture will create new energy and enthusiasm, and provide a reservoir of good will among a government workforce that often has been demoralized by being portrayed as the problem instead of part of the solution.

Why does it matter? In the end, personnel is policy. Obama's agenda may initially be tied to action by Congress, but it will be implemented by the federal workforce, and the ultimate success of an Obama administration will rest with the capacity of the government to perform.

If the senior managers and the entire career workforce can be motivated and given a stake in the process, the new administration will find that its major goals and even minor policy initiatives will be easier to achieve.

Obama is well-positioned to energize the civilian workforce. Many presidents have come to office after having run against Washington and the federal bureaucracy. This has carried over into mistrust

and skepticism once they were in power, with newly minted political appointees often ignoring the knowledge and abilities of seasoned government managers and sending a message that they are not valued or trusted.

Obama resisted the temptation to score cheap political points at the expense of civil servants, and now he has the opportunity to reap the benefits.

After the initial speech, what exactly does Obama need to do? First, follow up aggressively and consistently. The new president's effort to engage the federal workforce must be an ongoing process that is reinforced on a regular basis by the Cabinet secretaries and top political appointees.

Second, the president and his appointees must reach out well beyond the Beltway. Eight-five percent of the federal workforce lives and works outside of Washington, and these front-line employees must be made to feel part of the team effort.

Third, stick with what's working. Political appointees frequently have sought to reinvent the wheel by setting up new command and control systems that bypass career federal managers or discard substantive work already in the pipeline. It has become standard operating procedure for every president to propose his own, new and improved government reform plan, but little ever gets fixed because it's also common practice to wipe out even the good work that has been done.

Next, reach out to unions. One of the biggest obstacles to human capital reforms over the past eight years was the chilly relationship between President George W. Bush's administration and federal unions. The new administration should work in partnership with labor leaders.

To be clear, having an engaged workforce won't guarantee a successful tenure, but not having one will result in certain failure. It's not a question of needing either smart policies or a well-managed workforce.

You need both. So while Obama should continue to review the achievements of our greatest presidents, he shouldn't ignore the one-termers.

Applying this simple early lesson from the senior Bush could go a long way toward determining Obama's chances of any FDR-esque accomplishments.

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