Hang On Tight! How to Navigate the Presidential Transition

A GOVLOOP TOOLKIT

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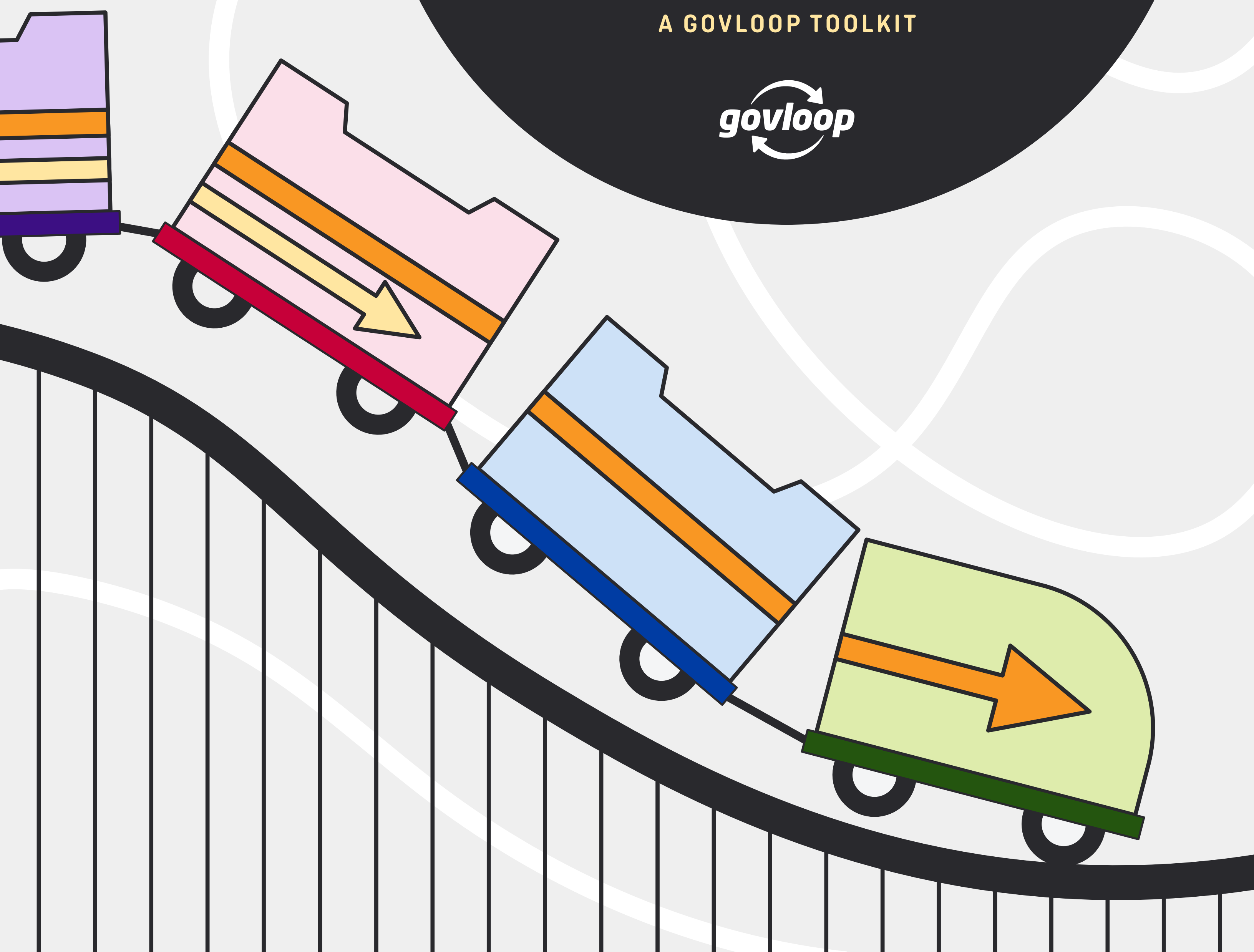


Introduction

For federal employees, the first year of a new administration can feel like a roller-coaster ride. Or a walk through a funhouse, or even a house of horrors. But while there's no getting around the uncertainty or the inevitable changes, both large and small, there are numerous ways to keep yourself centered and on task, even when everything seems to be in flux.

For this 2025 transition toolkit, we have gathered advice and tips offered in recent years by GovLoop Featured Contributors and other experts. Topics run the gamut from surviving the first 100 days and to talking to your teams about impending change — as well as getting ready for a job change if that's the best course.

Here at GovLoop, we know the months ahead will be bumpy, as transitions always are. But please know we appreciate the work you do, and we look forward to supporting you however we can.

IN THIS TOOLKIT:

Ensuring a Smooth Transition:

Tips for Career Employees and Political Appointees

In a 2020 blog post, Neil Levine, then a Featured Contributor and a veteran of four presidential transitions with experience as a civil servant and a political appointee, shared some advice for navigating the first 100 days of a new administration. Here's what he wrote.

Let's start with advice for career employees:

Do your homework.

Seasoned civil servants do their homework and identify the new team's broad areas of interest, gleaned from speeches, policy papers and the individuals associated with the campaign.

Be prepared to share.

Put forward your best ideas that will resonate with the new team's interest. At the same time, there is an opportunity to educate new leadership about what gets in the way of the mission and how they can help.

Pay attention to framing.

Even more important is framing and expressing ideas in the language of possibility and potential, rather than constraints. Phrases like "We're already doing that" or "We don't have the money or the people" immediately suck the energy out of the room.

Don't get lost in the details.

Keep briefings with transition teams well-organized and small. That means pitching the briefing at the right level — headlines and highlights. Weed out the jargon and the acronyms to save time and make your communication clear.

Here are tips for political appointees and agency review teams charged with understanding the operations of each agency and ensuring a smooth transition:

Prioritize issues for the first 100 days.

No new administration can address all the perceived ills it may inherit, nor can it address all demands from internal and external stakeholders. Identifying and sticking to priorities calls for strict discipline and focused energy.

Embody key leadership qualities.

The real blocking and tackling in government policymaking and providing services occurs at lower levels of management where vision, political savvy, communication and conflict resolution skills are required.

Be open.

Perhaps the hardest part of the job will be overcoming the "not invented here" syndrome where ideas of the other party are summarily rejected, regardless of merit.

One final word of advice for appointees and career employees:

Identify your team's "transition whisperers."

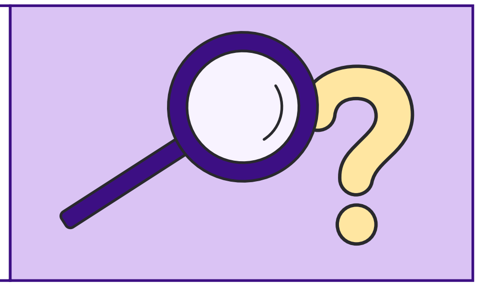
Political appointees with prior service in the department and long-tenured career civil servants likely are known quantities who have earned respect for their political savvy and deep institutional knowledge. Putting these people to work can smooth the transition and set the stage for early success.

How to Make Decisions in a World of Uncertainty

A presidential transition is inherently stressful. As the new administration takes shape, agency leaders and employees will be under pressure to make a lot of decisions and make them quickly. So, how do you make a decision when time and information are limited, and the answer is not obvious? In a 2021 blog post, Christine Galvin-Combet offered steps to make the task less daunting.

Conduct Root Cause Analysis

When faced with a problem, make sure you understand its real cause. For example, if you're receiving applications that do not align with your needs, the problem may not be a lack of candidates or technologies. It could be how the solicitation was written or advertised.

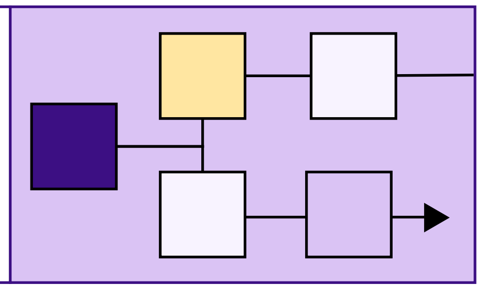


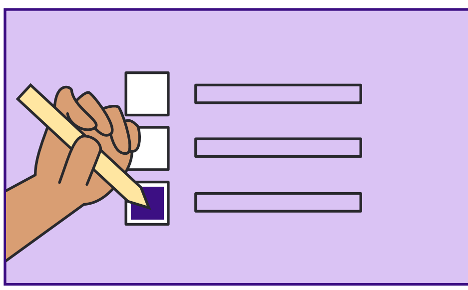
Determine the Relative Urgency

Before racing to make a decision, step back and think: How critical is it, and how soon is action really needed? Gain insight into the actual time-sensitivity and work from there.

Adopt a Decision-Making Framework

If you don't have a lot of time to gather and analyze data, look for a framework to aid your decision-making. In this Harvard Business Review article, Cheryl Strauss Einhorn presents a four-step template that you can adapt to many contexts.



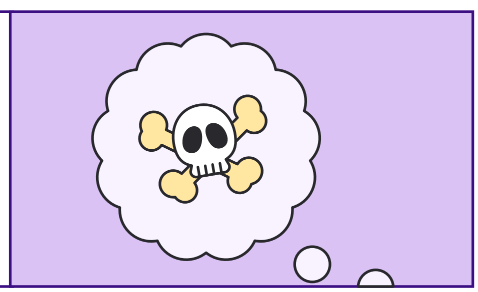


Gather Input (and Allow for Different Opinions)

Generally speaking, you shouldn't make high-stakes decisions in a vacuum. By involving people with diverse perspectives, you'll get a more robust examination of a problem and more ideas for solving it.

Try the 'Fear-Setting' Technique

Author Tim Ferriss presents a useful strategy called Fear-Setting, which calls for considering the worst possible outcomes of a decision. This will help you think through the ramifications, mitigate negative outcomes or consequences, and consider other options.



What to Say During Times of Change

If you lead a team, however big or small, you will play a critical role in helping your staff members navigate the coming months. They will look to you to understand what's changing and what it means to them. In February 2024, Nina Kern, a Featured Contributor, wrote a blog post about how to craft your messaging. Here's a quick summary (but you can read the full post here):

Know your audience.

Look at the situation from their perspective. What will be the day-to-day impact of this change on their work, their job and their team? Will people perceive this as a gain or a loss (regardless of the value to the larger organization)?

What is changing and why?

Be as specific as you can about how things will be different and what is driving that change. When talking about the "why," avoid corporate terms like "more strategic," "increase efficiency," "promote innovation" or "better position us for the future."

Describe the path forward.

Most change doesn't happen with the flip of a switch. Share as much as you can (or as much as you know) about how the change will unfold, both in terms of process and timing. And keep that conversation going as things progress.

Keep the vision front and center.

Remind people, time and again, the point of it all — that is, what we are trying to get done here? What outcomes do we hope to achieve? This is especially important for people who are not involved in planning or implementing the change. They need to be inspired on a regular basis.

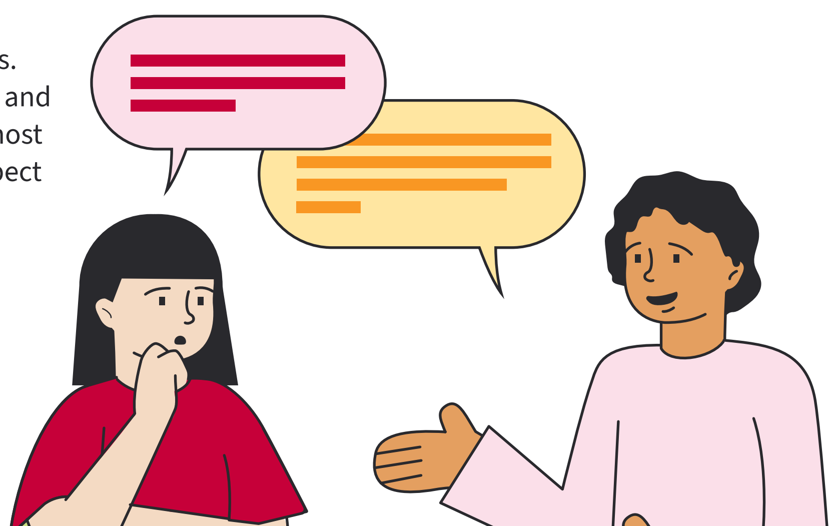
Set expectations.

Change often requires people to learn new processes, new systems and maybe new skills. Let people know what they will need to learn and how you will support them — and, perhaps most profoundly, try to model the learning you expect from them.

Tips for Keeping Teams in the Loop

As new programs move forward, you must make sure all stakeholders know what's happening. The Agency Transition Guide, developed by the Center for Presidential Transition, offers these best practices:

- ☑ Establish target outcomes and goals, particularly in terms of what you want employees to think, feel and do after receiving your communications.
- ☑ Determine all communication channels and tools, including times, locations, technology platforms and contact methods for engaging employees.
- ☑ Define the audiences in terms of distinct stakeholder categories and assess their communication needs and expectations.
- ☑ Develop plans with timeliness and cadence for messaging each audience.
- ☑ Outline key messages for each target audience, and tailor them depending on circumstance.
- ☑ Establish clear measures of success, and track progress via feedback loops.



6 Tips for Staying Steady During Times of Change

When facing the uncertainty and change of a new administration, you might be tempted to lay low until everything settles. But both you and your team will be better off if you keep engaged in spite of the uncertainty. During a recent GovLoop virtual event, speakers offered some tips for staying steady and even thriving.

1 Embrace Ambiguity

Rather than trying to escape uncertainty, be curious. What's changing? What's not changing, and why? Talk with your manager and others in leadership, asking open-ended questions about what's unfolding.

2 Focus on What You Can Control

During a transition, you can't control much of what happens. So, focus instead on what Stephen Covey, author of "7 Habits of Highly Effective People," calls your circle of control. That includes your thoughts, choices, actions and communication. It also includes your relationships with others, which enable you to expand your influence over time.

3 Communicate Clearly and Factually

New policies and processes can create a lot of tension in a team. When talking about divisive issues, set your personal feelings aside and stick to the facts and what needs to be done. Again, this is your circle of control.

4 See a Problem? Look for a Solution

New policies and processes also can result in unanticipated problems for you or your team. As annoying as that can be, it's also an opportunity to step up and help work toward a solution. A problem-solving mindset can position you well for growth on the job and in your career.

5 Manage Information Overload

Be more intentional about how and when you consume news. A good start is turning off the news alerts and maybe even sticking your phone in a drawer. And when reading the news, look for sources that deepen your understanding rather than adding to your stress or confusion.

6 Prioritize Self-Care

It's obvious but often forgotten: The more stressed you are, the more you need to make a point of making time for replenishing your energy, whether that's exercising, journaling, meditating or connecting friends. Whatever it is, make it a priority.

Career Planning: Conducting a Personal SWOT Analysis

If the current transition has you thinking about making a job change — whether that's looking for a new role in your existing organization, jumping to another agency or even moving to the private sector — you might want to conduct a personal SWOT analysis.

This technique, typically applied to organizations or teams, involves assessing your **strengths** and **weaknesses** and considering the **opportunities** and **threats** to your job prospects. To learn more, check out this guide from the Pepperdine Graziadio Business School and this blog post from Kennesaw State University (Georgia).

Here is a basic worksheet with some questions to guide your reflection.

STRENGTHS

- What kind of work do you excel at?
- What experience and/or training have set you up for success?
- Which achievements are you most proud of?

WEAKNESSES

- What kind of work do you typically avoid?
- Given your career goals, where do you see gaps in your education/training?
- What issues have come up in your performance reviews?

OPPORTUNITIES

- What organizations focus on work that align with your talents?
- What contacts do you have in prospective organizations?
- Do you have a mentor who can guide you?

THREATS

- Do you see declining demand for your particular skills or areas of expertise?
- In what ways has your current job derailed your career goals?
- Do you lack the resources or opportunities to address your weaknesses?

How to Fine-Tune Your Resume

If you decide to search for a new job, you might need to carefully review your existing resume. At a GovLoop event last year, experts offered some insights and tips on how to craft a resume that represents you well.

Your resume has its own job. Is it to…

- ✗ Tell everything about your career history
- ✗ Comprehensively explain what you are doing
- ✗ Be as brief as possible
- ✓ Define you as a problem solver
- ✓ Be visually accessible for reviewers
- ✓ Showcase your most valuable experiences

Who reviews your resume, and how:

- Reviewers will **scan** the document before reading it.
- They look for **how you might solve a problem** their organization has. Initially, that may be the only thing they look for.
- The reviewer may be a person, software or even AI. **Make your resume accessible for all**. For humans, remember that eye strain matters: Your font must be readable.
- The vast majority of reviewers will look at your resume **digitally**.

A RESUME FAQ

How long should a resume be?

Long enough to convey the quality of your experience

Does it matter how I organize things?

Yes! Put your relevant experience front and center — the first third of your resume is prime real estate. Think of it as "Cliff Notes" of who you are as an employee. A hiring manager wants to learn your capabilities, competencies and knowledge from the first few items.

How do I know what experience is valuable?

Consult bullet points from the job description and match them with your career experiences, expertise and supporting details. List any security clearances early on: They're attractive to busy hiring managers. Volunteer experience counts.

How should I characterize my expertise?

Be authentic: Don't pretend to be an expert in everything. But when you do have expert knowledge and skills, acknowledge that. Don't downplay what you can do.

Should I write a cover letter?

It never hurts. A cover letter is an opportunity to meet someone in a different way, through writing, and a place where someone can know you better. The letter shouldn't repeat your resume; it should convey more meaning or significance about what's there.

For more resume tips, check out this blog post from a GovLoop Featured Contributor.

Tips for Returning to the Office

Many federal employees will return to physical office buildings. But transitioning to an in-person environment can be jarring, especially for people who've spent the last several years working comfortably at home. There are ways to make the adjustment more manageable, however (this article offers advice on making the most of your return-to-office experience). Here are other tips:

Reawaken old habits.

To prepare for your in-office routine — commuting, getting lunches ready, etc. — adjust your work-from-home schedule in advance. For instance, start waking up in time to commute, before it's required.

Focus on the positives.

You probably enjoyed some aspects of in-office work: e.g., connecting with colleagues, chatting around a watercooler, collaborating in-person. Look forward to those things.

Create a welcoming environment.

Bring touches of your home office into your workspace, so you feel more comfortable and creative and avoid culture shock.

Be realistic about time.

Don't expect to accomplish everything you did before returning to the office. Cultivate an attitude of openness and receptivity, and you can better adapt to change. Recalibrate your expectations.

Practice mindfulness.

Each day, take a few minutes to center yourself. Deep breathing, journal writing, meditation and exercise are good options, among others. Resist the urge to complain about going to the office. Be grateful for small things.

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