

MANAGING THE GAP

As baby boomers retire,
legislative staff managers
are cultivating the
next crop of leaders.

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TAMMY GRACE, DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF THE NEVADA
LEGISLATIVE COUNSEL BUREAU

BY BRIAN WEBERG

It was like the canary in the coal mine.

When two senior members of the fiscal staff announced their retirement to the Nevada Legislative Counsel Bureau in 2009, Tammy Grace, deputy director of the bureau, knew it would grab lawmakers' attention and help them recognize the serious problem facing them.

“The loss of long-term employees left a gap in institutional knowledge for our agency in an area that has a direct relationship to our legislators,” Grace says. “It made the turnover problem very visible.”

Plenty of staff have left since, Grace says. Some retired, while others took outside offers, perhaps made more attractive by furloughs, pay cuts and reduced benefits. Then came the biggest blow. Before the 2011 session, the bureau's 18-year director, Lorne Malkiewich, announced he would retire at the end of the session.

The much-anticipated, much-discussed baby boomer exodus appears to be in full swing at the Nevada legislative bureau. Even before Malkiewich's announcement, however, the staff agency was developing a way to deal with the problem. After the high-profile departures in 2009, Tammy Grace worked with members of the bureau to design a leadership academy where participants would gain the skills to be good managers and leaders who are willing to share what they learn with their younger coworkers. With support from legislative leaders, who felt the loss of key budget talent, the program was awarded \$40,000 in 2011 to fund its startup.

Looking Down the Road

The Nevada Legislature has been ahead of the pack in addressing upcoming staff needs. The process of identifying gaps between future workforce needs and current capacity and then developing programs to close those gaps is officially called “succession planning.” It usually is a collaborative endeavor among an organization's leaders (staff and legislators), human resources professionals and employees. Plans may include designing new positions, reassigning job responsibilities, reorganizing agencies, investing in staff training, improving recruitment activities, focusing on retention, preserving the knowledge of senior staff, and finding ways for those soon to retire to mentor their younger colleagues.

Like legislatures, most public organizations and many private ones have no succession plan in place or, at best, have only bits and pieces of various activities to help manage upcoming transitions. Few legislatures have performed serious “gap analyses” to identify how their current organizations and structures might fall short in the future.

Many legislative staff offices, however, have recognized the need for senior staff to pass on knowledge, sometimes through mentor programs and often by documenting the procedures, tasks and skills required for various jobs. Even though legislatures, in general, have a strong history of staff training, these

Brian Weberg directs NCSL's Legislative Management Division.

Connecticut's Approach

Connecticut offers these core courses in its leadership program.

- ◆ Basic Principles of Effective Organizations
- ◆ The Coaching Zone—Leading Your Employees to New Levels
- ◆ Conducting Performance Appraisals
- ◆ Correcting Performance Problems
- ◆ Critical Thinking: Breaking Out of the Box
- ◆ Diversity Awareness
- ◆ Goal Setting for Supervisors
- ◆ Motivating/Energizing Your Employees
- ◆ Recognizing Your Employees
- ◆ Sexual Harassment Awareness

efforts often have been poorly funded, unfocused and unavailable to many employees.

After working for the Legislature for 34 years, Jeff Youtz, director of Idaho's Legislative Services Office, is preparing his staff and legislative leaders for his upcoming retirement. He's been managing a series of retirements of senior staff recently, which has given him the opportunity to reassess and reorganize responsibilities, as well as mentor and prepare new young leaders in the agency. He is fully aware that the anticipated brain drain from state legislatures no longer is a theory, but a growing reality.

The nonpartisan agency of 65 employees provides a full range of research, budget, audit and technology support to all members of the Legislature. Along with more informal mentoring and leadership preparation activities, Youtz has written a kind

of "Everything You Need to Know" guidebook for this central agency that includes all his management and administrative knowledge and experiences. His successor will open it to find a monthly time line with tasks, deadlines and assigned responsibilities, along with examples of communications a director will need.

"The state legislative process is driven with definite time lines, deadlines and organizational expectations that don't change a great deal from year to year," Youtz says. "With this guidebook, if I were to leave tomorrow, my successor would at least know what's coming month by month."

Promoting Leadership

The Nevada Legislative Counsel Bureau leaders hope their academy will provide a way to manage the transition.

Do-it-Yourself

If you don't have a formal succession plan at your office, there's plenty you can do yourself.

- ◆ Find one or several mentors who currently are leaders within your agency.
- ◆ Solicit feedback from them on your leadership qualities, both good and bad.
- ◆ Participate in all applicable training opportunities.
- ◆ Ask questions of current managers and employees.
- ◆ Create your own career development plan—where you want to go, what you want to achieve and when.

Source: NCSL's "Succession Planning in the Legislative Workplace: A Guide for State Legislatures," July 2005.

The bureau, with its 280 nonpartisan staff, conducts research, bill drafting, fiscal analysis and audits, and provides a full range of computer and administrative support to the Legislature. Like Idaho's Legislative Services Office, it is Nevada's one-stop shop for member support services and institutional memory.

The leadership academy held its first graduation ceremony on May 31, 2012. The 10-month program is subtitled "Promoting a Culture of Leadership" and Grace, the academy director and passionate advocate, is quick to point out the significance of this label.

"Our program is trying to change the LCB culture to be one where our agency looks to mentor and grow leaders," she says, "not just wait until people announce they are leaving."

She hopes the program creates a "new norm" among employees where graduates share what they have learned, and where those who are promoted to supervisory positions have the training and tools to be good managers and leaders.

In developing the content for the academy, designers interviewed directors to determine what skills and knowledge they believed would be needed by staff in the future. All employees who had support from their supervisors and who could commit to attending all sessions were invited to apply to the academy.

They participated in workshops, read various texts, completed a work project and were evaluated comprehensively. They knew it would be rigorous.

"Many staff here are on the verge of retirement," says Mindy Martini, who works in the Research Division and was in the original group accepted into the program. "So I thought, if I don't participate in the academy, I risk being overlooked when these positions become available."

Martini loved the experience, but it didn't turn out to be only about her individual progress. "For me, the biggest thing we learned was about other divisions at the LCB. We now have a team. As we move up into leadership positions, we all will be working together."

"Succession plans are not designed to just get you to the next level. They are geared to emphasize the building of competencies that increase individual and organizational effectiveness."

—FROM THE CONNECTICUT SUCCESSION PLAN

Training Focus

The Connecticut General Assembly and its Office of Legislative Management are no strangers to succession planning. Jim Tamburro, the office's training and staff development coordinator, is one of the few full-time, in-house legislative staff training professionals in the country. For years, his office has focused its efforts on staff training and development.

The office provides administrative, human resources and fiscal support to about 400 other staff working in the General Assembly's nonpartisan research, fiscal, bill drafting, library, IT, security and audit offices. These staff have the opportunity to participate in 12 certificate programs on leadership, legislative aide development, life management, presentation skills, and committee clerk skills, among others.

The "Leadership Development and Succession Management" course is targeted to supervisors and directors who learn how to coach and motivate employees, handle performance problems and conduct appraisals. Tamburro helps division directors identify potential candidates for the programs. Staff who already are performing well and have a strong leadership potential are encouraged to participate.

Connecticut participants self-select to enter the training program. Tamburro, however, also coaches directors to use the "talent assessment grid" to identify strong candidates. The grid measures "performance levels" and the "potential for larger or broader roles" on a scale of low, medium and high. Staff who have high performance and high potential are encouraged to participate in the program.

"We are looking for the 'high/high' people, and we want to create an individual development plan for them," says Tamburro.

The Connecticut and Nevada programs rely heavily on a thorough, honest performance evaluation of the participants. "The 360 assessment is very

important," says Tamburro. "It provides feedback they never would receive otherwise and serves as the basis for their individual development plan."

A Bounty of Benefits

These efforts illustrate a few possibilities available to legislatures as they confront baby boomer retirements, higher staff turnover and declining resources.

Positive, unintended consequences are side benefits. When Nevada's leadership academy class first convened, "we had to introduce people to each other," says Grace. "We got them together and started to break down the silos. Now they get together as a group every month and stay connected."

Grace doesn't hide her pride in the academy and its first class of graduates. She boasts proof that its goals are being met. This September, it's her turn to retire, and five academy graduates have already volunteered to take over the reins of the academy.