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Choosing better government leaders

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Geoff Smart

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Caption: "LEADOCRACY: Hiring More Great Leaders (Like You) Into Government."

EDITOR'S NOTE In December 2010, new Colorado Gov. John Hickenlooper reached out to leadership selection expert Geoff Smart for help in putting together a Cabinet. The two ended up creating The Leaders Initiative, a not-for-profit organization whose mission is "to identify, develop and deploy society's great leaders into government." In "LEADOCRACY" (Greenleaf Book Group, July 2012), Smart describes ways to improve the quality of government. Here is an excerpt: On a cold day in December of 2010, I received the following e-mail from a client:

Geoff,

As you might be aware, I am on the governor-elect's transition team. Various lawyers and professionals are donating hundreds of hours. Would your firm be prepared to interview two to three of the top candidates for various cabinet positions? Roxane White, chief of staff, would like to call you.

Thanks in advance. The People of Colorado appreciate your support. -- Blair Richardson

Various thoughts crossed my mind. Help the government? No way! Government is hopeless and broken. What's the point? All of his leadership hiring decisions will be politically motivated anyway. I'm going to say "no."

I started writing back with my regrets. "I'm sorry, but -- ."

My fingers froze on the keyboard.

A thought had popped into my head. Blair is somebody for whom I have the utmost respect. If he is helping, maybe the situation isn't hopeless, I thought. Besides, Time magazine had called the new governor, John Hickenlooper, one of the "Five Best Big-City Mayors" in his previous job as mayor of Denver, and he had been a business leader and entrepreneur before that. I wouldn't mind meeting him. In fact, it was a rare opportunity to meet a fellow businessperson who had gone into public service.

I deleted the words I had written, and wrote this instead:

"Yes."

I voted for Hickenlooper, and am happy to use my firm's expertise to help him pick a great Cabinet. His success as our governor will be largely determined by the quality of the team he selects. Privileged to serve.

The work I was about to do for the governor ended up being the most exciting, meaningful, and fun work I did all year. And I can point to it as the moment that put me on the path to a very different mind-set about government and how to improve it.

Four days after I sent the reply, I found myself at a small round conference table with John Hickenlooper, the newly elected governor of my home state of Colorado, and his chief of staff, Roxane White. Our task was to discuss whom to hire for key Cabinet roles. The governor was to take office in three weeks.

In person, Governor Hickenlooper was energetic, friendly and genuine, but with an intensity of purpose behind his eyes. Roxane White -- a former not-for-profit CEO -- matched the governor on energy, but managed to steer hers, and his, into lanes of highly productive decision-making. Instantly, I could see why they made a great pair in their previous jobs as mayor of Denver and mayoral chief of staff.

The discussion about candidates was focused, fact-based, and lively. And the governor's leadership competence began to chip away at my negative assumptions. First, he was clearly more interested in hiring the best leader than in playing politics. Not one time did the governor say the word "Republican" or "Democrat." That was mind-blowing to me.

Second, he had his eye on results. What were we trying to achieve in human services, by when? How much would that cost? It was a very straightforward discussion of outcomes and strategies, not too different from thousands of conversations I have had with leaders in the private sector.

Then, when I heard the governor refer to citizens as "customers," I almost fell out of my chair. Our citizens are our customers. We are here because they put us here. How do we manage those investments of time and tax revenue as intelligently as possible to deliver the best results?

All was going well, but then something happened. We were discussing a big job, one that required turning around a multibillion-dollar department in the government that had weak performance outcomes. "There are a few impressive candidates in the stack, but too few," I said. "Where's the A list?"

Hickenlooper said, "I would love nothing better than to hire the very best leaders we have in our state. But they have a perception that government is unsavory, so they won't come."

Before I could stop myself, I blurted out, "Isn't government unsavory?"

"It doesn't have to be," Hickenlooper replied with a small smile. "In our administration, we're going to be all about talent and results. So it will be a lot less unsavory for my key leaders here than in an administration that was all about politics. In the right situation, a Cabinet job like this

can actually be incredibly rewarding and meaningful for a leader. If we could get the kind of leaders we want, you would have a government that performed much, much better. The change would be profound."

That is when it really clicked. Yes, government is broken; everyone knows that. Our attempts to fix it have been focused on chasing "what" solutions -- new laws, regulations, fiddling with policies, arguing about ideology. But what if the fundamental problem were not a "what" problem? What if the fundamental problem were a "who" problem?

What if the fundamental problem was simply that we did not have enough great leaders in government?

I looked at the governor and his chief of staff and, choosing my words carefully as I counted out six fingers, I said, "Hiring. More. Great. Leaders. Into. Government. There is a six-word solution to the problem of how to reform government. I shrugged my shoulders to invite honest feedback. "Right?"

Five seconds of silence.

Then the governor replied, "Yes."

But how to make that happen?

"Someone should develop a program to get those leaders in office," I said. "You could find them, demystify government, train them, and then have them do a stint."

"Like Teach for America," chief of staff White added.

"They could do a stint for a couple of years," said the governor, "and if they want to stay in it, they could; or they could then roll off back into the private sector."

Silence. Exchange of looks. We were playing a game of "who's going to step up?" I knew the governor would need someone to get such a program up and running. Someone who believed in the power of great leadership and could help bridge great leaders from the private sector into the public sector.

I didn't even wait for him to vocalize the need.

"I'll do it," I said. And "it" turned into two things: my book "**LEADOCRACY**: Hiring More Great Leaders (Like You) Into Government"; and The Leaders Initiative, a non-profit that matches private-sector leaders with two-year stints in government.

That December day, in that room with the governor, I realized this solution did not apply just to our state but also could apply to all governments everywhere. Getting more great leaders into government could improve the quality of life of people around the world.

The TLI pilot program is up and running in Colorado, with eight leaders from Colorado's private sector [including Noodles & Co. founder Aaron Kennedy] signed up and exploring the possibility of government service. If it's successful, we hope to expand to other states so people everywhere can reap the benefits of a government that consists of society's greatest leaders.

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