

## The Top 7 Traps When Moving from Business to Government

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Are you considering transitioning from business to government? According to government human resource professionals, you'll need to watch where you step.

A recent survey of senior public-sector HR executives conducted by us — Peter Daly and Michael Watkins, coauthors of *The First 90 Days in Government: Critical Success Strategies for New Public Leaders at all Levels* — found that in contrast to business, performance failures can have consequences measured not only by financial standards but by embarrassment and political defeat.

To ensure success, you will want to avoid what more than 100 surveyed senior government HR officials report to be the seven most common traps business people fall into when they move to government.

### Trap 1: Failing to Understand Government's Fishbowl Nature

Many new arrivals are “not able to adapt to the political climate and being in the public eye where you are scrutinized when you make decisions,” says one senior public-sector HR professional in the survey. Leaders in businesses often are shielded from the sort of public, media and political scrutiny and second-guessing that accompanies high-profile government appointments. The admonition that new arrivals hear — “imagine how this will seem on the front page of tomorrow's newspaper” — is no jest.

### Trap 2: Thinking Too Narrowly About Stakeholders

Satisfying everyone is impossible, so creating coalitions is essential. In business, there are shareholders, Wall Street analysts, customers, regulators, partners and employees. In federal government, there are almost 300 million citizens, 535 elected representatives, 3,000 or so members of an elected administration, thousands of special-interest constituencies and lobbyists, unions, regulatory bodies and many others.

### Trap 3: Not Grasping How Performance Is Measured

In government, finance is but one measurement to devising a strategy. The bottom line, if one even exists in government, is always trumped by political crises, public policy or constituent pressure. Success often entails tolerating financial conditions that would never be entertained in business.

### Trap 4: Underestimating the Constraints

Many new arrivals “attempt to make changes that simply can't be made because of statutes and regulations,” says another HR professional. Leaders in government do not have the option of selling off an agency that performs poorly. They must change and improve it. Private companies are constructed with change in mind, while government is designed for just the opposite — to remain stable. Agencies are governed by complicated regulations, staffed by people doing narrowly defined tasks and overseen by managers whose responsibility often is to assure that rules are followed.

### Trap 5: Overlooking Nonmonetary Incentives

One of the starkest contrasts between business and government is the differences in incentives for motivating workers. “The biggest trap for successful individuals entering government, is not understanding the structured nature of pay in government,” notes one HR professional in the survey. “Pay raises can only be given based on certain criteria, at a certain time and within the confines of a merit system. This is often a shock to former private-sector employees.” In business, motivation often means sharing in the financial benefits of a successful business plan. In government, financial incentives can conflict with the concept of professionals who carry out policies to best serve the public, not for personal gain. Leaders, therefore, must rely on other tools — a compelling vision, a culture that values and recognizes success, the potential for development and advancement, and the reward of engaged teamwork — that are more difficult to design.

### Trap 6: Overestimating Control Over Critical Resources

Acquiring resources in government is heavily regulated by Cabinet agencies and Congress, creating a competitive environment where agencies not only vie against each other but must engage the political process and gain the support of allies. Even when support is strong, acquiring quick infusions of people, facilities or technology is unlikely, given complex personnel and procurement rules. Most new government leaders must start off largely with the resources they inherited.

### **Trap 7: Expecting Government to Move as Fast as Business**

New arrivals from business “believe they can make change happen quickly,” says another survey respondent. “When they find out that they cannot make that change as quickly as they’d like, discouragement sets in.” Government’s rhythms are different from the quarterly and annual reporting deadlines of business. So for new leaders, getting up to speed could take longer than six months, which is typical in business. Still, they are not insulated from the impatience of stakeholders and are likely to face pressures for early wins. Targets for such wins should be selected wisely, despite insistence from some quarters for rapid action, because when they are met, they increase credibility and build momentum for success with longer-term changes.

Success in avoiding these traps will position you to get off to a good start and build personal credibility. If you fall into one, however, it will set up a vicious cycle that will consume your precious time and energy; it could even contribute to derailment.

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