

Trump's team

Leaders need to generate and evaluate ideas as well as turn those ideas into action. Luckily, leaders do not have to do all this themselves. They have a team.

For instance, even before he won the 1980 Presidential election, Ronald Reagan began assembling his governing team. Reagan picked people that he thought were either very competent or very loyal to him (or if possible both). For instance, Reagan appointed

James Baker III as his chief of staff. Baker was not loyal to Reagan; instead, he was loyal to George H. Bush, the incoming Vice President. But Baker was extraordinarily competent, so much so that he was a key player in helping Reagan have a successful presidency. Reagan also attempted to fill the Secretary of State position with a person he believed was competent and who he did not know well. His first pick was Alexander Haig, Jr., who on paper looked like he was perfect for the job. That pick ended up being a disappointment, and as a result, Haig only lasted in office for 18 months. Haig was replaced with George Schultz. Schultz also did not have much of a relationship with Reagan before he was nominated, but he had a background that suggested he would be excellent at the job and indeed he was.

Reagan also appointed good friends: William French Smith as Attorney General, Edwin Meese as his chief policy advisor who managed the cabinet, and Charles Wick as Director of United States Information Agency. Reagan correctly believed that these appointees would stand by him when political trouble came. Unfortunately, Wick – who had been a fundraiser for Reagan – did not have the appropriate expertise to do the job and is widely considered to have performed poorly in that role. Yet, Reagan stuck with him through both terms of his presidency.

Reagan's presidency illustrates a problem faced by all presidents. The problem is that any President only has so many friends and close associates that are competent to do the jobs that need to be filled. If a President limits his picks to those who will be loyal to him, he will pick people who won't be particularly good at their jobs. They will be responsible for creating bad policies and for poorly implementing good policies. This poor performance will damage the president's reputation.

Unfortunately, in his second administration President Trump seems to have only appointed people who he believes will be loyal to him. These people are responsible for several blunders that are hurting the administration's popularity. For example, Pete Hegseth is certainly loyal to Trump, but he does not have the experience necessary to do a good job as Secretary of Defense. Hegseth only reached the rank of Major in the army. This is not an exclusive club. Between 80 percent and 90 percent of Army Captains are promoted to Major, so Hegseth had no more experience than many others. In contrast, in his first term as President, Trump's first Secretary of Defense was James Mattis, who had been a four-star general in the Marine Corp, and as a result had ample experience to give him insights that he could use to make himself effective in the cabinet post.

Hegseth has made a lot of gaffes that have reflected poorly on the administration, gaffes that a more qualified person probably would not have made. But he is not the only one like this in the administration. Kristi Noem, the current director of Homeland Security, has no experience in law enforcement, which may have contributed to her missteps in managing ICE's operations in Minneapolis. These missteps are hurting the popularity of Republicans, so much so that a Democrat won a seat in the Texas State Senate in a district that is overwhelmingly Republican.

That Texas election may signal what is coming. If nothing changes, the Republicans will start losing an inordinate number of elections. Luckily for Republicans, Donald Trump evaluates his policies and appointees by looking at polls and at how the stock market responds to events and policy proclamations. So hopefully, when Trump sees his favorability rate decline in the polls, he will reverse course and start appointing more competent people to the government. In doing this, he would risk having administration officials who might be willing to criticize the President or his policies. But Trump's gain from bringing more competent people into his team is that these people are more likely to shoot down bad ideas before they are adopted, and these people are more likely to avoid mistakes in implementing policies. Trump would not have to rely on the stock market and polls to recognize bad policies after they are in effect; instead, he could use the advice of competent team members to refrain from ever adopting the bad policy in the first place.

It is possible that Trump is starting to accept the argument that I am making. He recently replaced Kristi Noem as the person in charge of ICE's Minneapolis surge with Tom Homan, a man who has spent his whole career in law enforcement. By all accounts, Homan is competent. And since he took over, things have settled down in Minneapolis. It is my hope that Trump's decision to give Homan control over a policy that is causing political damage to Republicans represents the beginning of a shift in how Trump will add to his team going forward as current team members leave government service. We will see what happens.

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