The nation is paying a lot of attention to President Obama’s Cabinet selections. The issues surrounding the choice of our nation’s leadership provide lessons for those of us in the transportation industry.

The model most cited to describe the new Cabinet is “Team of Rivals”—taken from Doris Kearns Goodwin’s book of the same title that describes how Abraham Lincoln called upon past rivals collectively to serve the nation in a time of crisis. Goodwin maintains that the success of this strategy was made possible by Lincoln’s ability to rise above past personal slights and his talent for getting along with men who detested each other because of clashing personalities and ideologies.

The new team in Washington also has been compared to the “best and the brightest”—the title of David Halberstam’s history of the Kennedy administration’s young, bright (and hubristic) team that ultimately mired the nation in the Vietnam War. New York Times columnist Frank Rich has noted that this term is frequently misused because it was originally “meant to strike a sardonic, not a flattering note.” Halberstam believed that the fatal flaw of the Kennedy team was “the difference between intelligence and wisdom, between the abstract quickness and verbal facility which the team exuded, and true wisdom, which is the product of hard-won, often bitter experience.”

To many observers, the Clinton administration was a modification of the best and the brightest. There was certainly no shortage of powerful minds, and discussion was encouraged. Unfortunately, Clinton lacked Lincoln’s ability to enforce discipline and bring policy discussions to a close. As a result, discussion never ended—it was understood that the last advocate to speak often carried the day with the president.

For the George W. Bush administration, some have suggested a theme of “The Price of Loyalty,” after the Ron Suskind book tracking the rise and fall of Treasury Secretary Paul O’Neill. Suskind maintains that evidence and discussion were stifled by predetermined and foregone political conclusions. O’Neill contrasts his Nixon administration experience—where “Brandeis briefs” were prepared by the Office of Management and Budget to thoroughly analyze opposing arguments—to the Bush administration practice of scripting Cabinet meetings to adopt a policy that already had been determined.

The “team of rivals” is not a model frequently seen in business—let alone in the transportation industry. Unsuccessful rivals for chief executives frequently depart—voluntarily or not—once succession paths have been established. There may be a good reason for that. When Ron Conway became president of CSX Transportation, his vanquished rival, Pete Carpenter, was allowed to remain. Many believe that Conway’s subsequent departure was the result of undermining efforts undertaken by Carpenter and his allies.

The “best and the brightest” model sometimes seems antithetical to the transportation industry, which is steeped in tradition and career advancement through the ranks. In fact, as a result of the transportation industry’s personnel model, many companies have experienced catastrophic results, ranging from severe cultural conflict (e.g., the strategic planning group in early Conrail days) or extreme corporate damage (e.g., McKinsey’s repeated reorganizations at Burlington Northern prior to its merger with Santa Fe.) In both cases, the organization rejected a talent influx that was not consistent with its culture and institutional memory.

The lesson is that loyalty in and of itself is not bad. The problem is when loyalty to an organization is sacrificed to honor loyalty to an individual. Usually, such a hierarchy can cause an entire organization to suffer as employees try to prove their loyalty—and the disloyalty of others.

Early in my career, I ran the gamut of these models in about three years. A business reorganization started with planning by the “best and the brightest” and evolved into a management structure reminiscent of the “team of rivals.” Ultimately, the president succumbed to the personal loyalty model and hired managers who had previously worked for him at other companies (two of which had gone bankrupt). Without realistic management, the organization disintegrated.

It is rare for management to adhere to a single management structure. There usually exists a mix of the three—with varying degrees of success. Regardless of whether we speak of the public or private sector, the optimal result is when people are working for the good of the organization. Our nation (and industry) require no less in the trying days ahead.

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