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Mission is Possible Presidential Transition Mini-Series

Episode 6: Anne Witkowsky, The Importance of Strong Leadership

SASHA: Welcome back to Mission is Possible. I am Sasha O'Connell and I am thrilled to be introducing this miniseries of the Mission is Possible podcast, a joint project between Guidehouse and American University. This spin off series dives into the world of Presidential transitions and explores what can be expected inside the agencies during this timeframe and how best to prepare for success by talking with the folks who have been there. Thank you for tuning in, and please enjoy.

On this episode, we are pleased to welcome Patricia Cogswell as a host. Patty is a Strategic Advisor for Guidehouse's National Security Segment, having recently retired as Deputy Administrator to the TSA. Before the election, Patty sat down with Anne Witkowsky, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Stability and Humanitarian Affairs. In this episode they discuss Anne's experiences with Presidential Transitions both inside as a federal employee, and in her work adjacent to the government.

PATTY: Anne, I'd like to start by welcoming you to the podcast and thank you for joining us here today. Can I ask you to just start us off by summarizing your career for us, and in particular highlighting some of the roles you've had during presidential transition periods?

ANNE: Sure. First of all, thank you for having me, Patty. I'm really excited to be doing this podcast today. I think the first point that I want to make for the purposes of this podcast is that I've been in both career and political positions. I served in the government for about 12 years in the civil service, starting in the Defense Department. I left for a number of years and later returned to serve in non-career positions, as part of the Obama administration. I started out my career as a Presidential Management Intern. That's a great program that after two years of service allows one to take a permanent career position in the US Government.

I started in the Reagan Administration in the Defense Department, was there when Bush won the election. And then when Clinton won later in 1992, that's two transitions, three administrations. Now I was detailed to the NSC staff at the White House at the very beginning of the Clinton Administration and was there to nearly the end of the second Clinton term. I left the government before the end of the Clinton Administration, and then returned much later, about a year into the Obama Administration, first to serve at the State Department and then at the Defense Department, staying nearly until the end of the second Obama term. So I've seen a lot of presidents and been in government in a number of different phases related to transitions.

PATTY: Very, very helpful. Honing right in on that experience of the NSC, in our prior interview with Michael Daniels, he noted his experience in joining the NSC and having a clean slate as all of the previous information and files were archived at the end of one administration prior to the start of the next one. And he noted that that meant there was not a lot of existing infrastructure

as a result when he arrived. Can you describe what that was like for you? How was that experience of trying to build from scratch?

ANNE: Right. It was exhilarating to join the NSC staff in the first place. And it was also a little terrifying. We started the week after President Clinton's inauguration. It was very early in my career. I'd only been in government for a few years. There was a new president from a new generation, the boomer generation, with a new outlook, and it was all very exciting, but in the newness, there was this handoff process that was so very different than anything one would be likely to encounter in one of the national security agencies. First of all, the NSC staff had practically all turned over with a couple of exceptions. Only the administrative support staff for the most part remained behind. And we leaned on them for everything that was supposed to work. The templates for the memos, how to get in and out of the building, filing rules. I was considered one of the fortunate ones because the person I was replacing did a one-week handoff with me, but really there was little formal or even informal preparation. And that's the tradition on the NSC staff. Essentially, the philosophy was and is, if you're good enough, experienced enough to be hired for the NSC staff, you'll figure it out. And as you know, Patty, there's some truth in that. And I had great leadership on the NSC staff, as I know you did, but there's also room for improvement. Then there are the documents which Michael Daniels talked about. There's a legal requirement when an administration leaves office that all the documents have to be moved and taken to the national archives. Some of them end up in presidential libraries and that's really great for preserving history, but it's really tough for a new person coming in. I basically had almost no written records of anything that had happened even a couple of days before I arrived, people in the agencies had those that I didn't. Now, there is a set of documents that is retained and those are presidential decision memos or executive orders. And that's an important piece of continuity.

But the day to day is shipped off to the archives. Now there's a lot that's been put into place since I served on the NSC staff that I know requires a greater amount of transition handoff and that's important for continuity. But I do think that someone in my position today coming into the NSC staff could have an experience that wasn't too different from the one that I had so many years ago. So what I have to say about that is, while it's great to have a lot of confidence placed in individuals who are hired for those NSC staff positions - and people do figure it out, as we did - it would be so beneficial to give new NSC staff some training, some understanding of their roles and responsibilities, what's expected of them, a couple of days to absorb best practices from past NSC staff, lessons learned to absorb the character of a new national security advisor and how he or she wants the process to serve the President.

I'm so passionate about this because these NSC staff positions are so vitally important to making the whole inter-agency system work well. And it seems to me, there should be a little more preparation for new staff. Whether anything can be done about the documents is probably a question for the lawyers (laughs), but the more continuity the better, and just the final point on

this, getting a good White House process into place can be such an important aspect of good decision-making and good implementation of those decisions.

PATTY: Thank you, Anne. And I just echo everything you said. I mean compare and contrast my experience, I was really fortunate that although I didn't have a transition with my immediate predecessor in my position, I had a full team still in place reporting to me who could explain what the various systems meant and how do we do packages here, and what is the process to get approval on things? In a way that you had to learn kind of by osmosis as you did trial and error, or as the new leadership told you, I at least got to come in at a time when much of that was regularly already in place.

I also had the benefit of having been on the agency side, receiving a number of the packages from the people who were now my team (laughs). So I knew kind of what I would expect as someone in the agency receiving a product. I can only imagine what it was like for you trying to form this new team with this new inter agency group that had a lot of expectations for you.

If I can turn next to spend just a few minutes talking a little bit about how during your tenure, you noted you had the opportunity to experience both political transitions as both a career civil service official and as a political appointee. Maybe talk a little bit about your time as a senior career civil service official. What were some of the most important takeaways for you about how you thought about transitions?

ANNE: Right. So as a career person I would say from that perspective transitions are a little nerve wracking, right? There's a lot of anticipation. There's a period of hope that one's new boss will be high quality, good to work for, lots of speculation. Transition can be stressful for us as humans, right? Then the new team starts to arrive and civil service people who are the professionals in these agencies for the most part you know, like I did, we want to make a good impression on our new bosses. We want them to like us. We want them to respect our work. We want them to respect our views and listen to us. So that's how it feels. On the process side, there are lots of papers that are written to create briefing books for the incoming team, for the new bosses, and sometimes also contributions to their briefing books for their confirmation processes as well for their hearings.

So that's an opportunity to shape the views of the incoming team and to let them know what we know. There's also a process that is very common when there's a transition from one administration to another. Those are policy reviews. It would be natural for new teams coming in to want to have a look at what's there: what's been done, what should stay the same, what should change?

On top of the day-to-day work that a career person would have simply to carry out the duties that are already underway. There's often this slurry of policy reviews and papers that they're asked to engage in as well. I would say my experience was very positive when we transitioned

for example from Reagan to Bush in the Pentagon, the Bush team brought in very serious and very kind professionals and we learned a lot from them.

PATTY: As with some of the others we have interviewed on this podcast, you chose to accept a transition to a political appointment at a certain stage in your career. Can you talk with us about how you approached the decision to make the transition? What factors did you take into account?

ANNE: Yeah, another really good question.I'd been out of the government for a number of years for most of that time at CSIS, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, which is a major nonpartisan think tank, when a colleague of mine called to see if I'd be interested in joining his team in what was then a counter-terrorism office reporting directly to the Secretary of State. I have to say, I pretty much jumped at the opportunity.

It only took me a few days to say yes. My principle consideration, to your question, was first about the person who wanted to hire me. This happened to be a friend for whom I have deep respect, and then second around the role I was being hired for which I knew something about, because I knew the person who was in it at the time, and it was very appealing to me. Since I'd given up my career status at the end of the Clinton administration by leaving, I had nothing to lose and really only to gain by essentially becoming part of the Obama team which I was super excited to do. So the checklist I went through was work for this person? Yes, absolutely. Take this job? Yes, absolutely. Work for President Obama? Yes, absolutely.

PATTY: Turning to your time at State working on counter-terrorism issues, you've noted that the focus and attention in terms of priority changed during your tenure. Could you speak a bit on your experience with the shifting priorities after a president takes office or as policy goals evolve between terms in response to outside factors?

ANNE: Yes, definitely. Presidents come into office with a set of objectives that they want to accomplish. That's really important. As I said we do these policy reviews at the beginning of an administration and to try to set the direction over time for that administration, for that particular area, and set of policy goals. Those reviews can be conducted of course, along the way as well, which is really important. But so often, in my experience, a crisis will come along to interrupt that set of directions or priorities.

And I think it's important for people to remember that the urgent sometimes takes over the immediate fact all too often that is the case. So one example of my experience was what we called the Christmas bomber, or the attempt to take down of the Northwest Flight over or near Detroit on Christmas day in 2009.

Fortunately the bombing attempt was unsuccessful, but the incident was a real wake up call for President Obama and his counterterrorism team. I was in the Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism at the State Department at the time and let's just say that counterterrorism and aviation security started to take a lot more time on the President's agenda very fast. The senior leadership became personally engaged in figuring out what steps to take in the aftermath of that incident which was really the first near successful attempt to take a plane down since, since 9/11.

In the event that there is a Biden presidency, the immediate crisis would be the COVID-19 response and recovery, so that's something that they will have to contend with. Priority shifting just in general happens and a point I want to make about that is leading a team through these crisis periods is hard and vitally important.

It's really difficult to successfully manage through a type of crisis that one has not previously encountered before. That's where really effective leadership comes in. It's also super rewarding when we arrive at solutions at the other end that everyone can buy into and that are effective. And I've been really proud to be part of more than one of those periods.

Not only I would say through the period of improving our aviation security yet again in that early part of the Obama administration, working with our friends and allies to do that as well, but much later in the Ebola response where we encountered a kind of crisis that we hadn't previously encountered, a health crisis. We found a way through that was able to help the West Africans in a way that bent the curve over the disease and essentially brought the spread of Ebola back to zero in the region of West Africa.

PATTY: Now, thank you for raising the shifting priorities around the 12/25 attempted bombing back in 2009. As you know, that is part of the reason I ended up at the NSC was because of all the work following on the relook at the watch listing process as a result. And that was actually part of the reason you and I ended up spending so much time together, because as part of that, we rethought what we wanted to have in terms of some of our relationships around information sharing with critical allies around the world, as you very accurately stated. It’s not that we didn't have an interest in those things happening, but that wasn't necessarily going to be happening right at that time, absent that kind of forcing event that switched the priority well to the left in terms of how quickly we needed to take it on.

One of the other items you also highlighted was the transition of State CT from an office reporting to the Secretary of State, to its own bureau at the State Department. That is not only an important accomplishment, but something that doesn't happen all that frequently. Can you talk a little bit about some of the challenges and successes you experienced?

ANNE: Yeah. I was really proud to be part of that process because I believed that the State Department's contributions to the counterterrorism agenda are so important and at that time that its resources needed to be more robust. So what happened was during the course of my tenure in the CT Bureau, the Counterterrorism Bureau at the State Department, we matured our offices a great deal, in terms of setting out an agenda, a strategy, and then building out the number of people that we needed to achieve our goals as against that strategy.

So when the State Department's Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development View was underway, a few years into my tenure in the department, the situation was really right for the decision to make the office a Bureau, which in State Department parlance means more stability over the long term and a corresponding improvement in recruiting people and in just a greater status in the department overall.

Now I just want to be clear, I did not lead this effort. This effort was led by our ambassador at large for counterterrorism and his incredible principal deputy at the time. But I was in one of the four offices, and I'm proud to say that I was part of the process. We set some ambitious goals for ourselves. I thought the people that we needed to carry out those goals, and we had really great support from our leadership. My one fourth part was a key component of the maturing process that helped to get us that Bureau status in which of course is still in place today.

PATTY: Shifting topics to your time outside of government, while you were with CSIS, you were asked by government leadership to lead strategic program reviews, bringing in outside experts to provide advice to the agency. What was it like to do that type of work? How did that change your working relationships with the employees inside the agency?

ANNE: Well, first of all, it can be very freeing to work on a problem outside of government (laughs), without the constraints of the daily inbox and the multitude of players with whom one needs to work, to bring along a new idea. So to me, it's very simple. The key is to listen. I worked on two large reports that the CSIS did for government agencies. One was for the Department of Energy, one for the Department of State. For both of those projects, we spent a lot of time listening to people in those agencies talk about their concerns and offer us solutions. And some of the best ideas for both those reports came from people within those agencies.

I would say in both those cases, I was lucky to work with incredible individuals who had served at really high levels in both of those departments. They gave us stellar guidance on the direction of the report and how to make use of the ideas of that we had heard from within. And the point about this is that people inside the agencies often have a clear vision of how to sort through what needs to be changed, but they don't necessarily have the tools to do that. That's how

these outside studies can be really valuable because they create a picture of what needs to be done. Then oftentimes the studies are structured so that high level individuals are involved with them and have a voice in speaking back to the leadership of the folks in the department to advise them on what we found and what's a good way forward.

PATTY: I find it also gives a lot of weight to the recommendations as well, where, although you would like to believe that people always listen to the people who live and work in an agency every day, that perhaps they actually understand their problems pretty well, sometimes it takes that outside voice to get the attention of Congress or some of the other constituencies who need to weigh in and agree to a direction and where you can have great officials such as yourself pull all those pieces together. I'm sure that went a long way in helping weight those recommendations and ensuring that they were able to get the attention and time they deserve towards implementation.

Looking across your career, I'm sure you've seen instances where ground has been lost on important initiatives during transitions, in terms of continuity and sustainability. Do you have thoughts on how career and political staff can ensure that important activities continue to completion across transitions?

ANNE: Yeah. First of all, for people who haven't had experience in the government, I think it's important to remember that there is a lot more continuity across administrations on so many national security issues than sometimes the headlines lead us to believe. So a lot of time this policy development and implementation is about passing the baton from one person to another. One person gets the baton, runs really fast, runs really hard and then passes it to the next person. So with that, policymaking is, getting to your point, it's a team sport, meaning that it takes a team to move it forward. It takes leadership. In the best of all possible worlds, the team experience extends across agencies. And I think I had a chance to work with you, Patty, on a couple of issues where we really had under your leadership and the NSC staff, a great team experience where agencies were pulling together. And that's really the best of all possible worlds.

So continuity can happen when the members of the team are invested. I was involved in one really great example of an issue where we began work in the Office of the Secretary of Defense for policy just before I left. It was led by one of the very best civilians I've ever worked with, one of the very best military officers I've ever worked with and we were trying to understand how to evolve our policy on stability operations after Afghanistan, after Iraq. What was it going to look like going forward? We knew that it required some adjustment and change and quite a bit of time to really think through what needed to come next. So we began that work when I was a Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense in OSD policy.

We spent months and months doing consultations, looking in particular at Department of Defense Directive, which was the vehicle through which were going to be making the policy changes on this particular issue. We began the work before I left, but the work had not been completed at the end of my time there, and it continued under the leadership of my team. And also their initiative was extended to a conversation with the State Department and USAID and, much to my great pride and delight, about a few months, maybe a little bit more, into the next administration.

In the Trump administration not only was the directive signed out, but in addition, there had been an agreed policy as between the State Department and USAID signed out at the very highest levels on what our stabilization policy would look like going forward. And I think that's a great example of where there can be continuity optimization and that doesn't always happen. Obviously, there are swings and those are challenging, but to the extent that the vast majority of the work that goes on in the national security community does require continuity, having the teams invested and engaged and understanding what needs to happen to move a policy forward is absolutely the key.

PATTY: And just to continue on that point, I found it doesn't, and especially in the national security space, it's not actually solely about the transition from one political party to another. It can just be the swap out of individual people in different positions. My experience during the George W. Bush administration from the first four years to the second four years, there was such a turnover in the leadership at the Department of Homeland Security that we rethought a lot about how the organization was structured, how decisions were made, what some of the priorities were.

I actually found my job changed more than in fact it did in my role at screening coordination office, going from Bush to Obama. So it can be less about the change of the party and more just about other factors such as in my case, the department being a certain number of years old, and they decided to relook at our structure.

ANNE: Absolutely, absolutely. And my opportunity coming into the defense department was midstream in the Obama administration sometime into the second term. And there was some change and there was pins the pop and our leadership, and that presented an opportunity. Just as you said to move into new directions. And I think that's another point as well, right? I mean change is good. Change is good. It can be hard, but it's good. It's important to understand when situations around us have changed and that our policies need to adjust accordingly.

And sometimes that can be hard to do without a change in leadership because we, as humans continue to move forward in the way that we have been. So I think we need to look at transitions

in a variety of dimensions, as you've said, and also in ways that can understand where they can really be, where they can be positive to the US Government.

PATTY: As a political appointee, you were tasked with leading a team of career officials. Can you speak about some of the challenges of that role from a leadership perspective? Do you have any advice for appointees?

ANNE: Right. That's a very important question because leadership is such a key element of being successful in senior positions in the government. Remember I talked about what it was like to be a career person weighing political leadership? Now as I moved into a position where I was being brought in under political leadership, the shoe of my experience was on the other foot. So as much as I focused on the substance of our work, I believe then, as I do now, that success is a product of the team is the product of good teamwork, career officials. This is something I really want to say, career officials want to succeed. As a leader, for the most part, if they have good leadership, if they are engaged in creating the direction of the team to office on the issue set, if one provides helpful guidance to them in doing so, shows some respect, and lets the career team do their job, that can be extremely powerful.

These are deeply experienced knowledgeable individuals, whether in the civil service foreign service or incredible military officers and they're very committed and dedicated to their work. I've never met a more dedicated group of people in any of those communities. So conditions are exciting, but they're also very stressful. The team wants a leader with whom they clicked. And as a leader, I want to build their trust and confidence in me.

I want respect and let's say we have, as I mentioned, civil service foreign service officers and a variety of other types of hires on my team at the Defense Department there were civil service folks, military officers and contractors on my team, lots of talent in both places. In other words, though, a mix of cultures, a mix of tribe, right? Cultures and backgrounds. And so there are lots of challenges in leadership and one of them can be working within these very, very different cultures and ensuring that the team is moving together in the direction where we want it to go.

And the hardest part of that I think is building trust and mutual respect so that each member of the team is comfortable leading in their particular area, but toward a common set of objectives. Despite the challenges of bringing together different parts of the government, people who come up through the government in different ways, also bringing them together to work can be very powerful because they have different experiences. They have different talents; they have different training. And I benefited from everything that they brought to the table.

Now, let's be honest with ourselves sometimes when there's a change, people can be unhappy with the new leadership and with the new directions under a new leader. And that happens, and it happened in my experience. And there's nothing wrong with that. Sometimes the best outcome in those cases is for that person or those people to find another office or another place that they want to work. It's incumbent upon the leader for whom they are working at the time to help them do that.

But by and large, that's not the majority of experience. For me, it was one of opportunity to shape new directions, to utilize incredible resources of the people who are the career folks in the respective agencies in these different ways: foreign service, civil service, military officers. And it can be incredibly satisfying to build that team. In fact, I think the most satisfying part of my career was building a team that could work together, a team could accomplish bigger goals together than they could alone.

PATTY: No, I couldn't agree more. And I have to say, words to live by for most leaders. I would say early on in my career I moved around a lot, saw a lot of different leaders. I learned an awful lot about what I didn't like that I saw them do and what I really liked about what they did. And I know I have tried very much through my career to take all those good things I saw people do. And remember them. A lot of people come into new jobs and they think the first thing they should do is let's restructure the organization or rewrite the strategic plan.

And there's some willingness, I think, to look at some of those things in terms of it's the easy button and depending on when those were last done, maybe it is time to do it. But to your point, sometimes you just need to sit back and take stock and listen for a few minutes, figure out what internally people think the problems are, as well as whatever you heard externally before you arrived at that organization and then formulate a plan ahead that brings everybody together towards that goal.

ANNE: I agree with that completely Patty, and this is one of the reasons why it was so great to work with you because you clearly had absorbed those lessons. We so enjoyed being part of your team process when we were working on various transportation security issues when I was at the State Department. And to your point about the listening and taking stock, the other aspect of solution sets and change is that in so many ways they have to be sustained. They have to be organic. They have to be organic to the institution, organic to what is possible.

It's very important of course, to try to set new directions, to create that change, to push the boundaries a little bit, but in ways that take account of what's already in place. We often say that policymaking and policy shifts in the US government are more like an aircraft carrier. You can just move a little bit at a time. I think it's important for people to understand that as well, that these shifts happen a little bit at a time.

PATTY: Continuing on that thought of the culture of an organization, about how they learn and how they adapt, can vary significantly agency to agency. The State Department has a very different culture than defense, just coming into those new organizations and trying to take stock of, okay, if we want to try to turn this ship, how is it most likely to be well received, such that they take it on and not only just embrace what they're being asked to do, but build up from there, make it their own and really drive it strongly into even better direction.

ANNE: Yes, exactly right. It's really important to understand the cultures of these different institutions and they are different. I think one of the aspects that is a principle difference between let's say the State Department and the Defense Department and the cultures, is that the Defense Department doesn't really care for ambiguity. We need clarity in the Defense Department in order to carry out the policies and the programs of this very large institution.

I think one of the reasons for that is that the dominant culture of the Department of Defense is the military. Even though there are hundreds and thousands of civilians in our Defense Department and the department is run, of course, by civilians. On the State Department side, I think there's a greater tolerance for ambiguity. And that's because in diplomacy, ambiguity is valued, right?

You need a little flexibility in the field in order to be able to accomplish one's goals and work on really sensitive issues. So I think that is can be a feature of the culture in the State Department. That's important to understand, and in the inter-agency context where you work Patty, and where I work, bringing those two cultures together so that they can work effectively is an important challenge and part of what we like to do.

PATTY: Absolutely. And frankly, from my experience it really made the end result so much stronger to be able to have that melding of the minds across, as you highlighted, bringing the team together to accomplish something that no one entity or individual could have achieved on their own was the highlight of my career.

ANNE: Absolutely. And I like to say about that process. It's not as easy as it looks.

PATTY: Before we close for today. Do you have any advice you would give to career officials or new political appointees? Is there anything that you wish you had known before you went through one of these transitions that we haven't covered today?

ANNE: Yeah, that's a really important question because leadership is a key to being successful in senior positions in the government. I remember I talked about what it was like to be a career person accepting an incoming political team. And I think it's important for political appointees to understand that particular perspective. Transitions, as I said, they're exciting, they're also stressful. The incoming team, the career folks, want a leader with whom they can click. And as a leader, I'm coming into one of these positions, I want to build a trust and confidence of the team.

There's a need on both sides to understand the respective perspectives. I think I would say for political, the most important piece of advice I can say is take care of your people. The teams you are leading are key to your success. For career folks, be patient stay open-minded and do what you always do, which is to be professional.

And then I just like to say something about one thing that I'd wish I'd known about myself or a perspective that I'd had before I moved around to these different positions and that is about myself as a leader, especially earlier in my career. And I'd like to convey one of the best pieces of advice that I got when I was switching from the State Department to the Defense Department, in my taking on my last position that I held inside the government when I was headed to the Pentagon. It was from someone who'd served in a senior official position of women with whom I've worked over the years.

And she said, "get yourself a 360 assessment when you arrive." A 360 assessment for our listeners is an assessment that is conducted through a poll essentially. A series of questions that are given to the people one works with, and the people who work for someone. And I did that when I arrived at the Pentagon and I did it every year after that. It really helped me understand my strengths, my weak areas, and to work on those. And I hope it meant that the team was more effective as a result. There’s always room to improve one's leadership skills. So, my advice is to take advantage of the opportunities for feedback improvement, wherever you can, and it'll make everybody better.

PATTY: Thank you so much for joining us here today. We've really enjoyed the opportunity to talk with you.

CLOSING: Thank you so much for tuning in to this episode of the Mission is Possible Presidential Transition miniseries. If you are interested in hearing more, look out for new episodes in this special series, and check out our other episodes on Apple Podcasts, TuneIn, Stitcher, or on the Guidehouse website.