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Blago destroyed state personnel system

By Jim Nowlan

Ex-Gov. Rod Blagojevich has nearly destroyed the Illinois state government personnel “system” of more than 50,000 employees. The process limps along, dominated by unions, stripped of much of its experienced middle and upper-rung professionals, lacking management tools to reward and sanction, unattractive to a next generation of capable employees.

This is Blago’s most serious crime against Illinois. It will take a generation to restore what has been lost, according to insiders.

When I was an interim director of several state agencies during the early 1980s, the state personnel system comprised three layers:

- a top layer of political and professional employees in policymaking positions, who could be dismissed at any time;
- a deep middle layer of employees protected by civil service and rewarded by a merit compensation program, and last,
- a level of low-skilled employees, difficult to differentiate by civil service examination, who were protected by union membership.

Today, we have a dysfunctional “system” in which the middle layer has basically vanished and 97 percent of all state employees belong to unions, including agency personnel officers, prison wardens, and even some elite senior public service administrators (SPSAs).

Blago came to office in 2003, fired everybody he could, trashed state employees publicly, and struck fear into the hearts of many upper-level state employees that they were next on the chopping block. He brought in political appointees of a mediocre quality overall. He froze pay for civil service employees and gave union employees a 17 percent increase. Many union employees now earn much more than their non-union supervisors.

After a while, civil service employees saw the writing on the wall and began, in droves, to seek the protection of union membership.

With unions now basically in control, along with their fetish for promotion on the basis of seniority rather than merit, managers have lost their capacity to reward and sanction their employees. Long-time professionals who used to work unpaid extra hours alongside union employees see no benefit in the longer hours while the union employees earn overtime.

Soon, the motivation to excel among public and senior public service administrators wilted; many joined the unions as the only way to benefit from the “system.”

In addition, when Blago came into office, there was an early retirement program in place and many veteran employees, not liking what they were seeing, took the early way out. Similarly this spring, with pension changes in the air, more of the few remaining veterans retired.

One non-union manager I know reported that he tried to promote a deserving employee into a better job, but because of required union posting of job openings and seniority, the wrong person got the job.

Other factors have been at play as well. In the old days, an agency head could bury political appointees in non-essential jobs. With the US Supreme Court-ordered elimination of political hiring in the 1980s, political appointees had to be “moved up” to “policymaking positions,” which were exempt from the political ban. Often these political appointees are not up to the demanding executive positions they find themselves in.

Another restriction on hiring is the absolute military veterans’ preference. That is, if a veteran is in a group of applicants who received A grades on their exams, the veteran *must* be hired. I believe veterans should be given some preference in hiring, but not absolute preference.

What to do? Here are a couple recommendations from old hands in state government management.

- Prohibit union membership among senior management and supervisory personnel (which Gov. Quinn has tried to do, unsuccessfully).
- Reopen the merit compensation pay plan, so that employees know there is a positive career ladder available to them.
- Provide professional development opportunities for career management employees. With governor’s agency personnel down from 55,000 to 51,000 in just the past few years, those remaining need to benefit from the best management techniques.

Illinois state government is like any other \$60 billion enterprise operating during tough economic times. We need highly capable managers who can institute change in a system that provides direct health care and human services to more than three million of our 13 million residents.

Let us start the process of restoring what Rod Blagojevich has nearly destroyed.