

Do's: Smart Steps To Take When Entering Public Office

Overview

We listed the don'ts first because they can immediately get you into trouble. But just as important as what you don't do is what you actually do. Those first few months in office will often set the tone for your next four years. Here are a few "ought-to's" to help get you started on the right foot.

1. **Sign and file your oath of office.** Legally, you haven't taken office until your oath and bond is filed. And if you haven't legally taken office, you can't be paid for unbonded days worked. But don't file your bond before Jan. 1 of your new term -- it doesn't count until you're legally entitled to take office.

2. **Attend training.** There is training designed for every office. It is an excellent idea for new officials to get grounded in the workings of their office. Also, continuing education is required for most county officials.

3. **Get a copy of your department's budget.** Study it and find out how it works. Your budget indicates what resources you have to get the job done - it's your blueprint for action. In particular read any financial reports and budget work papers of your predecessor to see where you stand financially.

4. **Learn how county offices work together.** County government in Oklahoma was built on a system of check and balances and it's important to learn what each county office does and how it all works together. On one hand, each independent elected official is responsible for determining how his or her office is run. But in many instances, counties have a set of policies established by commissioners' court for areas such as in personnel decisions.

5. **Meet with staff.** Let them know who you are; learn about their jobs and tell them what you expect from them in performance. Many officials attempt to replace workers without even meeting with them. (This is on our don't list) In addition to setting clear expectations for employees, you can also learn a great deal on the workings of your office. Often, your employees will have clear insight on what works and what doesn't.

6. **Ask questions.** To get guidance on issues from your peers, we suggest that you call ACCO and request to speak to the ACCO staff member most qualified to answer your question

7. **Do your homework.** Has the idea been tried or suggested before? Is it legal? Will it infringe on the rights or responsibilities of another official or county department? Have you talked to them before announcing your initiative? Before jumping out on a limb with a new project or proposal, make sure you've researched it well.

8. **Network.** Build a network of people you can trust so that you have persons you can go to for advice or guidance. It's good to establish relationships with other office holders in your county and it's also beneficial to establish relationships with fellow office holders from different counties.

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9. **Sometimes, keep your opinions to yourself.** Although a confrontational attitude may have helped get you elected, it is probably a good idea not to alienate the people you will be working with over the next four years. Now that you are an official, remember that you are not just representing yourself but your office. So often go by that golden rule especially when it comes to fellow office holders, if you can't say something nice, say nothing at all.

10. **When in doubt, call your Association.** The Association of County Commissioners of Oklahoma is a valuable resource to you, and is there when you need us. Call 800-982-6212 with any questions you may have.