

17. Tom Bowen: The Campaign Trail – Project Management on the Run

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00:03 Tom Bowen: Most people vote the way I'm gonna buy a toaster. They don't think about it very much, they don't do it very often.

00:09 Kendall Lott: Imagine selling to a customer like that with two years leading up to the purchase.

00:14 TB: You just have one day to get everybody to go out there and express a preference that almost 99% of the time will not make a difference.

00:24 KL: We're talking politicians and the campaign managers that get them through election night.

00:28 TB: They are the product you're selling to the voters, their vision, their background, their hopes and dreams.

00:35 Speaker 3: From the Washington DC Chapter of the Project Management Institute, this is PM Point-of-View, the podcast that looks at project management from all the angles. Here's your host, Kendall Lott.

00:46 KL: Tom Bowen is a political communications and management professional. He was a staff assistant for Senator Barbara Boxer, a reporter for the National Journal with Senior Hotline Editor, Chuck Todd, a press aide to then State Senator, Barack Obama, and most recently, the Deputy Campaign Manager for Chicago Mayor, Rahm Emanuel. Tom has managed six political campaigns and is the principal of New Chicago Consulting, which specializes in management and communications for political and non-profit organizations. We had an in-depth Skype conversation about this intensely-personal yet very public project called Getting Your Candidate Elected.

01:25 TB: Democracy is largely an exercise in social engagement and expressing values, and you have to really understand what you're trying to sell people on, which is to go out there and speak out that they want a certain thing done. It is like running a business but it has a finite end and a specific purpose. So it is much more accurate to think of it as a very long-term and very intense project.

01:55 KL: I think the scope is pretty clear, "Get me elected." How do you start approaching the schedule and looking at the control of the interdependencies of the activities that you have to deal with?

02:06 TB: There's several things to, first, educate the candidate about. I think people that do my job, that do it responsibly, talk about the risks of engaging in the public sphere. There's a tremendous amount of scrutiny. There are interests that you may be challenging that are powerful.

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So when you seek office, you are, in theory here, taking this opportunity away from somebody else and someone will fight for it. So your competition is something I always try and get folks to consider. The very important schedule items are, number one; the rules of accessing the ballot. There was a story about Mayor Rahm Emanuel not being eligible for the ballot because he was serving in Washington, DC as the President's Chief of Staff even though he maintained a home in Chicago that had renters in it. The very important next item is to build a strong team. Campaigns are not won or lost by single people, they are won or lost by teams and they are lead by, number one, the candidate themselves. Campaigns tend to reflect their candidates and then the manager that is given responsibility for running the campaign.

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03:33 TB: The folks that make up teams and campaigns tend to be development or fund-raising, media consultants and the various different types of media consultants, digital media, television or traditional media, radio. Other members of the team are, what political people call, field. You need people on the ground, in communities, organizing those communities for the purpose of electing that candidate.

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04:11 TB: And then, the last part is what we have focused a lot more on in politics in the last 10 years because of the growth of spending related to it. We consider it operations but it's your real estate brokers, your accountants, your legal teams that handle things like human relations, staff agreements, confidentiality agreements. I have seen disparagement clauses enter political contracts for the first time.

04:44 KL: That's about the kiss and tell type of things?

04:46 TB: I've seen agreements that say that you will never write a book about your experience.

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04:55 KL: How far do you start... As the campaign manager, where would they get that call to start educating the client and to start building that team?

05:03 TB: People start thinking about these races many, many years in advance but very seldomly do you see anybody acting beyond a two-year timeline before an election.

05:16 KL: Who are your stakeholders? Who actually are you trying to please or accommodate?

05:22 TB: The candidate is the ultimate boss. They are the decision-makers. It is their name on the ballot. And also, there are folks that we'll call "A kitchen cabinet," that are part of any candidate's life, a spouse, a sibling, a parent or a business colleague. They are competing interests and I think good candidates tend to have folks that keep them grounded, who are in real life, and then also, have foosts firmly in the what you need to do in order to be elected camp, which is a manager, staffers, consultants, donors, special interest groups, like business groups or labor groups. All of these different people have a say, if you will, in how a plan will develop and how it's executed.

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06:21 TB: A typical campaign budget is about 80% media. They gobble up the largest piece of that pie. They are often important voices in what the campaign plan is going to say, and their...

06:37 KL: Make sure I understood that. Because media takes 80% of the budget, the media specialists tend to be a key sponsor in what's happening for a plan design to be a campaign manager?

06:46 TB: Yes. Absolutely. Since so much money is being spent there, well, of course, that media consultant might have an important voice on the team. And I think good managers balance those concerns out with their own perspective that they are trying to accomplish.

07:04 KL: Is your candidate, like you said, your boss, your sponsor, like the person that you're trying to just satisfy, or are they the product?

07:14 TB: They're actually all of it. From the manager standpoint, they are your sponsor. At the same time, they are also the product you're selling to the voters, their vision, their background, their hopes and dreams.

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07:31 KL: So from your perspective as being the campaign manager, are you more coordinating some of these key stakeholders and team members or are you actually getting their input and then you're actually designing what they need to do? How much are you a project coordinator versus the project manager in that context?

07:48 TB: You really do coordinate the members of the team to do what they do best. Obviously, a manager's best quality is leading a team, hiring a team, motivating a team.

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08:06 KL: So, from a campaign manager's perspective, where is risk?

08:11 TB: There are tons of risks. Is the development or fund-raising process going well? Are you meeting your targets and goals? Are you speaking to enough voters with your staff? Is your candidate prepared to answer the questions? The average person who runs for a federal office has very, very limited experience in dealing with foreign affairs and a lot of voters don't tend to make decisions that way, but if you badly flub a question about foreign affairs, the conclusion the voter will draw is not that you are unaware of the ruler of Saudi Arabia, it's that you're unprepared to do the job, and I do not want you voting on sending my sons or daughters to war if you're not prepared for that vote.

08:58 TB: I see this happen all the time. Often, there are many advisors and many team members and they don't have the perspective you do, and they may think of something as extremely urgent to tell the candidate but you have to be able to, maybe, stop that from happening that day because some people, whoever tells them something last, that is what their going to retain as far as how an argument is gonna be made. And if you were walking into a television debate that night, someone

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may just say, "Hey, don't forget to mention that..." That's the last thing they hear and that's not part of the plan. And there's nothing you can do. So you can't educate every family member to be on the plan for the debate schedule, but you have to keep the candidate away from, maybe, that uncle that gives advice when they're not cognizant of kind of how elections work. I think any good manager in politics should have control of the checkbook, and that is a very powerful way to settle differences, is the decision is yours and you spend the money. I think there's also extremely good value in having an audit type system, which is usually a campaign's treasurer, so that someone is watching over you.

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10:20 KL: So all projects have to watch how fast they burn through the money. I assume a couple of things, that finances are particularly tricky in this case, that they're very exposed?

10:29 TB: Let me start with the burn rate, which this is an extremely unique thing and extremely nerve-racking thing, and something that probably most folks listening to this haven't experienced before. Your burn rate gets extremely high the closer you get to the election. It essentially goes to 100%. Your goal is to spend every dime you have. The life cycle burn rate here is to, essentially, keep it as low as humanly possible to really live on shoestrings and to not make some sort of mistake on the spending side that creates difficulty in executing your plan. The other thing I'd like to point out about this is your revenue, essentially, comes from the generosity of politically-savvy and ideological people and there's about 1% of the country that give in political campaigns. So those candidates spend 80% to 90% of their time not, actually, talking to voters or learning about issues. They spend it fund-raising.

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11:44 KL: Your budget is actually part of the potential story here, right?

11:47 TB: Yes.

11:47 KL: They have to show that they're well-funded, and you also, of course, can't have some scandal, if you will.

11:52 TB: Well, and one thing we haven't talked a lot about is there is also somebody out there who wants this same office who is picking at everything you do and trying to create a negative story about it, and budgeting is a frequent tactic. It is a well-known technique to review the campaign finance filings of a candidate. That's a potential area of attack.

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12:25 KL: So, it's election night. You've spent the money right up to the last minute. The project is about to terminate. You're about to get the answer whether or not you met the scope requirements, which was produce a winning candidate. So how much are you still managing through election night and into the next day? When does the project really end?

12:45 TB: Election day is always fairly easy because everything's done. You don't have anything to do. All the wheels are already set in motion.

12:55 KL: Well, so when did you get done? The day before? The week before?

12:58 TB: Yeah, usually the couple days beforehand. Election day, you don't have, actually, a lot to do. It's extremely nerve-wracking because you've spent 18 months to two years, and if you've been working with somebody for a very long time, maybe years and years, for them to reach this new pinnacle is exhilarating if you've been successful. It's powerful, even when you lose, in how much pain it can be. But the next day, you have to shut down the campaign, win or lose. Campaigns are legal structures. They're non-profit corporations. So you have work to do with the IRS and with your state and local government. You have rent to pay. You have phones that have been activated or deactivated. You usually hold some resources back from the end just for close down costs. But measuring that, 'cause you really... Once the campaign is over, no one else is gonna give you any money if you've lost. You have to be pretty efficient in how quickly you stop spending money and you better hope you don't have a recount. That could be a whole new challenge. So you'll have a sense of what's going on, whether you're close to winning, you're not going to win or stuff like that. So that will help you budget better. But usually, within the first seven to 30 days of the campaign's ending from election day, that's the time period where you, essentially, shut everything down.

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14:31 KL: How much of this is documented? Your schedule, key milestones, key expenditure rates and targets for expenditures? Is this documented ahead of time or is it very organic?

14:42 TB: It is much more documented now than it has ever been and every new election cycle it is becoming more documented. There is a much bigger professional industry around this now than there ever has been. There's more money in politics than there ever has been. There's more money in government relations and lobbying. 25 years ago, much more often, these were personal friends or people who had local vested interest. There is just huge networks of us now, who have managed several races, work in this industry, and that's been a result of the growth of funding in it. In 2008, the Obama and McCain campaigns maybe spent \$300 million and \$500 million. In 2012, both the Obama and Romney campaigns spent \$1 billion. And the projection in 2016 is that both the Democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton, and whoever the Republican nominee is will each spend \$2 billion and that there will probably be an additional two to maybe even \$5 billion more spent by advocates of each one, but the growth is just as exponential.

16:06 KL: With the growth of that in the more technical management aspects, I'm wondering if it's a growth area for project managers. Do you see a role for people with that kind of training to be inside campaigns now?

16:16 TB: There's a saying in campaigns, that what you're doing here is you're building an airplane as it's getting ready to take off. It's very chaotic. So there isn't always a lot of thought around good project management. And I think people, the more they do these sorts of things, and the more they are involved with, maybe, not working in them anymore, but advising people who are working in them going forward. There is a lot of thought around how to do this better and managing people and organizations well, I think it's enormously-important.

16:52 KL: And so, you're off now preparing to pick up the next set of candidates, perhaps?

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16:55 TB: I'm recruiting for the 2016 cycle. So if anyone is listening from Illinois and your thinking of running for office, my Twitter handle is thomascbowen and talk to me about running.

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17:10 KL: Special thanks to today's guest Tom Bowen, and a shout out to Patrick Hendrickson for introducing us to Tom. Our theme music was composed by Molly Flannery, used with permission. Post production performed at M Powered Strategies and technical and web support provided by Potomac Management Resources. I'm your host, Kendall Lott, and until next time, keep it in scope and get it done. This podcast is a Final Milestone Production and distributed by PMIWDC.