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Inside W.H., calls for shake-up

By: Glenn Thrush

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Some of the calls for a White House shake-up are now coming from inside the building.

Frustrated current and former West Wing staffers, speaking on condition of anonymity, told POLITICO they hoped Tuesday night's humbling losses would persuade President Barack Obama to pursue a much more sweeping fix than just the "natural" post-election churn of personnel his administration has insisted will take place.

Many of those changes are already being seriously considered, among them: replacing Political Director Patrick Gaspard with a former top aide to Rahm Emanuel; replacing deputy chief of staff Jim Messina, who is expected to move to Obama's 2012 campaign, with Legislative Affairs Director Phil Schiliro; and possibly giving White House energy czar Carol Browner expanded policy responsibilities.

But if Obama's critics are focusing on his agenda and messaging, many on his team are urging him to address what they see as a major organizational flaw: an amorphous, ill-defined chain of command in the West Wing that concentrates too much power in too few hands, hampering efficiency, accountability and communication.

"If there's still only five, 10 people making decisions, then we haven't learned our lesson from Tuesday," said one aide, who believes the problem starts with Obama's insistence on giving his senior advisers, Valerie Jarrett and David Axelrod, broadly sketched responsibilities.

But the issue isn't confined to the upper levels. Several Obama insiders pointed to a surplus of West Wingers who spin out ideas by the bushel — and a shortage of seasoned middle managers to execute and sell them.

"They've been here for two years; they need a more grown-up system," one former administration official said. "They've gone too horizontal."

Key Obama aides — including interim chief of staff Pete Rouse, who has been tasked with creating a new organizational plan, and press secretary Robert Gibbs, who is seeking to carve out a role beyond briefing reporters — have reportedly made that point directly to the president.

But it's not clear whether Obama, who ordered Rouse to conduct an institutional review of the West Wing, is ready to scrap a loose, comfortable system that allowed him to respond quickly to multiple crises for a more conventional executive organization.

No one expects Obama to immediately heed calls to conduct a major housecleaning — or inject fresh blood into the West Wing by bringing in outsiders or even a Republican or two, as former Sen. Tom Daschle, an Obama ally, has counseled.

White House officials maintain they will make gradual changes — and hope that the arrival of Obama's organization-building 2008 campaign manager, David Plouffe, sometime in early 2011 will provide the West Wing with more focus.

But Ken Duberstein, former chief of staff to President Ronald Reagan, said the White House needs to move much more quickly. "There's a window of six to nine months where serious governing can take place before people start looking at the [2012] primaries," he said.

Mike McCurry, President Bill Clinton's former press secretary, said Tuesday's results will usher in changes to Obama's day-to-day operations, whether he likes them or not.

"President Clinton had to submit to a lot more discipline and structure in his daily schedule," said McCurry, who was an aide to then-Secretary of State Warren Christopher during the Democrats' devastating two-house loss in the 1994 midterms.

We had "little calendars that had color codes on how [Clinton] was spending his time. ... Enjoying the solitude of the office is probably over [for Obama]," he added.

Obama has had weeks to brace for the worst, unlike Clinton, who was blindsided by the '94 results. But some of Obama's allies fear he will take Tuesday's results too much in stride. That perception was fueled by Axelrod, who told a gathering of Democrats earlier this week that he didn't interpret Tuesday's expected debacle as a rejection of the president.

"I'm not sure [Obama] gets it yet," said one person close to the president.

But Rouse apparently does. In recent weeks, he has solicited advice and detailed memos from key administration players and allies outside the White House, especially former White House Communications Director Anita Dunn.

The results, gleaned from insiders, are a range of plans to restructure Obama's policy, political, legislative affairs and communications operations.

No final decisions have been made. But Rouse — a quiet, meticulous organizer who inherited a chaotic system designed on the fly by Emanuel after Emanuel left the White House to run for mayor of Chicago — is determined to clarify lines of authority and wants

to assign more specific job descriptions to senior staff.

There are no plans to embark on a wholesale purge: The structural changes, if Obama signs off on them, are intended to dovetail with the anticipated departure of some personnel and reshuffling of a relatively small cast of Obama insiders.

"It's a combination of two things: natural attrition and changes that want to be made," another aide said. But "some people have done all they can here."

And many of the biggest West Wing moves were preloaded before Nov. 2, in part to avoid the appearance of a mass exodus — including the departures of Emanuel, Office of Management and Budget Chief Peter Orszag (himself a critic of the White House management structure), Council of Economic Advisers Chairwoman Christina Romer and National Economic Council Chairman Larry Summers.

Among the first post-election moves, according to people familiar with the planning, will be to move Gaspard, who has fallen out of favor, to another administration job or a position outside the White House.

The top candidate to replace him is said to be veteran House Democratic staffer Sean Sweeney, who served as Emanuel's chief of staff.

Messina, an Obama favorite who is said to be headed to Chicago next year with Axelrod to work on Obama's reelection effort, is likely to be replaced by Schiliro, though Schiliro won't inherit Messina's wide-ranging political portfolio.

The legislative affairs office — a pre-midterm powerhouse that pushed through the stimulus, regulatory reform and health care bills — will most likely be downsized to reflect Obama's curtailed agenda on the Hill.

But Schiliro, a former aide to Rep. Henry Waxman (D-Calif.), will pick up a crucial new assignment: In conjunction with White House counsel Bob Bauer, he's expected to defend Obama against an anticipated wave of GOP hearings and investigations spearheaded by the feared new chairman of the House Oversight Committee, California Rep. Darrell Issa.

Less clear is what Rouse and Obama have in store for the policy team — a group that becomes much more important now that any meaningful legislative action is shut down by House Republicans and a shrunken Senate majority.

In a flashback to the Clinton years, the administration will now be forced to rely on creative rule writing and new regulatory strategies to counter Republican obstruction on the Hill.

Several people familiar with the situation said that Browner, one of the few Clinton administration veterans to earn the president's trust — is being considered for a newly envisioned policy job.

Browner, known for her aggressive rule making when she was Environmental Protection Agency administrator, would supplant deputy chief of staff Mona Sutphen, who is expected to leave the administration sometime in 2011.

Melody Barnes, director of Obama's Domestic Policy Council, is also expected to take on

a greater role.

In the meantime, Rouse has quietly sought to change the culture inside the West Wing by enfranchising a wider circle of advisers than did Emanuel, who was prone to making spur-of-the-moment decisions consulting only a handful of trusted aides.

The changes are small but significant. Emanuel made many of his decisions at his signature 7:30 a.m. meeting in the chief of staff's office — and often used a larger 8:30 a.m. sit-down simply to issue marching orders.

Rouse, by contrast, seems to put more weight on the later meeting because it gives more junior staff an opportunity to take part in decision making, insiders say.

Amie Parnes and Abby Phillip contributed to this report.



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