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New management style likely with next N.C. governor

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RALEIGH — North Carolina will see not only get a new governor next year but, the candidates say, a new style of governing.

Gov. Mike Easley's remote management style is campaign fodder for Republican candidates who paint him as disengaged.

The two Democrats who want the job, while not mentioning Easley, join Republicans in promising accessibility and hands-on leadership.

Management experience has been an issue in a campaign in which the professional backgrounds of the major candidates vary widely. Some have legislative experience, while others have done most of their work in the private sector.

All candidates, invariably, tout their background as a reason to vote for them.

But no resume line will help predict a successful tour as governor, said Don Kettl, director of the Fels Institute of Government at the University of Pennsylvania.

"There is no one blueprint, no one mold that stamps out the most successful governors," he said. "The job of being governor is not really quite like any job anywhere else."

Republican Fred Smith and Democrat Richard Moore have made their management experience central points in their pitch to voters. Smith is head of a real estate development company and Moore has been state treasurer and a state agency head under former Gov. Jim Hunt.

Smith said a lesson he learned as a CEO is to hire the right people, hold them responsible for carrying out the stated mission and take responsibility for the results.

"I take responsibility 100 percent on whether we did well or we did bad," he said.

Moore said in his job as state treasurer, he's been an innovator in the way the office runs and interacts with retirees.

Moore has run a television ad on management, highlighting his record as treasurer and his chief opponent Lt. Gov. Beverly Perdue's late tax payments on a real estate development company she partly owns.

"There's no one else running for governor who has run an executive branch agency, and I think I've run them very well," he said.

Moore has had his stumbles as a manager, too.

In his early days as a manager in 1996, when Moore was head of the state Department of Crime Control and Public Safety, he was surprised to find that alcohol agents in the department had been having sex with women they were trying to arrest. Moore initially said that investigative technique "may have been appropriate under the circumstances."

Moore's response won him a swift rebuke from Hunt a day later.

Moore said he mistakenly relied on what his directors were telling him and has learned a lot about management since.

"One of the things I learned from that episode," he said, is "you do your own checking into things."

Smith said his experience running a housing development company and a road-building firm, which employ about 600 people collectively, help form the foundation of principles he'll bring to office.

Smith has had less success as a state senator from the minority party, with none of the positions he emphasized in the campaign becoming law.

As governor, Smith said, he'll be able to use persuasion in his dealings with the legislature, and if that doesn't work, he'll use the veto as a negotiating tool.

"If you're not successful through rational reasons and persuasion," he said, "then you have to move to where you have some authority."

But some private-sector management principles don't translate easily from business to government, experts said. Business chiefs who move to governors' suites often find frustration there because they have trouble working with legislatures, said Alan Rosenthal, a political science professor at Rutgers University who is researching a book on governors.

"Governors that seem to do best are the governors that come in steeped in legislative backgrounds" and have held leadership positions, he said. "The traditional route is to be in politics before running for governor."

Perdue has thinner management credentials than Moore or Smith, but she has the long political resume that includes eight years as lieutenant governor and 14 years in the Legislature.

She points to her efforts developing proposals on school nutrition, using a commission she leads, as evidence of her ability to use resources she has to change policies.

"I never have believed that leadership or results should be defined by the office," she said. "It's defined by the person who holds it."

Republican Bob Orr, a former state Supreme Court justice, discounts the notion that governors need to have experience as managers. Governors need to pick good managers, he said, not run everything themselves.

"You have to rely on good people, and you set the overall policies and overall operation for state government," Orr said.

Successful candidates for governor rarely come out of nowhere, said Kettl, the political scientist in Pennsylvania. "Being governor is not a starting job for anybody," he said.

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