

All the governor's men

Spitzer seen needing key adviser who can mend fences, build alliances in Albany

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A growing group of Democrats say the scandal over the use of state troopers to spy on Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno is symptomatic of Gov. Eliot Spitzer's reliance on a small group of advisers caught up in a win-at-all-costs mentality that dates back to his gubernatorial campaign.

Party members are calling for the governor to broaden his inner circle--virtually all of whom hail from the relentless world of legal prosecution and are Albany neophytes--by bringing in a second-in-command who understands the Legislature and can inject some collegiality into strained relationships with would-be supporters.

'Not particularly successful'

"The temperament and temperature coming out of the governor's office is something I've never seen, and it has not been particularly successful," says Assemblyman Keith Wright, who campaigned door-to-door for Mr. Spitzer in 1988 but who now feels shut out.

"If they had had more relationships, they would have more defenders now," Mr. Wright says.

Mr. Spitzer's spokeswoman says that no staff shake-up is planned. "The governor's team is in place," says Christine Anderson. "They have achieved great things for the state in a short seven months."

Other leaders, including President Bill Clinton and New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, have weathered very difficult first years in office. They grew while in office, and nobody rules out the possibility of that happening for someone as smart as Mr. Spitzer.

"We'll see how he changes his behavior now, after he's had his epiphany," says Douglas Muzzio, a political science professor at Baruch College.

"A little humility will help, and a lot more consultation and understanding. He needs less calling people out in their districts, and a lot less invective and vulgarity," Mr. Muzzio says.

Most Democrats won't speak on the record. Privately, elected officials and former campaign staff agree that there were early warnings signs that the Spitzer team could go too far.

A typical week at the campaign's Madison Avenue headquarters saw Mr. Spitzer sitting down daily or every other day with a chosen few. Richard Baum, who was then the attorney general's chief of staff, and campaign manager Ryan Toohey were present. Darren Dopp, communications chief for the AG's office in Albany, attended by speakerphone.

"In terms of information flow and planning, it was a closed shop," one campaign staffer says. "When [troopergate] broke, I could totally see how it happened. If you did something they didn't like, you were marked for a hit, and you were going down."

That approach has moved into the statehouse. "Even before this happened, we were hearing about complete bedlam in the governor's office," the staffer says. "Baum keeps everything close to the vest. People are always in the dark."

Mr. Baum, the secretary to the governor, leads one of two small cliques that have his ear. He consults with David Nocenti, a lawyer who moved over from the attorney general's office, and Sean Patrick Maloney, another lawyer and former Clinton aide.

The cliques

The second group consists of Budget Director Paul Francis and Lloyd Constantine, Mr. Spitzer's former law partner, who watches out for the governor's political future.

One Assembly Democrat says the experience of the inner circle members is simply too narrow.

"It's not a matter of not having enough voices--it's a matter of not having the right voices," the lawmaker says. "Anybody could have told [Mr. Spitzer] in January that it was a really bad idea to pick a fight with the Assembly Democrats [over who would succeed Alan Hevesi as comptroller], but he alienated a group that could be rallying to his side now."

No need to change

Mr. Spitzer's critics are off base, say defenders inside the governor's chamber.

They claim that Mr. Spitzer consults with a far broader network than just a few advisers. They also contend that his reform record on workers' compensation, school funding, health care and campaign finance proves that he can navigate the Legislature.

Such defenses lead people to wonder whether Mr. Spitzer really feels a need to change.

Gerald Benjamin, a dean and political scientist at the State University of New York at New Paltz, and an avid Spitzer fan, says that the governor may need to continue to stand aloof from Albany culture, rather than function smoothly within it, to bring about reform.

He agrees that the governor should soften his manner, however. "He needs to attack selectively and to stop personalizing things in an injudicious way," Mr. Benjamin says.

But, he adds, Mr. Spitzer's style "is embedded from a lifetime of success, and how much can you change that? It's a worry."