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DAILY NEWS, SUNDAY, DECEMBER 2, 2001

Mayor Mike's putting his ego on hold

In less than a month, it'll all be his.

At midnight Dec. 31, Mike Bloomberg will become New York's 108th mayor — and the problems and complexities he'll face will dwarf any he encountered in creating and building his multibillion-dollar media empire.

The mayoralty is a hard job in the best of times — and these are not the best of times. The city is facing a huge fiscal mess made worse by the necessity to rebuild after Sept. 11, and Bloomberg himself is getting a late start.

Few people, Bloomberg included, thought he would win. So unlike Mark Green, whose misplaced confidence led him to construct a transition apparatus a full month before Election Day, Bloomberg had done virtually no planning before the numbers improbably broke his way.

Still, Bloomberg has one big advantage. He knows money. And while Bloomberg admits the city's financial outlook is scary, he understands that revenue forecasts are often wide of the mark and plans to "spend a lot of time in Washington" making sure that New York gets the reconstruction funds it needs — and has been promised.

"We'll be okay," Bloomberg says softly — and that assurance seems less naive than if those words were uttered by a professional politician.

Just what doctor ordered

In a sense, then, the city may have lucked out. If a tough prosecutor was exactly what New York needed when Mayor Giuliani was elected, then a fiscal wiz is what it needs now — and it's hard to think of anyone who better fits that prescription than Bloomberg.

Another sign is also promising. In staffing his government, Bloomberg has already made one inspired decision. In picking Nat Leventhal to run his transition office, Bloomberg has chosen a former top deputy mayor to Ed Koch, a widely regarded technocrat with an encyclopedic knowledge of city government.

But Leventhal's penchant for methodical organization runs counter to Bloomberg's private-sector MO, and Leventhal's ultimate influence over the kind of government Bloomberg will fashion is an open question.

Bloomberg's phenomenally successful company has been run in a classic hub-and-spokes style. In many ways, Bloomberg L.P. is the antithesis of hierarchy. Titles and even walled-in offices are frowned upon, open communication is encouraged and all managers report directly to the man whose name is on the door.

"If I could," Bloomberg has said frequently since his election, "I'd have the entire city government in the same room. I want everyone to participate. I want to hear from everyone, and I want them to hear me. The downside is you get a lot of leaks [to the press], but that's how you encourage innovation and how you generate enthusiasm from the people who have to execute your policies."

Bloomberg knows the vast city government can't, as a whole, operate as his company does, but with his close personal staff at City Hall, he will likely replicate the loose structure that's helped him make billions.

As a calm, confident leader beholden to virtually no one because his campaign was financed out of his own pocket, Bloomberg will undoubtedly institute an open-door operation

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at City Hall — and stick with it unless and until it proves unwieldy.

Although he has yet to select any of his key assistants besides Raymond Kelly as New York's next top cop, we've already learned something quite valuable about our new mayor: To reduce polarization, Bloomberg can stow his sizable ego.

As the new chief has said in various ways since Nov. 6, victory is its own revenge, and at every moment in recent days when he could have strutted his stuff, Bloomberg has tacked in the opposite direction.

Indeed, each time Giuliani has struck at those who've offended him lately, his successor has winced.

The other day, the mayor slammed American Express for demanding a sizable city-provided security presence as the price for staying at its headquarters near the World Trade Center site. The mayor-elect calmly pointed out that he has talked to Amex's chief — and to Kelly — to try to accommodate the company's concerns. Bloomberg made it clear that the company's demands were nothing to get steamed about — and the dispute was resolved on Friday.

Similarly, Giuliani has said the teachers union's call for a 22% salary hike over the next two years would do "tremendous damage to the city." Bloomberg has so far only reiterated what he said during the campaign — that a raise of that size won't happen and that he "looks forward" to negotiating with the union.

A cynic would smile at those words, but Bloomberg clearly believes that a less confrontational style is beneficial. "I want to get things done," he says. "I'm not interested in waging ideological wars, not with anyone."

You can see that un-Giuliani-like stance in action in the words Bloomberg uses when discussing the city's public schools. Bloomberg's ambitious reform agenda includes two serious, and potentially controversial, changes.

First, he wants teacher training vastly improved. "In the private sector," he says, "people fight to take courses that can improve their skills. That mind-set is missing in the public school system, and we have to do something about that. The teachers have to get better, and I'm determined to help them."

Second, Bloomberg wants principals to have the authority to move teachers around within their schools so the best educators are doing the most important work rather than being sidelined to secondary administrative chores.

Both these vital changes will require the teachers union's agreement. Most everyone familiar with education blithely mouths the traditional term for such contractual shifts — givebacks. But not Bloomberg. "I call them improvements," he says, "because 'givebacks' implies that the teachers are losing something, but the teachers, too, want students to do better."

Entrenched forces

When he finally takes office, Bloomberg's cool optimism will be severely challenged. Sooner or later — and probably sooner — the new mayor will realize that many people and many organizations out only for themselves will view him as an obstacle to their desires. They'll want theirs at all costs — and the goodwill Bloomberg will have won through reasoned discourse won't save him from being trashed mercilessly.

Whether Bloomberg can stay calm in the face of those realities remains to be seen — but his comments and demeanor since his victory are a good start. Whether he knows it intuitively — or has come to know it — Bloomberg seems to understand that a little less Giuliani can go a long way toward bringing the city together and advancing the goals every sober person should want accomplished.

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