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Memos Play Central Role in Decision-Making at de Blasio's City Hall

By **J. David Goodman**

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At City Hall, the buck typically stops with the mayor. But in Mayor Bill de Blasio's administration, it does so in the form of a multipage, multisignature memorandum, replete with caveats.

Mr. de Blasio has relied upon "decision memos" — documents requiring the review and signatures of a dizzying array of top officials — for nearly every city endeavor that is likely to attract attention, and some that are not: a policy change, or an action that could bring about controversy, generate public interest or carry a substantial cost.

There have been memos on raising the minimum wage to \$15, the distribution of the anti-overdose drug naloxone, a new city-organized retirement savings plan and lead levels in water.

Before the memos can land on the mayor's desk, they require the signatures of at least eight top officials, including the first deputy mayor, Anthony E. Shorris; the Law Department, the mayor's counsel; the budget director; the press operation; the head of intergovernmental affairs; and any relevant deputy mayor.

If any of the officials happen to mark up the memos with thoughts and concerns, new versions and new rounds of signatures become necessary.

The memos are intended to help the mayor's office control high-level decision-making across the sprawling apparatus of New York City government.

They provide a look at the behind-the-scenes methods by which Mr. de Blasio — a Democrat steeped in Washington politics, but lacking in experience leading a large organization — has coped with the flood of information and demands flowing into his office.

The memos, a feature of the White House with roots at least as far back as the Carter administration, are also the most striking managerial innovation brought by Mr. de Blasio, who has faced criticism for the slow pace of his decision-making.

Joseph J. Lhota called Mr. de Blasio's memorandum process "way too bureaucratic."

Michael Kirby Smith for The New York Times



Some of the 86 memos issued since Mr. de Blasio took office in 2014 have taken months to get attention, creating what agency officials have perceived as a bottleneck at City Hall; a few have been lost as they made the rounds, current and former city officials said, and had to be resubmitted.

The memos are variously described by current and former administration officials as a necessity for the free flow of information and knowledge, and an impediment to quick action on decisions formerly handled by agencies or deputy mayors.

Mr. de Blasio's chief of staff, Tom Snyder, described the mayor's approach as "extremely granular, engaged, semi-Socratic."

According to the administration's template for the memos, the goal is to get input from all parties, including "external stakeholders" and "willing validators and anticipated detractors." The memos should "present necessary arguments, including the pros and cons" of each approach and "clearly identify the positions of relevant agencies and City Hall policy advisers."

A mayor, who like the head of any large organization faces myriad decisions, can benefit from a formalized process, though none before Mr. de Blasio had employed the memos.

"I don't know that it ever occurred to us to force things into a format," said Jay L. Kriegel, the chief of staff to Mayor John V. Lindsay, adding, "There's nothing wrong with it."

Joseph J. Lhota, a Republican who was deputy mayor to Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani, said that their administration had relied on daily morning meetings to debate policy and reach consensus, rather than on memos. "Everybody has a different approach to management," said Mr. Lhota,

who ran against Mr. de Blasio in 2013. “But this one,” he added, referring to Mr. de Blasio’s method, “is way too bureaucratic.”

Mr. Shorris said some government officials familiar with past administrations had objected to the rigid new process, arguing that it delayed action. Those complaints resonated with critics who have faulted Mr. de Blasio for his deliberative style, including when he managed Hillary Clinton’s campaign for the Senate in 2000.

Analysis and Policy Considerations

Outline alternative choices or approaches in order to inform the Mayor’s decision. Present necessary arguments, including both the pros and cons of each alternative approach and clearly identify the positions of relevant agencies and City Hall policy advisers.

An excerpt from a template used by the mayor’s staff to write decision memos.

But Mr. Shorris said that delaying action to reach better decisions was part of the design of the memo process. “It slows things down,” he said.

Elke Weber, the director of the Center for Decision Sciences at Columbia University, said the city’s memos struck her as “a little old-fashioned.”

“It seems like from a different era,” she said, “where people thought that decision makers are more rational than they are, or that they should be, and that just by structuring information better, you could arrive at better decisions.”

But Jennifer S. Lerner, a professor of decision science with the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, said the most important thing for any leader to have when making a decision was a fair representation of arguments on either side of a given issue.



Alicia Glen, the deputy mayor leading the proposed Brooklyn-Queens streetcar project.
Todd Heisler/The New York Times

“If you have an optimal process, the value of a memo is better than no memo because it forces a discipline, and there is accountability,” Professor Lerner said.

Other avenues certainly exist for Mr. de Blasio to take a course of action. For example, the process for creating the mayor’s proposed budget incorporates major and minor questions over spending and programs without the use of decision memos.

And on rare occasions, a large-scale project does not go through the decision-memo process, Mr. Snyder said. One example is the proposal for a streetcar line along the Brooklyn-Queens waterfront.

“There are lots of things that I talk to him about which are not lending themselves to a decision memo but are directions I need him to understand that we’re going,” said Alicia Glen, the deputy mayor spearheading the project. The memos, she added, “are usually about a specific thing we’re going to implement on a particular time frame” rather than a “big idea.”

But the decision memos have, for some current and former city officials, come to define the hands-on leadership of Mr. de Blasio. All but five of the 86 decision memos have been resolved, with the oldest pending decisions dating to December, City Hall officials said.

The administration has fine-tuned the practice; in January, the mayor’s office began using an online portal for the memos, ending the cumbersome paper process. And in recent months, as the administration has matured and as more decisions are being made in meetings, fewer memos have been circulated: From a peak of 11 a month last summer, there were just two memos in February.

But Mr. Snyder said they remained important. “The mayor, not infrequently, says, ‘I want a decision memo on that,’” he said this month, tapping on a table for emphasis. “Not 10 times a day, but it’s definitely part of the fabric of how we operate here.”

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