

Using a Transition Map to Navigate a New Presidency

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Many challenges confront new college or university presidents as they embark on a journey of both the heart and the mind. They must develop personal connections with diverse stakeholders, decide who is trustworthy, and absorb the institutional culture. They also must cope with the shadow of their predecessors, discover hidden problems, and acquire a large body of knowledge.

And the old saying that you only get one chance to make a first impression is especially true for the new president of a college or university. Take too long to establish your presence, and credibility is lost. Act too quickly, and you'll inevitably meet resistance and set off alarms.

Although strategies vary by personality and circumstance, a structured yet flexible "transition map" increases the probability of a long and successful trip.

Laying the Groundwork

Assessing Key Competencies.

Personal insight clears the path for a new president, so taking on a new position is the ideal time for an honest evaluation of strengths and weaknesses. Several particularly important questions need to be answered:

- How have I done things in the past, and is this an opportunity to do things differently?
- Do I possess particular strengths that I can translate into special contributions to the institution?
- Do I overuse certain strengths, to the point that they become problems?
- What really motivates me?
- What do I aspire to accomplish?

Close friends should be queried, as they are usually aware of our gifts as well as our flaws.

Also, a carefully conducted 360-degree feedback process can be especially valuable as one begins a presidency. With this process, formal surveys are distributed to prior supervisors, subordinates, peers, and other colleagues. The surveys are completed anonymously and returned to an independent third party, who presents a summary report to the surveys' subject. This anonymous feedback can help yield a balanced picture of oneself and provide direction for future personal development efforts.

Requesting a Learning Network. The new president should ask senior leadership to put together a "learning network"—a dozen or more individuals recognized for their integrity, openness, and institutional wisdom. This network should represent a wide range of perspectives so the new president can quickly grasp



the institution's culture and history, as well as the impending challenges. The network also serves to introduce the new president to the campus.

A new president should spend time on campus before starting full-time employment to meet one-on-one with members of the learning network and develop personal relationships with them. The members will then convey their initial impressions to their personal networks, shaping and molding early opinion and perception.

The new president should ask members of the learning network for the names of others to contact and should meet with other campus groups (faculty senate, administrative council, etc.) to share initial impressions and get feedback. This will round out the information stream for the new president.

Developing a Support Network. Having access to a support network is also crucial. No matter how accomplished one has been in other positions, the presidency is a completely different experience. Even a small group of

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trusted advisers can act as a support group during the transition process.

The support network differs from the learning network in two ways. First, its primary purpose is to give the new leader emotional support. Second, the support network should include both insiders and outsiders. The insiders, some of whom may also be members of the learning network, provide a measure of the campus “pulse” and offer advice from the perspective of active participants. The outsiders, who bear no partisan view of norms and culture, provide a more objective view.

Managing the Previous Leader’s Legacy. Many people recognize that following in the footsteps of a failed president is a difficult journey because of the morale issues that remain. Following a legend or star can be equally daunting. New leaders should develop strategies for dealing with either situation.

Comparisons with former leaders are inevitable, especially if they were well liked. A new president needs to become comfortable with this, developing diplomatic skills and a thick skin. The last thing people want to hear is, “I’m not President Smith, and I plan to do things my way” or “I’m a very different leader, and you’ll just have to get used to me.”

The new leader should make an overture to the outgoing president to establish a meaningful relationship before departure. Departing presidents can be a source of wisdom, counsel, and political goodwill.

Building Bridges to the Senior Team. As a new president is preparing for the role, others are apprehensive, excited, and full of questions. Because this is especially true for the president’s senior team, it is crucial to be proactive and create opportunities to give voice to their hopes

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and concerns. The new president should engage these key individuals in meaningful ways and build strong relationships as soon as possible.

One new president used an interesting approach to surface sensitive conversations. Before coming to campus, she asked her senior team to spend a day with a consultant who knew her well. The resulting discussions provided an opportunity for the senior team to ask questions, enabling them to better understand the new president and what they could expect from her. They also realized that the new president was willing to take risks and to be as transparent as possible, and that earned their respect and trust.

Once You’re on Campus

Building Trust. Trust is one of the most fragile yet enduring elements in organizational life. Without it, achieving anything meaningful is nearly impossible. Often a new president has to not only build individual trust, but also rebuild trust within the institution and among stakeholders.

One of the best ways to establish trust is through direct engagement. A senior leadership transition requires extensive face-to-face interaction and frequent meetings with all constituencies. This is not a time for e-mail pronouncements; the community needs to see their new leader in action.

New leaders should limit travel during the first year. In addition to being visible at campus events, they should meet often with small groups. Informally organized

around meals, these gatherings can be casual events where people feel comfortable asking about the new leader’s personal history, career path, values, and professional interests.

Retired faculty and administrators should be included. This group is a wellspring of information about institutional history, organizational context, and campus culture. Meeting with them also conveys your respect for tradition.

Every president also should interact regularly with students, formally and informally, throughout the year. Establishing this as a routine practice early in your tenure demonstrates your awareness of the need to connect with this key constituency. Also, it is important to reach out to a diverse group of students—those who are active on campus and those who usually aren’t heard from.

Building Lasting Relationships. “In higher education, relationships are the coin of the realm” (McLaughlin, 1996). This might be the most important advice a new president can receive. Without authentic, positive, and trusting relationships with stakeholders, particularly those with influence, the president will eventually fail.

Every campus has an “ad hococracy” that really runs the place. Dowdall (2002) explains how to identify this key constituency: “Who holds real power regardless of their position? . . . Who has the ability to make things happen or prevent them?” Preferably, the learning network should include some of these individuals to let

the president test ideas and solicit counsel.

Being a Good Listener. Heifetz (1994) tells us that “most leaders die with their mouths open.” This is especially true of smart, assertive, and ambitious individuals. Winning the debate, arguing well, and finding flaws in the ideas of others are often rewarded in higher education. For a president, this type of showmanship engenders negative reactions.

Seeking Feedback. One of the most powerful and effective ways new presidents can achieve credibility and build trust in their leadership is to request feedback on a regular basis. After three months on campus, a new leader should solicit anonymous feedback from numerous, well-chosen sources. Useful questions for this purpose might include:

- What issues should I be paying attention to?
- Have there been positive or negative things you’ve heard about me or experienced in interactions with me?
- What advice do you have to help me improve or maintain my performance?

This process is most effective if repeated at six months, and annually thereafter.

Getting Down to Work— Strategy

The institution’s focus on the new president will be greatest at the very beginning. The first days on campus will set the tone for the duration of the president’s tenure. This is a time for strategic approaches as well as activities that will establish what will ultimately become the day-to-day routine.

Absorbing the Institutional Culture. Each campus has a unique, complicated, and pervasive culture that has been built over many years. While internal stakeholders understand this

culture at a deep level, it is rarely articulated or written. Culture drives daily behavior, organizational thinking, and decision making in a manner rarely understood by outsiders.

New leaders must manage the culture strategically in order to be effectively integrated into the organization and for the institution to accept, learn, and grow with its new leadership. They must leverage the culture and, when necessary, change it; recognize when and how it can be challenged; and, eventually, be able to explain it to others, especially outsiders.

Regulating Speed and Scope of Change. This is one of the most difficult and complex elements in the transition map. When a new president comes to campus, expectations are usually very high and the urge to take dramatic action is strong. It is important to be especially thoughtful and judicious during the first year, and to take the time needed to understand the complexity of a challenge or problem before acting.

Many new presidents feel compelled to create a new vision of the institution as soon as possible. The board is often the culprit here, urging the president to craft an exciting, ennobling future. One president told us, “I don’t yet understand this place, its culture, politics, tradition, hopes, or even its ghosts. How am I supposed to tell people where they should be going?”

It is important to exercise restraint. The board and the campus need to see the arrival of a new president as an opportunity to create a benchmark against which to assess progress and institutional priorities. After a year, an inclusive strategic planning and/or visioning process might be appropriate. Keep in mind, however, it’s entirely possible that the most recent strategic plan remains viable. It

might be more productive to invest your energies in implementing that plan than in changing direction.

Getting Down to Work— Operations

It’s not uncommon for presidents to be highly enthused about the strategic aspects of leading an institution, although daily operational matters may have greater overall consequences. Be sure to balance operational details with strategic concerns.

Developing Your Senior Team. Everyone will be watching to see how well the new team cooperates. The new president needs to dedicate significant time and thought to building a strong senior management team. The pace and complexity at the beginning can make this tough, but a president should meet informally within the first month with each member of the team.

Holding Retreats. A staff retreat during the first month is an excellent way for new presidents to get to know their staff, organize a future agenda, identify important issues, and initiate key relationships. A critical consideration for the first retreat is who to include. Inadvertently omitting an important person can lead to problems down the road.

This first retreat should last a day or two and be well organized, with a highly skilled facilitator. After six months, a follow-up retreat can be held to check on progress, realign efforts, and discuss lessons learned. A yearly retreat can be institutionalized thereafter.

Establishing Your Decision-Making Process. For a campus president, making important and difficult decisions comes with the territory. However, many decisions must be delegated. Unless the lines of authority are clearly delineated, there can be a great deal of ambiguity. This can easily

lead to needless infighting among the senior staff.

A president must make clear in each situation whether the decision is being made by the president, without consultation; by the president, after consultation with others; by consensus, involving discussion and debate; or by others, as designated by the president.

The Long Haul

Being a Learner. It takes time to understand the culture, policies, history, challenges, and achievements of a new institution. The learning process should begin before your arrival, but it starts in earnest after you get to campus. This goes beyond reading existing strategic plans, self-studies, or briefing books.

Within the first three to six months, the new president will have hundreds of conversations with people about the new job. Keeping a daily journal, while requiring discipline, can be an extraordinary resource for capturing impressions and insights about these discussions. It is often helpful to review the journal findings with members of the support network to explore emerging themes and to get their reactions.

Seeking Personal and Emotional Balance. We have observed that a number of new presidents, especially first-timers, allow the job to consume them entirely. They find it easy to fall into the trap of letting their presidency be a 24/7 endeavor. The work should not be allowed to take up every waking hour, and more importantly, it should not prevent one from obtaining the rest needed to be effective. A presidency is a marathon, not a sprint.

It also is important to anticipate the emotional challenges faced by a new president. It's common to experience an emotional "dip" after a month or so.

It may also occur again after the first year. These are times when it is beneficial to rely on the support network.

Managing the Spotlight. As mentioned earlier, a new president will be under enormous scrutiny throughout the first year. Actions take on greater meaning and, at times, will be interpreted in unexpected ways.

To many stakeholders and outsiders, the president *is* the institution. It is important to be conscious of the effects of your behavior. For example, several new presidents had significant improvements made to their residences during their first year in office. Although much-needed, in their opinions, the repairs and renovations led to a great deal of unfavorable publicity.

Conclusion

A presidential transition has a major impact on the life of an institution. With proper planning, care, and execution, this presents an opportunity to write

a positive chapter in the campus history. Appropriately addressing the anxiety that accompanies major transitions—for both those joining the institution and those already present—requires forethought and preparation. If it is well navigated, both the president and the campus will have an excellent journey together. ■

Notes:

1. Dowdall, J. Off to a good start: Thoughts on the first weeks of a new job. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (July 1, 2002), Chronicle Careers.
2. Heifetz, R. A. & Linsky, M. (2002). *Leadership on the line: Staying alive through the dangers of leading*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
3. McLaughlin, J.B. (1996). *Leadership transitions: The new college president*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

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