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What Professors Would Like Their New President to Know

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ABSTRACT

New college presidents are faced with many challenges; some known and some unknown. With the frequency of new presidents entering from outside the institution, a challenge exists to understand the culture and current state of the institution. Existing faculty are uniquely positioned to provide assistance in this regard. What is presented here are perspectives on what college professors would like their new presidents to know. The information is provided in the form of common challenges to be aware of and suggestions to consider. Future directions are offered to delve deeper into the potential insights to be offered from the faculty lens to new, incoming presidents.

Several years ago, during a gathering of all the faculty at a university, a senior faculty member commented during a stressful meeting, “Presidents come and go, but faculty stay.” This person has been on the faculty through several presidents, and had experienced a wide range of new initiatives, new visions, and bold promises. This faculty person also was keenly aware of the short life span of most university presidents. There was the sense that the role of the presidency was transient and short-lived. This sense is supported by data that shows the average tenure of a college president to be around six years (Smerek, 2009). It would have been interesting and perhaps insightful if the seasoned veteran had shared what they wished each of the new presidents knew about the institution. Considering that almost 80% of new presidents are hired from outside the organization (compared to 40 in businesses, Smerek, 2009), grasping what is going on is essential for success, especially early in the tenure.

It is the premise of this paper that new university presidents would benefit from the perspective of the faculty, with an acknowledgement that the perspective of a faculty member is different than the perspective of a university president with regard to scope of position. What follows is anecdotal data, first-hand observations, and qualitative data from years of conversations and experiencing organizational life around what professors would like their new president to know. To lead into the suggestions, here are some common challenges that have been observed.

You were told what?

Presidents enter their new job having been in conversations with the board, search committees, search firms, and other out-spoken stakeholders. They are told a variety of truths and mistruths,

such as, “the faculty are entrenched in their ways”; “We need a capital campaign.” “You need to add this program, you need to drop this degree...” From these conversations, it is fair to assume that new presidents will make their own assumptions about what they are “hearing” from those engaged in the search process.

In organizational consulting, there is a common occurrence when entering into a consulting engagement around what the problem is (Schein, 1999, Block, 2011). This is known as the presenting issue. The presenting issues more often than not are not the real issues facing the institution. It is a matter of peeling away the layers, sifting through all the information shared and gathered, and discovering what the real needs are for the institution. In other words, addressing problems and not symptoms of the problem.

A helpful construct around this challenge was identified by Smerek (2009) in a study examining how college presidents interpret and come to understand their new institution. The concept is referred to as sensemaking and sensegiving (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Presidents are called upon to make interpretations, to try and make sense of what they have been told and what they are observing. As described by the writer, David Foster Wallace, human beings are sense-making machines. We are hard-wired to try and make sense of our experiences.

The board has shared everything I need to know

New presidents tend to work closely with the board of trustees and often only one or two lead members of the board. This can lead to a sense that the board has provided them everything necessary to hit the ground running. As such, sometimes a new president is prone to not pick up on the need for seeing beyond the initial dependence on the board. There can be a certain comfort in believing that the board has provided all the necessary information and therefore they are set-up for success. This kind of comfort can be present in many new presidents, but new presidents that go through a process of a confidential or blind presidential search are more likely to be in a situation where they have to be comfortable with only what the board and possibly a few other community members told them.

New leaders need a keen awareness of who has access to them to avoid blind spots brought about by this overreliance on the board. A useful onboarding idea utilized by many human resource departments is that of a Realistic Job Preview (RJP). The technique gives candidates an honest view of the position. An interesting perspective on the use of an RJP was described in a study by Ridgway O'Brien and Hebl (2015). They examined the use of RJPs in academia around expectations and managing expectations. It seems that more often than not, college presidents are given “unrealistic job previews.” The new president can be cautious and question if they are getting the whole picture; if they are getting a realistic or unrealistic job preview!

Some factors to consider are the characteristics of the board. This entails the dynamics around the size of the board, how they were selected to be on the board, their length of tenure, how closely they have interacted with the administration and faculty body, and their relationship to the previous president and senior leadership. A useful perspective on the relationship between the new president and the board of trustees was described by McKay (2003) who identified some of the perceptions and preferences on the level of involvement in this relationship.

Here are the solutions I bring

Presidents often have certain skills and competencies that led to them being hired. This can be like the homerun hitter who changes teams and states, “I am here to hit homeruns”. Leaders tend to rely on the skills and mindset that got them to this point in their career. New presidents need to avoid the comparison trap. They need to consider that what worked at their previous institution(s) may not be the most effective approach in their new institution. There is a tendency to go with what is familiar and what is comfortable. Be aware of solutions in search of problems.

New presidents can fall into the trap of constantly talking about what worked at their old institution. Faculty may want to tell the new president, “If things were so wonderful at your old institution, why don’t you go back there?” It is wise to guard against ideas you have always had and thought, “If only I were in charge.” New presidents need to understand the difference in the role of faculty and their behaviors at their current institution before comparing them to those at other institutions.

Avoid assuming the organization is broken. One former senior leader (with a short-lived tenure), went so far as to say, “My predecessor built a lot of buildings and I am here to fill them up.” This comment alienated a large group of stakeholders and was an incorrect diagnosis of what the institution’s needs were. Ultimately, this new president failed to maintain the enrollment, causing an exodus of employees who have gone on to success elsewhere. That leader failed to capture and inspire the existing talent to elevate the institution to the next level of success. New leaders need to understand how to proceed and frame their assessment in a context of not fully knowing what the needs of the institution are (Kaplan, 2008).

I have all the answers and new ideas, that’s why they hired me, right?

Avoid assuming you have all the answers and that everyone will be so impressed with the “new and fresh ideas” you bring. This can be thought of as a hero or rescuer complex. For many new presidents, the role represents a first move into the most senior position, that of CEO of an institution of higher education. This transition from a VP or other senior position, that perhaps reports to the president, to now being the president can represent to the new person that they are now in charge, and therefore must come across as being the smartest in the room and not show any sign of not having answers or self-doubts. Boards often play a role in this perception.

Boards can potentially state to the new president a specific reason they were selected, and this reason being some specific past experience or specific skill or competency. This might be a previously successful capital campaign, or implementation of a specialized degree or program, or accreditation. This leads the new president to develop the mindset that they do indeed have all the answers and solutions, all ready to be implemented without gathering information from those on the front lines. New presidents need to have and/or develop flexible mental models (Senge, 2006).

SUGGESTIONS AND FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Need for an inclusive change model

New leaders need to utilize some type of inclusive change model. Nothing is as useful as a good theory – base your approach on sound methodology. Look to the literature on effective organizational change and look beyond a simple model suggested by a consultant you have hired or perhaps used in the past.

Develop sound and inclusive relationships. Gaval (2009) states that a large majority of new presidents begin their new role without a strong relationship with those on their senior leadership team. This highlights the need to be open to ideas and be inclusive in how they approach their new role. Presidents need to balance the expertise which they bring and for which they were hired with the integration of existing talent and ideas and institutional values and traditions. Sokol (2017) refers to this balance as the 50% rule:

“Half of what made you successful in the past is absolutely essential to success in your next role. And half of what made you successful in the past won’t help in your next role, and just may get in the way of success.”

New presidents need to genuinely embrace the notion of shared governance, not just pay it lip service. Some ways to do this is by the inclusion of faculty and/or faculty leadership on the president’s cabinet and other key committees. This may seem obvious, however it is not uncommon for the president’s cabinet or leadership team to be devoid of faculty membership. This is sometimes explained away by pointing out that there is a Dean or the VP of academic affairs serving as a representative of the faculty, which demonstrates the importance of hiring the right person in that role as well.

Who you should be having coffee with

It might seem obvious to state that new leaders need to be visible and out and about, however, what often happens is the new leader spends their time with a small group of those who they either brought with them as part of their transition, and/or they spend time with their small group of direct reports. Leaders need to find individuals they can trust to help interpret the needs and current status of the institution (Smerek, 2009).

Here are some suggested groups to intentionally reach out to:

- Tenured faculty
- Custodial staff
- Administrative assistants
- Junior faculty
- Committee leadership
- Department chairs
- Student leadership
- Alumni

The interactions should be a mix between one-on-ones and small groups. This should be a time of genuinely listening, and openly answering questions and likewise sharing your ideas and vision.

Be Inquisitive and Listen

“If we were meant to talk more and listen less, we would have been given two mouths and one ear.” – Mark Twain

Leaders should be conscious of the types of questions they are asking. Consider whether the questions you are asking are empowering or disempowering. One useful rule of thumb is to consider that most questions that begin with “why” tend to put the person on the defensive and therefore tend to be disempowering. Try instead to ask questions that begin with how. Focus on possibilities, the questions we ask shape our reality and by asking positive questions, the best ideas tend to surface. Focus on what is working, look for the bright spots (Heath & Heath, 2010).

Ask questions that challenge the status quo (this requires finding out accurately what the status quo is). Ask about success stories and not failures (avoid the tendency of seeking out complaints and trying to identify what is broken and/or needs fixed.) Tune into your ask-to-tell ratio. Are you doing more asking/inquiry or telling?

First do no harm

Part of the Hippocratic Oath is “primum non nocere, “first, do no harm”. Presidents need to diagnose before prescribing. New leaders need to recognize what they may not know.

Smerek (2009) reported on a significant disconnect between how presidents felt a certain degree of certainty and clarity about what they were dealing with compared with the level of ambiguity and complexity that has been identified in the literature on organizational theory. This appears to speak to the challenge of presidents not knowing what they don’t know. This is similar to the phenomena known as the Dunning-Kruger Effect. This term refers to a cognitive bias where someone who is incompetent at something is unable to recognize their own incompetence. Not only do they fail to recognize their incompetence, they are also likely to feel confident that they actually are competent (Dunning & Kruger, 1999). This can be a huge blind spot for the leader and one that can be difficult to recognize and overcome.

The importance of listening cannot be overstated. Listen to understand, not to respond. Listen to the concerns beneath the concerns. Grasping the culture is imperative as a new leader. This is true whether you are trying to adjust to the existing culture or desiring to change the culture. A couple of invaluable resources are the Competing Values Framework by Cameron and Quinn and Edgar Schein’s book, *Corporate Culture Survival Guide*.

Future Directions

The observations and suggestions here are broadly applied. Conducting qualitative research could provide deeper and more specific perspectives. It would be useful to examine such variables as the type of institution, whether public, private, religious, or for-profit. Similarly, it would be beneficial to examine differences between the size/mission of the institution, such as between community/technical colleges and four year institutions. To obtain this deeper data, a survey of faculty and new and seasoned presidents could provide these additional insights.

WHAT ALL THIS MEANS

Inherent in higher education is the reality that politics and culture are pervasive forces that are always subject to change. Within that reality, the new president often has to make controversial and unpopular decisions with limited context and history. How they come to those decisions and implement the process to execute those decisions will inform their success as a leader of people at their new institution. The faculty are typically the body at the university with the most longevity and power, and are often the drivers of successful initiatives, which can provide significant fuel to a new president's leadership through transition. Throughout this paper, anecdotes, stories, and lore were presented alongside modest research that supports the argument that the input of faculty for a presidential hire and subsequent onboarding is important and most necessary. What the faculty would like their president to know the most is that they are passionate about their craft, their students, and their institution. Additionally, they want to be heard as intelligent and critical individuals who have committed their lives to the advancement of their disciplines. All of the politics that goes with that will form the evolving culture as new leaders come and go, while the faculty remain the same.

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