

Talented Senior Staff Indispensable to New Presidents

by Marylouise Fennell and Scott D. Miller

Identifying, retaining and hiring talented senior staff who complement the strengths of a new president is a critical piece of his or her success in office, a process known collectively as "team-building." One crucial, yet often - overlooked aspect of a new presidency is the role of senior staff who will work collegially with the new CEO to execute and communicate the institutional vision.

No president can run an institution alone; every president must have a team of valued and close associates (often organized into what is called a president's cabinet). That group usually includes senior professionals from the four core areas of the institution - academic affairs, student life, finance and advancement. Depending on the complexity of the institution, other direct reports might include technology, admissions and intercollegiate athletics.

It is critical that the president carefully select and nurture talented individuals who, generally, should possess expertise superior to that of the CEO in their respective areas. If the president does a good job of appointing Senior staff, they will serve as the prime agents in implementing institutional goals. Loyalty is as important as competence for these senior campus leaders and they must be viewed as supportive of the president, while ensuring that the differing views of diverse external and internal constituencies are heard and considered. To assure credibility, this administrative team must be viewed as ethical, honest, energetic, mission oriented, creative and transformational. This is no place for sycophants or cronies which could result in a potentially captivating vision getting lost.

Author and former president of the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) James L. Fisher, warns in his recent book, *The Entrepreneurial College President* (2004), "to be surrounded by persons of lesser

ability or potential is to invite the burden of incompetence and, ultimately, of failure."

Senior staff selection/development Here are some helpful suggestions:

- Prior to arriving, commission an Institutional Review. A review will not only point out areas of concern, but it will also highlight the strengths of the institution upon which a new CEO can build. Many presidents use institutional reviews as the core of a realistic strategic plan.
- Develop an organizational structure that will ensure presidential effectiveness. Lines of authority should be clearly defined.
- Hold weekly Cabinet meetings with the entire staff. Only those who report directly to the president should attend, and they should submit items for discussion. It is absolutely essential that all understand that it is OK to debate items and disagree in these weekly meetings, but once a decision is made, the group must be unified upon leaving the room. Just as the president serves at the pleasure of the Board of Trustees, senior administrators must understand that they work at the pleasure of the president.
- Early on, conduct a retreat, preferably away from campus and facilitated by an outsider. This is an opportunity to get everyone "on the same page", as well as an opportune time to discover and witness the strengths of individual cabinet members. It also provides an occasion to see how well individual members work together in a team environment.
- Share credit for success with donors, politicians (if a public assisted school), faculty, staff, trustees, and students. Realize that it is also important to take responsibility for failures. If you

remain loyal to your Cabinet, your trustees, faculty and staff, they will reciprocate by being stronger in their support of you.

- Keep social distance. Too much informal interaction can reduce the leader's effectiveness. There are countless stories of presidents who have become too close to a vice president or dean and therefore, cannot objectively evaluate performance or demand accountability.
- Be a mentor ... help your people. Be candid, honest and direct with them. Tell them your expectations, but demonstrate by your words and actions that you will always be there for them and will help them as they advance professionally.

Senior staff are a direct reflection of the president's vision, judgment and leadership. If, like a gardener, you plant, cultivate, tend and nurture, a bountiful harvest will result.

Dr. Marylouise Fennell is former president of Carlow University in Pittsburgh, PA. She is senior advisor for the Council of Independent Colleges (CICJ) and coordinates the CIC New President's Program

Dr. Scott D. Miller is president of Wesley College in Dover, DE in his 15th year as a college president. Dr. Miller is also a consultant to boards and presidents

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