

# Presidential Relationships: Build Them With Caution

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Navigating a new presidency is a bit like piloting a ship through a narrow channel. Oftentimes, the surface appears calm, but sandbars and jagged rocks lurk just below.

We've seen similar situations time and time again with promising new presidencies whose ships never dock because of early, often fatal missteps.

All these CEOs had begun their presidencies with great potential. They had met or exceeded performance benchmarks – increased enrollment, recruited students, stemmed the flow of red ink – but still failed. What went wrong?

In our experience, rocky relationships with key constituencies sink more promising presidencies than any other single factor. While competent performance is a given, it must be accompanied by equally solid relationships. Failure to heed early warning signs can portend a shipwreck ahead. Several factors feed this common scenario.

**The “fix it” scenario:** Especially in turn-around situations, expectations that you will come in and immediately deliver a “quick fix” abound. Everyone will offer you advice, most of it well intended and some of it sound, but short-term solutions to long-term challenges will not result in long-term relationships.

**The overreaction scenario:** You may have been hired in response to a specific campus need or issue, or perhaps the search committee was seeking a leader similar to or as different as possible from your predecessor. Either way, you must avoid the temptation to act quickly and decisively, but wrongly. Beware of draconian change in response to pressure from well-meaning campus constituencies.

**The expectations scenario:** New presidents frequently comment that they came to the presidency from a specialized area and did not fully realize its comprehensive nature until they had actually assumed the

office. Even before the boxes in your new office are completely unpacked, various constituencies will likely beset you, each with its own unspoken needs and agendas.

It's tempting to build popularity by responding immediately to “squeaky wheels.” Take your time before making promises you may not be able to keep. Most leaders who try to be all things to all people, we've found, tend to fail at both.

Here is some time-proven guidance that has worked for virtually every effective transformational leader.

**Run from Day One:** According to *Right from the Start* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2000), two-thirds of presidents appointed since 1993 have left their positions within four years because they didn't take charge and move from the get-go. One of our most visionary United States presidents, Theodore Roosevelt, said, “In a time of decision, the best thing to do is the right thing. The worst thing to do is nothing.”

**Take calculated risks:** Effective leaders must take calculated risks to move the organization ahead. If your college or university is stagnant, it is in decline. If you are not where you want to be in the marketplace, you may need to create a whole new marketplace. Continuous re-invention is the key to dynamic leadership.

**Communicate a passionate vision:** Your highest priority is to develop and communicate an overriding plan to guide your actions. Without a passionate vision, your presidency risks gradually deteriorating into a mindless set of ad hoc adjustments to emerging circumstances.

Don't fall into the trap of managing from crisis to crisis, exhausting resources, staff, and yourself in the bargain.

**Don't try to go it alone:** Hire the best people that you can find, support them,

delegate, and don't micro-manage. Motivating leaders are secure enough to hire, retain, and promote men and women of accomplishment who know more than they do in their specific areas of expertise. Share credit for success, accept accountability for failure, be visible on campus, and keep appropriate social distance; too much informal interaction can reduce your effectiveness. The college presidency can be a lonely profession, but don't look for friendships among your key constituents.

While none of these recommendations will ensure a safe and secure mooring, following them will go a long way toward helping you make the crucial leap from the “honeymoon” to a successful and happy long-term “institutional marriage.”

*Editor's Note: Portions of this article are from an address by Dr. Miller and Dr. James L. Fisher at the NACUBO annual meeting in July, 2004.*

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