



## The Transformational Leader Presidential leadership for higher education today.

By Scott D. Miller and Marylouise Fennell - *College Planning & Management*, February 2012

The late Timothy Healy, SJ, the former president of Georgetown University, said it best with regard to hiring senior-level candidates: "We are looking for God on a good day." College presidencies today do seem to require almost God-like qualities as we attempt to steer our campuses and constituencies through turbulent economic waters, articulating a focused and compelling vision and managing change.

Challenging times such as these require exceptional leadership, not simply a list of goals and objectives. Reactive leadership, relying on what worked before and only managing day-to-day issues, no longer suffices. Rather than "thinking outside the box," we suggest throwing away that proverbial container altogether. In a time when crisis is the new norm, college CEOs are required to be visionary leaders and energetic communicators, inspiring commitment to winning strategies.

We suggest:

**Articulating a Compelling Vision.** Vision usually derives from a strongly held sense of mission and values. It is critical that presidents shape their institutional vision from ideas about which they are passionate; otherwise, it is unlikely that they will be able to convince others to join them. Effective leadership starts from the inside out. "You can't take a poll and be told what you believe in," according to former Congresswoman Jane Harman (D-CA), now head of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

**Listening actively and inclusively.** Seek advice. Make well-reasoned decisions. Strive for consensus. Presidents coming into office with the benefit of recent or ongoing institutional research may be able to save time in the planning process. Face-to-face communication with key constituents, however, especially faculty and students, will always be essential.

**Deferring big decisions.** H.L. Mencken once noted, "For every complex problem, there is a solution that is simple, neat, and wrong." Resist the impulse to resort to "obvious" solutions to the challenges facing your campus. Our colleague Kent Chabotar, president of Guilford College in North Carolina, used his first two years in office to develop the College's current strategic plan. He says the time was essential in improving content and community buy-in of the plan once it was unveiled.

**Building your team.** "The administration should be viewed as mission oriented, dynamic, and enlightened," says noted higher education author James L. Fisher. "More than any other segment of the academic community, the administration – under is president's inspired direction – should seem unified."

It is critical that the president carefully selects and nurtures talented individuals who possess expertise superior to that of the CEO in their respective areas. If the president does a good job of team building with senior staff, its members will serve as the prime agents in communicating a vision, gathering support campus-wide, and implementing institutional goals.

Supportive colleagues can also help to allay the loneliness of executive leadership. In the words of Harman, "As you get higher up the mountain, there's less oxygen. And it is harder. It requires more discipline, more focus, more inner strength. And as you get higher and there are fewer people at the same level, you become a target."

**Focus on your strengths.** The best leaders focus on their strengths, while relying on the support of others to minimize their weaknesses. Such leaders can achieve extraordinary results by adopting a leadership model that is driven by personal passion and also sustained by the talents and contributions of others.

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