

Leadership 101: The First 100 Days

By Marylouise Fennell and Scott D. Miller - *College Planning & Management, February 2010*

A president will never again have as much political capital as in the first 100 days in office. Thus, it is vitally important that he or she gets it right during this critical “honeymoon” period. We continue to see promising presidencies derailed by overspending, overpromising, under delivering, listening to the wrong people, or worse, failing to listen at all. Errors in judgment and execution at this point can doom a new CEO, irrevocably damaging a fledgling presidency.

Hence, some guidelines for surviving the tests imposed by the first 100 days, while emerging strong – with leadership ability intact – on the other side.

Appearances Matters

Like all successful leaders, college presidents must understand and act on the adage that “perception is reality” when it comes to matters of personal conduct. Thus, a president must not only be honest, modeling integrity for the entire community, but also, *appear to be honest*. Like Caesar’s wife, he or she must appear beyond reproach.

More new campus CEOs have gotten into trouble over expenditure of institutional funds than over any other single issue. So, we must insist: **don’t spend a lot of college money on personal expenses at the beginning of your presidency**. Because we’ve seen many presidencies compromised by expensive redecorating and furnishing costs of residences, we recommend deferring heavy personal spending. If you feel you must, pay for these items out of pocket and consider requesting partial reimbursement later. Be prudent in travel expenses. At all times, exercise sound stewardship of institutional time and treasure.

Words Matter

Be careful whom you listen to, and be equally attentive to how your words may be heard by others. Especially when you are a “newbie,” it is important to say what you mean and mean what you say because you are setting a precedent for your presidency.

Our valued colleague, Kent J. Chabotar, president of Gilford College in North Carolina, likes to tell the story of King Henry II of England. Becoming exasperated with Archbishop Thomas Becket in 1170, the King unwisely exclaimed, “Who will rid me of this meddlesome priest?” Much to the King’s chagrin and embarrassment, four over-zealous knights took him at this word, murdering Becket during services. When it come to early public utterances, it pays to head the time-tested principle articulated in Stephen R. Covey’s *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*: “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.”

New presidents are besieged with requests and counsel from faculty, staff, donors, volunteer leadership, and alumni; not all is equally valuable. “Be wary of those who are the first to make appointments with you,” suggested Jim Hunt, provost and dean of faculty at Southwestern University in Texas. He suggested that new presidents first research the history of any early requests before acting. The role of a college president, Hunt noted, is not to “hold things back,” but “to hold things within the scope of the institution’s goals.” Take time to listen and assess.

In the words of the late Peter F. Drucker, “Follow effective action with quiet reflection. From the quiet reflection will come even more effective action.”

Processes Matter

In their zeal to be productive and proactive, too many new presidents confuse action with leadership. As Drucker put it, “Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right thing.” Although closed-door meetings may produce quicker decisions, counsel and buy-ins from campus constituencies establish a stronger foundation for long-term success.

It is critically important to give skeptics a seat at the table. As Chabotar wisely emphasizes, “If opponents cannot criticize presidents for individual decisions, they will surely try to ‘get you’ on the process.” Don’t try to go it alone!

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