

The Successful President: Personal Style

By Dr. Scott D. Miller and Dr. Marylouise Fennell - *College Planning & Management, November 2009*

Presidential temperament is a bit like Marshall McLuhan's existential fish out of water. It's taken for granted unless it is suddenly absent. No other essential leadership quality is so elusive – indefinable, but absolutely essential. It's difficult to quantify, but you know it when you see it. A judicious presidential temperament can overcome a lack of other important leadership skill sets; without it, nothing else matters.

College presidents are no longer your father's CEO. Tenures are dropping in duration, while challenges mount. Although they came well qualified and highly recommended, too many new and promising first-time campus CEOs are derailed in the early months of their presidencies because they did not understand the expectations and new rules of the office. Still others lack one or more basic skills critical to all successful presidencies. The costs of failure are enormous, both to the institution and to the individual.

The Ground Rules Are Changing

What can we do to boost the odds of success? Let's start with basic ground rules, which have changed enormously in the last 30 years. In the presidency of 1978, most presidents were educators who came from an academic background and viewed themselves as academic leaders, and they spent most of their time on campus managing internal affairs. The paradigm today represents a 180° shift. In 2009, most successful presidents come with a business background or a good sense of the business world, and they focus on activities related to external affairs and advancement. Effective presidents now spend upwards of 70 percent of their time off-campus, "friend" raising and fundraising. Today, presidents

are the "face" of the university to diverse outside publics, including government officials, the media, corporations and foundations, the business community, and the community at large.

We've seen stellar candidates on paper flounder in office and fail this litmus test despite solid experience, obvious qualifications, and strong references. Sound judgment and a sense of appropriate action for a given situation – what used to be called "horse sense" – trumps all else in leaders. As President Harry Truman once said, "Common sense is very uncommon."

Some of the Pitfalls

Some of the pitfalls that we've seen sink many promising presidencies:

- **Perceptions matter.** Smart and successful leaders recognize that when it comes to the public, perception is reality. Think about how a given action or behavior might be viewed by those outside your inner circle. Two sound ethical "sniff" tests: "How would it look on the front page of tomorrow's paper?" and "What would happen to the institution/community/profession if all presidents emulated this action?"
- **Spend judiciously.** Mishandling or perceived misuse of institutional funds has probably compromised the effectiveness of more CEOs than any other behavior. Be aware of appearances. Don't fly first class on short trips, even if you are using your own accumulated mileage. Don't stay at the most expensive hotel in a given city. Be conservative in expenditures for presidential residences, furnishings, and automobiles. Insist on a fair, but not extravagant, compensation and perks for your region, type, and size of institution. Don't discuss

personal travel, especially "out of the country" trips. Be discreet in maintaining appropriate distance with faculty and staff. Be a good steward of both personal and institutional funds.

- **Be accountable.** It's easy to take the credit when times are good. It's when things aren't going well that the true test of presidential temperament occurs. Admit mistakes. Don't hide behind your staff. Let them take credit for successes while you accept responsibility for failures. Stand behind your staff and volunteer leaders in good times, and they'll stand behind you when times get tough.
- **Put the public good first.** Question your own ambition. Are you doing it for the good of the others, or for your own self-aggrandizement?

Plato perhaps said it best: "The measure of a man (or woman) is what he does with power." Presidential power, well used, can be transformative. Abused, it can irreparably damage an institution for years to come.

Dr. Scott D. Miller is president of Bethany College in West Virginia. He is now in his 19th year as a college president. Dr. Marylouise Fennell, RSM, a former president of Carlow University in Pittsburgh, is senior counsel for the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) and principal of Fennell Associates, Higher Education Services. Both serve as consultants to college presidents and boards. They have jointly published four books and over 100 articles on assorted leadership topics.