

Leading Change

Steps to building dynamic leadership.

BY DR. SCOTT D. MILLER AND DR. MARYLOUISE FENNELL



IN HIS BOOK *PROHIBITION Hangover*, author Garrett Peck states, “The problem with the enforcement of Prohibition lay in the fact that nearly everyone thought the law applied to everyone else, but not to them.” Similarly, many, if not most, people support the idea of institutional change in the abstract while eschewing it in practice.

Harvard University President Drew Gilpin Faust, a historian, has noted the “essential conservatism of human beings” for whom “change is frightening.”

New presidents are often hired during periods when rapid change is necessary and expected. They recognize that success requires

them to capitalize on the brief “honeymoon” period, when their popularity is at its peak, to introduce needed change while forging relationships and securing buy-in. How, then, can we make change less frightening, moving both quickly and strategically to implement it?

Build a senior team committed to obtaining strategic, broad-based buy-ins.

Writing in the July 2012 issue of the *McKinsey Quarterly*, Chris Bradley, Lowell Bryan, and Sven Smit tout the importance of “regular strategic dialogue involving a broad group of senior executives.” “Back in 2009,” they continue, “we wrote an article whose premise was that pervasive, ongoing uncertainty meant companies needed to get their senior-leadership teams working together in a fundamentally different way . . . we suggested that the only way to set strategy effectively during uncertain times was to bring together, much more frequently, the members of the top team, who were uniquely positioned to surface critical issues early, debate their implications, and make timely decisions.”

Forge relationships while focusing on tasks.

Presidents coming into office with the benefit of recent or ongoing institutional research and/or evaluation may be able to save time in the planning process. However, we submit, there is no substitute for face-to-face communication with key constituents, especially students and faculty. Holding regular office hours; using committees to recommend annual budgets, fringe benefit programs, and facility renovations; and championing annual surveys of the community climate build support. Though time-

consuming, they develop a strong base on which a new presidency can flourish. Short-circuit the planning process at your own risk.

Communicate a passionate vision.


As we wrote in a commentary entitled “The College Presidency: Welcome to the Future” in the Fall 2008 edition of *The Lawlor Review*, “the highest presidential priority is to develop and communicate an overriding plan. Without a passionate vision, a presidency risks gradually deteriorating into a mindless set of ad hoc circumstances.

“Too many presidencies,” we note, “fall into the trap of managing from crisis to crisis, exhausting resources, staff, and themselves in the bargain.”

Focusing on a vision, along with taking calculated risks, can build dynamic leadership and advance the institution.

Find a coach.

Josh Bersin is a noted management consultant and an expert on corporate leadership. He recently wrote an article entitled “Why Leaders Must be Experts.” A coach is not a manager or supervisor, but rather, someone who knows how to help you bring out your best. Further, this person has an uncanny ability to point out your weaknesses and help you learn to overcome them. Find someone you trust to help you develop or enhance needed skills.

Keep in mind that an effective president is a coach to many. In an interview in the July 24, 2011 *Washington Post*, Harvard’s Drew Gilpin Faust notes, “I’ve found that if you tell people that in order to have the things they most want and that most matter to them, they have to change certain other things, that makes those changes seem not just desirable, but imperative. And that seems to me a good path to lead people along as they face inevitable change.” 

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