

March 2014

What Leadership Development Institutes Can Never Teach College Presidents About Leadership

Livingston Alexander

University of Pittsburgh at Bradford and Titusville

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/ijlc>



Part of the [Educational Leadership Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Alexander, Livingston (2014) "What Leadership Development Institutes Can Never Teach College Presidents About Leadership," *International Journal of Leadership and Change*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/ijlc/vol1/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Journal of Leadership and Change by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact topscholar@wku.edu.

What Leadership Development Institutes Can Never Teach College Presidents About Leadership

Abstract

While most new presidents of colleges and universities advance to the presidency through a traditional academic pathway, an increasing number of new presidents are now coming from positions outside of higher education. Yet, regardless of how they come to the position, many new presidents are unprepared for the complex challenges they will encounter when they take on their new assignments. A large number assume that participation in professional development seminars, often promoted as institutes for new presidents, will provide the essential algorithm for a successful presidency. Operating on such an assumption may well turn out to be a fatal mistake. This article identifies areas of potential vulnerability in the presidency that cannot be addressed in professional development seminars. The article then suggests constructive ways to supplement insights gained in the professional development seminars to enable more successful college presidencies.

Keywords

leadership, presidents, education, colleges, universities

What Leadership Development Institutes Can Never Teach College Presidents About Leadership

Livingston Alexander *President, University of Pittsburgh at Bradford and Titusville and Professor of Psychology*

Abstract

While most new presidents of colleges and universities advance to the presidency through a traditional academic pathway, an increasing number of new presidents are now coming from positions outside of higher education. Yet, regardless of how they come to the position, many new presidents are unprepared for the complex challenges they will encounter when they take on their new assignments. A large number assume that participation in professional development seminars, often promoted as institutes for new presidents, will provide the essential algorithm for a successful presidency. Operating on such an assumption may well turn out to be a fatal mistake. This article identifies areas of potential vulnerability in the presidency that cannot be addressed in professional development seminars. The article then suggests constructive ways to supplement insights gained in the professional development seminars to enable more successful college presidencies.

Keywords

leadership; presidents; education; colleges; universities

Presidents of colleges and universities no longer advance to the presidency exclusively through the traditional pathway, i.e., faculty member, department head, dean, and provost/vice president for academic affairs. While 44% of leaders serving in their first presidency still come from the chief academic officer or provost position (Kim & Cook, 2013), an increasing number of new presidents now come from outside of higher education. In fact, the 2013 American Council on Education report exploring pathways to the presidency indicates that, in 2012, 23% of first-time presidents came from positions outside of higher education, an increase from 17% in 2007.

Even for first-time presidents who have spent their entire careers in higher education, leading a college campus in today's complex social, political, and financially strained environment can be daunting and overwhelming. The following case scenario reveals how complex the transition to the presidency can be and how unprepared most new presidents are for their next leadership challenge.

“You Got the Job, Now What?”

When the telephone rings at 9:00 p.m., just as the headhunter had promised, the lucky finalist for the presidency waits until it rings a second time. He does not want the Chairman of the Board of Trustees to think he's been sitting by the phone waiting impatiently for the “call of a lifetime.” It is, of course, the most important

phone call he's ever received in his life, but he's not about to betray it to the caller. He desperately wants to leave his current institution because it's clear he's worn out his welcome, given the tough decisions he's had to make and looming departure of his president.

As provost, he'd naturally be next in line to advance to the presidency; and while he has a respectable number of advocates on campus, he knows all too well that a sizable and very influential group of faculty are already lining up to oppose his candidacy. He feels fortunate that he was able to hide his precarious and somewhat desperate plight from the search committee during the airport and campus interviews for the position he will soon accept. On more than one occasion, he'd actually misrepresented the real circumstances at his home institution by characterizing the decision he'd have to make as “excruciatingly difficult” if offered the position—the professed rationale being that he was intrigued by this new opportunity but loved his current position and felt a sense of duty and obligation to his current institution to complete the agenda he had started. Based on what he'd read about search processes, he felt justified in being less than candid about his problems on his own campus, since search committees invariably paint a much rosier picture of circumstances on their campuses when pursuing presidential candidates.

After the second ring, he calmly lifts the receiver, takes a deep breath to try to settle his rapid heartbeat,

clears his throat, and manages a composed “hello.” The smile extends from ear to ear when the conversation ends. He got the offer, and a feeling of euphoria sweeps over the new president as he now contemplates the future. He envisions the swagger in his gait when he walks to his office the next morning. He smiles openly as he considers the “don’t give a damn” attitude he’ll adopt tomorrow—for just one day—as he meets with the faculty or as he takes a little more time to get to that appointment with the president. After all, he muses, he and the president are peers now; and if he doesn’t agree with something the president wants to advance, he can either sandbag or tell him it’s a lame idea.

The attention of the new president quickly turns to life beyond tomorrow and the many promises and assurances he made to the search committee and the multiplicity of new constituents to whom he is now accountable. He ticks off the persuasive and convincing assurances he made during the interviews: “My experience as provost has prepared me to move State University to new heights.” “I’m prepared to re-ignite the fundraising effort at State University by launching a new capital campaign and engaging a new generation of major donors.” “Having led the effort to increase enrollments at my current institution, I feel very confident that I can help the campus achieve record enrollment levels within a relatively short period of time.”

His heartbeat begins to race again as he now wonders how he’s going to deliver on those promises. In a private moment of reflection and candid self-appraisal, the new president readily admits that he’s lived his entire career on the academic side of the institution, never giving much thought to strategic positioning or lobbying and advocacy or asking wealthy people for money or even worrying about setting enrollment records. The very idea of approaching someone he barely knows and asking them for half a million or a million dollars for this or that campus initiative unsettles his stomach and calls into question why he even chose to pursue this new career direction so aggressively.

The response to the question as to why he chose to pursue a presidency comes quickly as he recalls the predicament he faced at the end of the last academic year, his eighth year as provost. The position was beginning to wear on him as he faced one tough decision after another. Should he deny tenure to this or that faculty member? Should he reprimand a department chair for failing to evaluate a poorly performing tenured faculty member? Should he ask a dean to step aside after years

offailing to settle infighting and instability in her school? Can he continue to endure the anxiety and tension brought on by contentious Board of Trustees meetings where members question and challenge virtually every proposal or recommendation placed before them, either from sheer lack of understanding of policies or out of disrespect and contempt for the lame-duck president? Should he return to his first love, which is teaching, or explore the proverbial next step in the career ladder of a college administrator, in his case, the presidency?

As quickly as the new president replayed the “fork in the road” dilemma he faced a few months ago, he just as quickly remembered his response to the dilemma and the fundamental reason why he responded in the way he did. He chose to continue as provost, but at the same time seek the opportunity to lead the academy as president in order to protect the academy and its foundational creed. From the very beginning of his career, he had pledged allegiance to the creed of the academy, characterized succinctly by Nelson (2007) as: “Freedom of thought and inquiry, freedom of academic and scholarly expression, respect for divergent and diverse opinions, commitment to civility in discourse and behavior; the belief that education passes the test of culture from one generation to another, the belief in human equality and progress, and the belief in the tenets of meritocracy” (p. 210). He still believes strongly in the creed and all too frequently has to defend it from one threat after another: whether it’s a politician seeking to circumvent the admission requirements for the son or daughter of a major financial supporter, an athletic director or coach putting pressure on a faculty member to change a grade to protect the academic eligibility of a star athlete, or members of the campus community organizing to prevent a controversial speaker from speaking on campus.

Now that he has been thrust in the position of protecting and advancing the creed of the academy and of leading an institution to new heights, the new president wonders what strategies and tools he’ll use to do that. He wonders how he’ll deliver on the promises made to his new constituents during the interview process. He will certainly seek advice from a number of sitting and former presidents for whom he has a great deal of respect. However, like many new presidents, he decides that leadership development institutes are the most reliable source for the proven strategies and tools he will need to get off to a good start and increase his odds for a successful presidency.

Leadership Development Institutes for New Presidents

Virtually all major higher education professional associations sponsor a leadership development institute for new presidents. The most compelling case the associations make for participating in a leadership institute is that new presidents come to the position with significant knowledge and background in a few areas, but the position of college president requires one to conceptualize and embrace a broad institutional vision and exercise expert leadership across a wide range of areas. The leadership institutes purport to assist new presidents to meet the high expectations of their challenging positions because there is little time to learn on the job. The institutes underscore the importance of self-monitoring during the first few months and avoiding common missteps that can be critical to long-term success.

The most well-established and popular leadership development institutes for new presidents are conducted by the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC), American Council on Education (ACE), the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), and the Harvard University Graduate School of Education. A common theme reflected in all of the institutes is embodied in the title of one session offered by the CIC institute: "You Got the Job, Now What?"

Claiming to be the oldest of the institutes serving new college chief executives and their spouses, CIC's New President's Program features sessions for new presidents and concurrent sessions for presidential spouses/partners. Among the key topics are financial fundamentals, working with the Board of Trustees, development (fundraising), enrollment management, staff development, and leadership. The program also features sessions on the varied roles of the presidential spouse/partner and joint sessions for new president and spouse/partner on finding their niche on campus and in the community. Presidents are assigned seasoned presidential colleagues who serve in informal advisory capacities after the program ends.

The newest of the institutes, ACE's Institute for New Presidents, and AASCU's long running New President's Academy cover such topics as strategic visioning and planning, shaping and leading complex organizations, managing institutional change, enrollment management and student success, financial management, fundraising, and athletics. The AASCU Academy offers executive coaching and mentoring throughout the first year of the presidency.

Considered by many previous participants to be the gold standard of institutes for new presidents, the Harvard Seminar for New Presidents focuses on critical issues of the first few months and years of the presidency. Among the key topics featured in promotional materials are: the *Context of Leadership*, which explores the importance of sensitivity to the culture and traditions of an institution while managing change; *Governance*, which examines the role of governing boards and the relationship between the president and the board of trustees; *Presidential Fundraising*, including how a president becomes an effective fundraiser and what a president should expect from the chief development officer; *Financial Management* and the role of financial information in institutional decision making; *Building the Administrative Team*, which focuses on developing the president's staff and cabinet into an effective working team; *Academic Leadership* that explores how the president exerts leadership in the academic arena; the *Life of the President*, which discusses issues related to lifestyle such as entertainment, the role of the spouse, managing the president's house, and living in the spotlight; and *Strategic Planning*, including the president's role in the design and implementation of strategic planning efforts.

As one who participated in and gained tremendous benefit from an institute for new presidents, I regard the institutes as invaluable resources. Unequivocally focused on some of the core areas of presidential leadership, the institutes cover the most important topics that should comprise a new president's agenda during the first year. It's probably fair to say that many more presidents would fail during the first few years in office if not for the insights gained from participating in one or more of the institutes for new presidents.

Yet, as instructive and insightful as the institutes are in helping new presidents get off to a good start, they can never prepare them for the host of landmines that lie in wait, threatening to derail their presidency. Nor can the institutes anticipate and safeguard the new president from potential lapses or missteps that are liable to alienate one or more constituents. The reports in the media abound about presidencies on the brink of failure because of such leadership lapses as: the propensity to use dysfunctional leadership styles, inability to effectively balance time devoted to the multiplicity of demands on the office and time devoted to developing and sustaining strong personal relationships with key constituents, failure to exercise what Daniel Goleman (1995) described as emotional intelligence, and failure

to effectively communicate with and respect the governance role of faculty. What is more, the institutes for new presidents can never prepare the new presidents to deal effectively with exceptionally difficult decisions associated with inherited or unforeseen problems.

The sections that follow describe vulnerabilities college/university presidents frequently experience as they execute their responsibilities as leaders of their campuses. In some instances, examples will be used to illustrate the potentially deleterious effects of these vulnerabilities; in other instances, documentation will come from research on leadership.

While some of these problems may well be discussed in a general sense during institute sessions for new presidents, it's virtually impossible to prescribe in advance appropriate responses for problematic circumstances occurring at unpredictable times and in widely varying contexts. The sections that follow, then, will contain suggestions on ways to supplement the insights gained in the institute for new president seminars.

Style Matters

As a participant in a professional association-sponsored seminar on leadership in higher education, I recall vividly my visceral reaction to the astonishing observations of a seasoned search consultant about perceptions some members of Boards of Trustees at majority institutions hold about minorities and women: "You're going to have to work extra hard during the interview to refute their assumptions that *Black* administrators are domineering, controlling, and authoritarian." "And for you women in the group, especially the *Black* women, they will assume you'll fly off the handle at any moment. So you'll have to somehow demonstrate that you're capable of managing your emotions."

Fisher and Koch (1996) contend that there is insufficient research to indicate that African-Americans and women adopt management styles that differ significantly from those of Caucasian men. In their view, the chief qualities that signal success in the presidency, regardless of race, gender, or style, involve how well the president develops charisma, cultivates appropriate social distance, and articulates a transformational vision. Fisher and Koch define charisma as "the ability to develop a public presence that inspires trust and confidence," (p. 41) even as they encourage leaders to develop appropriate social distance in the relationships they develop with constituents. In that regard, they encourage the president

to appear in the workplace often, especially on important occasions, but not remain so long as to diminish the aura and mystique of the presidency.

Finally, in prevailing upon presidents to advance a transformational vision, Fisher and Koch (1996) cite a compelling statement on the issue by former University of Notre Dame President Father Theodore Hesburgh: "The most important contribution a president can make to institutional advancement is to articulate his vision of the institution so persuasively that it becomes shared by all constituencies, internal and external, who adopt it as their own" (p. 68).

Challenge for New Presidents

While institutes for new presidents can assist the new president to develop a functional leadership style, the new president will have to adapt his style to his institution in a way that enables him or her to display charisma, establish an appropriate degree of social distance, and articulate a transformational vision.

When the Going Gets Tough

In his landmark book, *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman (1995) asserts, with ample documentation, that "the brightest among us can founder on the shoals of unbridled passions and unruly impulses," and that "people with high IQs can be stunningly poor pilots of their private lives" (p. 34). He contends that, at best, IQ accounts for about 20% of the factors that determine success, leaving 80% to other factors. Among the other factors that determine success is a construct Goleman refers to as emotional intelligence, which he characterizes as the ability "to motivate oneself and persist in the face of frustrations; to control impulse and delay gratification; to regulate one's moods and keep distress from swamping the ability to think; to empathize and to hope" (p. 34).

Loehr and Schwartz (2003) also associate emotional intelligence with high performance and success. They regard it as the capacity to manage emotions, skillfully using such key competencies as self-confidence, self-control (self-regulation), social skills (interpersonal effectiveness), and empathy. Such competencies are rarely discussed in leadership institutes, but their presence or absence in college leaders can make or break their presidencies.

In addition to bringing knowledge, experience, and competence to their roles as leaders, college presidents

also bring personal issues and private lives and all the baggage that come with their private lives. That reality was exemplified in a recent *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Schmidt, 2013a) feature on the president of Pepperdine University. The president and his wife had struggled privately for years to help their son overcome drug addiction, only to have their struggle play out publicly in a dramatic chase and arrest by sheriff deputies in an administrative building on the campus. The son faced five felony charges, several related to possession of a firearm and ammunition.

The president was both criticized and praised for his behavior throughout the struggle with his son's addiction. Some felt he should have devoted more time to his son and less to his career; others praised him for his forthrightness in speaking openly about the problem his family was facing and his willingness to explore all avenues to help the son. No matter the perspective one takes on this personal family problem, what is clear is that this president demonstrated extraordinary emotional resilience throughout the struggle with the son's addiction. While the president admitted to being distracted by his son's problems, he acknowledged that he was able to compartmentalize family struggles and professional challenges, continuing to perform effectively in his role as campus leader. Further illustrating the president's emotional resilience, *The Chronicle* feature points out that, on the night before he had arranged for his son to be taken forcibly to a therapeutic boarding school, the president projected a public image of calm professionalism during a moment of private turmoil by performing a wedding ceremony for a Pepperdine graduate.

A leadership institute could not have helped the Pepperdine president to manage the set of circumstances he faced when he assumed the presidency. There are simply no opportunities in such institutes to discuss those private and deeply personal issues that virtually all presidents and their families bring with them to their very public roles.

Nor can leadership institutes instruct even the most academically gifted new president on how to listen and become attuned to the feelings of others when communicating with them; manage disagreements so that they do not escalate; provide constructive feedback about work performance without demoralizing; and persuade colleagues to work toward a common goal. Individuals who possess those abilities most likely have a high emotional intelligence quotient. Yet, one of the nation's most prominent leadership experts, Karol

Wasylyshyn (2012), contends that leaders who fail to demonstrate emotional intelligence will not long survive as leaders. She has found that leadership types fall on a continuum ranging from remarkable to perilous to toxic. She contends that the key difference in a leader who is remarkable versus one who is toxic is that a remarkable leader demonstrates strong emotional intelligence, including attunement to others and scoring higher on extraversion and conscientiousness domains.

Challenge for New Presidents

Because institutes for new presidents focus appropriately on the more urgent administrative dimensions of leading during the first few years of the presidency and less on the personal dimension of leading, the new president would do well to assess his or her emotional intelligence using Daniel Goleman's (1995) framework. The results from the assessment could be used to facilitate adjustments in personal style, thereby enabling more effective communication with constituents.

Sharing Power

The president of a well-regarded liberal arts college and I served together on the board of a professional association for five years. I developed a great deal of respect for this colleague because he reflected those personal qualities I most admire in people—positive disposition, friendly and approachable demeanor, and ability to make those in his presence feel at ease. He also displayed self-confidence when interacting individually and when speaking to an audience.

Not long after we had concluded our respective terms of service on the association board, I read an account in the media that the faculty on my colleague's campus had unanimously approved a vote of no confidence in his presidency. Among the reasons given was his failure to communicate and consult with the faculty on major decisions affecting the campus. While the members of the Board of Trustees declared their support for my colleague president, they indicated that they would assess the relationship between the president and the faculty and determine what follow-up action to take during an executive meeting of the Board.

More recently, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Schmidt, 2013b) reported that the faculty at a Catholic university in the Midwest cast an overwhelming vote of no confidence in its president, a Catholic priest. The vote came in response to efforts by the administration to

change the tenure rules, a move faculty characterized as yet another example of failing to include the faculty in important campus decisions.

Yet another *Chronicle* (Schmidt, 2013a) report gave an account of a dispute between the faculty and administration at a state university in Louisiana. Arguing on behalf of the faculty at that institution, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) accused the administrators of arbitrarily shrinking faculty salaries and laying off 19 tenured professors without consulting department chairs or faculty. The professed reason given by the administration for taking the action was declaration of financial exigency, although it appeared doubtful there was a big enough budget shortfall to warrant such drastic action.

The foregoing accounts of imperiled presidencies or troubled administrations exemplify the failure of leaders to involve an important constituent in institutional decision making. It should come as no surprise, of course, that the process of effective decision making in the complex shared governance context of higher education is not a subject that can be easily addressed in institutes for new presidents. Hendrickson, Lane, Harris, and Dorman (2013) cite a study by Tierney and Minor (2003) to document that 90% of all four-year colleges and universities have some form of faculty governance and that no two systems of faculty governance are exactly alike. The authors further state that college and university presidents are expected to follow the unique shared governance traditions already established at their institutions as they strive to advance their institutions. Along the same lines, the Association of Governing Boards report titled, *The Leadership Imperative* (2010), calls for higher education leaders to embrace a collaborative, but decisive, leadership approach that aligns the president, faculty, and the board together in a well-functioning partnership devoted to a well-defined, broadly affirmed, institutional vision.

No rubric on how to create such well-functioning, democratic partnerships with the faculty constituency will come from institutes for new presidents. Yet, creating such partnerships is essential for a successful presidency, particularly since the faculty constituency is heart and soul of a college or university.

Sooner or later, the new president will have to come to grips with the straightforward advice provided by Fisher and Koch (1996) about the presidential role, vis-à-vis the faculty: “Only they (the faculty) can transform the president’s vision into reality. They

must be cajoled, challenged, and at times faulted, but, most of all, respected and appropriately included in all important decisions affecting the institution” (p. 147).

Challenge for New Presidents

Because faculty governance processes vary from campus to campus, the new president must first understand the formal and informal ways in which faculty opinion is formed at his or her new institution. He or she must then devise techniques to stay in touch with the faculty in order to understand their needs, problems, and aspirations.

Concluding Statement

Unbeknownst to the newly appointed president featured in the opening case scenario, when he arrives at his new institution he will inherit from his predecessor(s) circumstances and contexts that may catapult him and his campus to greatness or portend doom and failure for his presidency. Sooner or later, inherited or unforeseen circumstances will require him to face what Michael Useem (1998) characterized as exceptionally difficult decisions, or fateful moments when his leadership is put to the test; when his goals are at stake and it is uncertain if they can be achieved; and the outcome depends on mobilizing others to realize success. Nothing in the institute for new president sessions will prepare the new president to prevail in those circumstances. To succeed, he will have to adapt his leadership style to his new institution in a way that enables him to display charisma, establish appropriate social distance, and articulate a transformational vision. He also will have to balance the knowledge, experience, and competence he brings to his new position with emotional intelligence or the ability “to rein in emotional impulse; read another person’s innermost feelings; and handle relationships smoothly” (Goleman 1995, p. xiii). Finally, the new president must immediately set out to form partnerships with the faculty that inspire their trust and confidence.

The institutes for new presidents are critically important orientations to the presidency. However, the new president must understand that insights gained at the institutes must be supplemented with lessons drawn from prior experience, observing how other leaders deal with exceptionally difficult decisions, and personal experience with success and failure in the presidential role.

References

- Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges. (2010). *The leadership imperative*. Washington DC: Author.
- Fisher, J. L., & Koch, J. V. (1996). *Presidential leadership: Making a difference*. Phoenix, AR: The Oryx Press.
- Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*. New York, NY: Bantam Books.
- Hendrickson, R. M., Lane, J. E., Harris, J. T., & Dorman, R. H. (2013). *Academic leadership and governance of higher education*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.
- Kim, Y. M., & Cook, B. J. (2013). *On the pathway to the presidency: Characteristics of higher education's senior leadership*. Washington DC: American Council on Education.
- Loehr, J., & Schwartz, T. (2003). *The power of full engagement*. New York, NY: Free Press, a Division of Simon & Schuster.
- Nelson, S. J. (2007). *Leaders in the labyrinth: College presidents and the battleground of creeds and convictions*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.
- Schmidt, P. (2013 a, April 12). Saint Louis University threatens professor with lawsuit over campus survey. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.
- Schmidt, P. (2013 b, April 13). AAUP rebukes Southern U. at Baton Rouge over layoffs. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 59, Issue 31, pp. A15-A15.
- Tierney, W. G., & Minor, J. T. (2003). Challenges for governance: A national report. In R. M. Hendrickson, J. E. Lane, J. T. Harris, & R. H. Dorman (2013), *Academic leadership and governance of higher education*. (pp 42-44). Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.
- Useem, M. (1998). *The leadership moment*. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press.
- Wasylyshyn, K. M. (2012). *Behind the executive door: Unexpected lessons for managing your boss and career*. New York, NY: Springer.