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Briefing Notes:
**Managing the Crush Upon Becoming a College
or University President**

Upon one's announcement as president, key stakeholders are actively strategizing how your appointment might affect their passions and agendas—what some have referred to as “reading your entrails.” While you are thinking through your own entry strategy, the use of time between the appointment and your assuming office, the early months, the critical issues, many stakeholders simultaneously are researching your background, contacting people in their network who know you and reading your available writings. Thus in almost any encounter that you have with a particular stakeholder, they will have had more time to prepare for the meeting than you will.

Upon your appointment, everyone needs to see you yesterday and often they and observers will over interpret the meaning of the order in which you attend to various constituencies such as the board, faculty, students, community leaders, alumni and donors. Below we offer some advice for the early stages of one's presidency, especially on ways to leverage one's scarce time. This note does not address directly the critical issues of developing and communicating key values, vision and priorities, but rather ways of connecting to the institution to give you the intelligence to do so.

Use the interim period to greatest advantage. How best to use this period will depend on the circumstances of the transition:

- The type: crisis, continued development, transformation
- The amount of time between your appointment and taking office
- The complexity of disengaging from your current role

In the *Contrarian's Guide to Leadership*, Sample (2003) felt that this period was so valuable that on the occasion of his next transition, he negotiated for a comparable period before assuming the role. Often one can see things more clearly before one is fully in the role, a version of what Ronnie Heifetz (1997) calls, “going to the balcony.”

Consider taking on a significant project/initiative during this interim period. In some situations there are a few time pressing critical issues (affiliation agreements of the medical school, a troubled major capital project, significant tension with the community, a key recruit for a school with uncertainty about the future of that school) that a designated leader can behind the scenes fully investigate and collaborate with the outgoing leader to make significant progress on this issue before assuming the responsibility for the full breath of the institution. In order to get sanction to focus on one or two key projects, one often has to explicitly state one's strategy for meeting with various groups after your official start date to release some of the immediate pressure for people to get access to you. One president clearly communicated to each of the deans that in the fall he would spend a day at each of the schools to get to know the people, the issues, the strengths, the challenges and thus would not be doing this during the period before taking office.

The choice of a significant project for this interim period is risky in that as an outsider often one may not know enough of the context and do not yet have in place one's support systems. Sometimes in conflict situations, one wants an agent to do the negotiating so that the principal can preserve degrees of freedom. However, if the issue is linked to why the board chose you, and this issue is one that can benefit from sustained personal attention of the president to crack a stalemate or make significant progress on an important issue, it can be a powerful way to begin with a strong statement about your leadership. Ironically, once one becomes the president, it is almost impossible to focus that amount of time on a single significant issue. One example of this kind of focus would be Lee Bollinger engaging with the future of the Columbia School of Journalism by stopping the search (which had three very qualified finalists) in order to re-conceptualize the school and its future and look to find a fit for the new direction. In this case timing was critical. Had he not intervened, it would have been 5 – 10 years before he would have an opportunity to revisit that issue.

One needs to be respectful of the final months of one's predecessor. However, there may be some circumstances in which you may want to negotiate on deferring or advancing some decisions, such as key appointments. Outgoing leaders can support their successors by leaving unfilled some roles that may be turning over as a result of the change in president. Judith Rodin in her final year as president left several key roles unfilled to give her successor immediate flexibility to make appointments without the cost of moving the current occupants of those roles.

One can be more truly in learning mode in the period before taking office as one does not yet have the decisional power to act on the issues that various people surface. One president used this period of several months to visit key stakeholders in their natural habitats on the three different campuses, asking all the same question:

What would be your three wishes to improve [this institution], without one of them being more resources?

His careful note taking signaled seriousness and enabled a richer analysis of the diversity of thinking across groups and over time. In these conversations one can also be linking and getting others views on ideas that have been suggested in earlier conversations, without getting trapped in being seen as putting up one's own trial balloons. One is weaving with threads from the interviews, selectively getting reactions to some of one's own early thoughts, but not necessarily having to put them out directly. Leaders need to accept certain traits of the culture they are joining before they will be supported in introducing new traits (Hirschman, 1997; Gilmore, 2003; Hirschhorn and May, 2000).

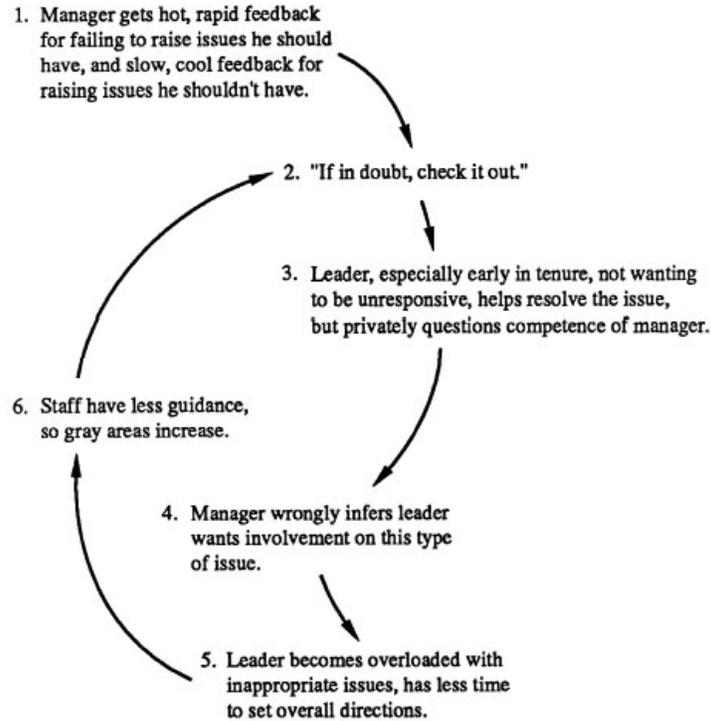
Engage the board in hosting stakeholders in the entry period. Often when a board has been deeply engaged in a search, after a candidate is selected, there can be a natural pulling back as board members take up their wider responsibilities that have been less attended to during this demanding period. (Gilmore, 1993). Yet this can often lead to a missed opportunity for the board to ensure an effective joining and transition. This phase of board work is the final 15% of effort that harvests the value of a good search. In one instance, the board chair during the interim period and through the first year hosted at his home a series of monthly dinners with important stakeholders of the university. Each dinner had a theme, such as major non-profit institutions, business leaders, government officials, and provided the new president an opportunity to meet socially, say a few words and listen to some of the themes and background of the guests' connections to the university and their ideas for the coming years. Then as the president encountered many of these people in the context of a particular issue—when he wanted something or the stakeholder was seeking some link, he had the context of their earlier meeting socially. To have scheduled separate meetings with that many people would have been impossible nor would it have had the gracious hosting and climate of connecting personally before exploring more instrumental ways of being useful to one another. This also afforded the board chair and through him the wider board (as relevant board members would also be invited) to be in contact with the transition process, but not in an inappropriate or intrusive way to operations. This is also a way to begin to build initial relationships with the donor community, a critical constituency.

Begin to build your own staff system. Early on one has to determine the mix of staff you inherit and people you bring or hire. Beware taking on too much too soon, especially before your support systems are high functioning. People will give you intelligence about the staff and operations of the president's office, but trust your own instincts about chemistry and style. You can move too quickly before realizing how rich a staff member's networks and institutional memory are. Conversely, you can move too slowly and miss a window for change. Early on it is easier (and expected) to change staff than after you have worked with them for a period of time. Handling transitions out sensitively is critical in institutions where loyalty and tenure are deep values. Often a mix of new and old serves you well initially. Especially when you are keeping people on, the more transparently you can discuss how you like to be supported and what their ideas are the faster you can build a high functioning support system. The early interactions are inevitably about both specific issues such as seeking a key donor, attending a community event, and about the criteria and process you want to guide scheduling and responsiveness. Reich (1997) when assuming the Secretary of Labor job, shortly after arriving, asked his chief of staff what criteria they were using to screen correspondence. They replied confidently, "the criteria you would use" to which he replied, "I don't know yet my own criteria." This triggered a useful joint-learning process where they developed some guidelines and ways for updating them by sampling a few of the screened out and periodically reflecting back on what was screened in over a month or so to refine the criteria.

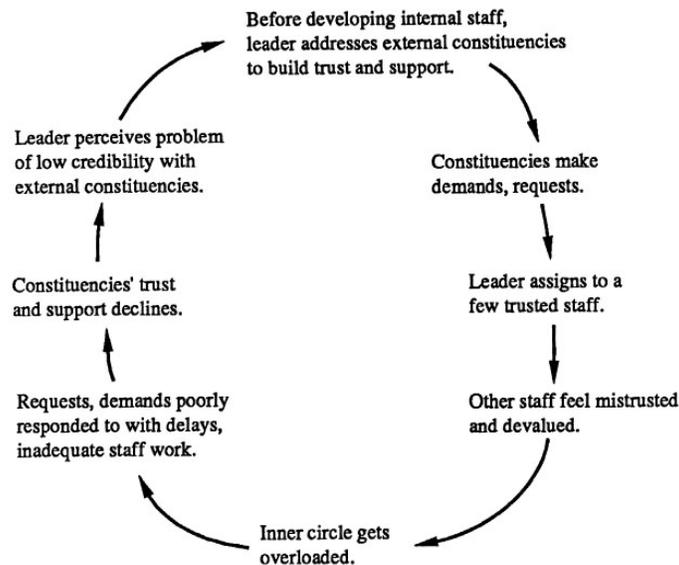
Your personal staff is the front line for the crush of people who want the president's time. If you bring someone new, he or she has no way of knowing that the alumni who calls and says, "I have met with every president for the last five transitions" is critical to schedule right away or not. If you are relying on the existing staff, they don't yet know your priorities. Reflection on the early specific examples is the best way to evolve shared approaches. Many times calls that seem like they are from the outside are actually simulated by internal stakeholders seeking to advance their agendas. Bennis (1989) has written eloquently about the "unconscious conspiracy" in which well intentioned faculty and staff begin to fill your calendar in ways that actually prevent you from being able to focus on the truly significant, transformational challenges that may have drawn the institution to you in the first place. This can come in two guises: people who keep you out of decisions or issues where your involvement could really make a difference and it is aligned with your agenda, and others who inappropriately involve you in "administrivial" issues.

Avoid the typical traps in connecting with existing staff. There are three predictable dynamics between a new entering leader and existing staff that are diagrammed below (Gilmore, 2003, ch. 9).

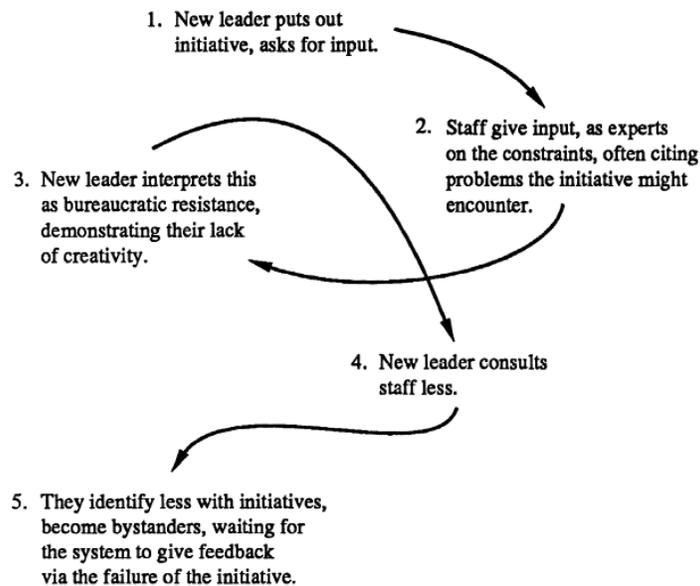
1. Cycle of overloading the leader



2. Over-focusing on external constituencies before developing inside staff.



3. Misunderstanding the mix of conserving and changing between a new leader and staff.



Match your early promises to the carrying capacity of you and your staff.

Under promising and over delivering creates credibility early on. But this refers to the number of issues you put in play, not to how high you set the bar on the few key ones you chose. Thus for example, if there are a number of searches underway, you might want to focus on the few most important and send a strong signal both about how you will be engaged in key searches as well as the level of talent you want to bring to the institution. For new leaders, the most potent form of communication in an increasingly cynical context about spin and rhetoric is through actions. Therefore, with each of the early actions in the many arenas in which you lead, think explicitly about the signals that the action sends: the standards, the values, and the directions.

Beware of early actions creating unsustainable pressures. Upon your appointment, you will be inundated with public and private opportunities to meet with various groups. Early on, get a list of all the ex officio boards or commissions on which the president by role sits. Find out which ones your predecessor committed to and which are best aligned with your emerging agenda. If you attend to meet and learn more about the community, be cautious about not setting the expectation that you will be a regular attendee. One new president, when invited to an annual event, accepted but flagged that he may not go next year—e.g., the athletic dinner—to prevent annual events accreting and filling up his schedule, drifting from the strategic use of the first occurrence to anti strategic in subsequent years. Pick the ones that are most aligned with your agenda. One president with young children early on set the precedent that his spouse would not attend weeknight events. It is much easier to set these limits from the beginning than to get caught up and then have to make the change. In another

case, a president realized that if he accepted one trustee's dinner invitation, it would be difficult to refuse others. So he created, with several trustees, ways of hosting prospects for substantial support for the college as a way of leveraging limited time.

For each key issue, work early on to authorize a partner to represent the institution and keep you up to speed. On most issues, identify early on someone who will support you or take the lead on various initiatives and include them even when stakeholders want to see you alone. Paul Gray, former president of MIT, always asked himself before each meeting, "whose job am I doing in this encounter," or, "whose job am I undercutting by inadvertently communicating a message of mistrust in their capabilities." By being transparent with others that their interests will be better served by working directly with the right member of your staff, you will save time and get the intelligence directly to the right person without you having to brief your staff after meeting alone with someone. One president is explicit that "this issue is too important for me to be the weak secretarial link to get what we will discuss to our director of technology transfer, so we need to at least have him in the meeting with us. But my schedule may slow us down in getting started, so I am comfortable with your meeting with him and keeping me involved when I can really make a difference."

Think of issue jujitsu. When you look at your calendar each day, forget for a minute why they want to see you and associate to how they might be helpful for your agenda, perhaps linking you with a key supporter, giving you a piece of intelligence on a proposed action, etc. This harvests more value from an investment of your scarce time you have already made in agreeing to see this person.

Invent more effective forums for connecting with multiple constituencies that work for you and them. One example is the above strategy of linking trustees, civic leaders, and donors in a series of dinner meetings. Another president invited others to join his morning run. He is a marathon runner. Anyone who wants can meet him at the president's house at 6 a.m. for the morning run. Most are serious runners, but for those who just want his ear on a topic he does not want to support, he can pick up the pace to the point where they can't talk and jog.

Invent ways of systematically connecting with key constituencies, such as undergraduates. Undergraduates are the core of higher education and any president needs to find a way to stay linked to their issues. Often undergraduates seek time on the president's calendar for a variety of issues. One strategy is to group students' requests into a preset format of a monthly lunch. Any student who calls to get on the calendar is asked if he wants to have lunch with the president, then is invited to the preset time. These are held in one of the residential dining halls so that it is visible to many others beyond those participating directly.

Because many of the student requests are pitches for scarce resources (money, support, space) it makes transparent the challenge of competing priorities. The president can invite them to think through the president's eyes across the set—what should be the priorities. This approach shifts use of time:

- *From:* being overwhelmed with a hodgepodge of different issues with high switching costs if some were put into your regular schedule, bad press from screening out many (with little clear criteria), probably doing someone else's job much of the time,
- *To:* your listening to the themes and engaging/educating students in seeing the issues through your eyes (hard choices), doing so visibly to other students, with lower switching costs and scheduling costs as the time is pre set, and serving as a pattern level pulse on the various roles whose job it is to serve students.

Many presidents teach an undergraduate course as another way of keeping linked to this key constituency as well as often serving as a source of pleasure for the president amid all the many demands that are not as central to the mission.

Mouse trap yourself with commitments that will embed you in the right groups for your key agendas and take care of your own mental health.

Teaching a freshman seminar once a semester, speaking at a major conference on research ethics, agreeing to a speak at a major business conference on new links to the university, all can link to your making time for key elements of your agenda and for things you enjoy. Explicitly lay out an annual calendar, with board meetings, key events in the life of the institution, external boards and meetings so that you have a sense when calendaring other things how you can fit them in, e.g., visiting a trustee in connection with an already planned trip, or how you can embed what might otherwise be a distraction into the right cycle to be effective.

Discipline your meeting systems. Build in not just the time for the meeting, but also the necessary time for notes about follow up and time for preparation. You are much more efficient following up on a meeting right after its finished, than later trying to recall the follow up. Explore where a slightly longer group meeting can replace a series of one on one's and enact a message about joint responsibility for function/unit and the whole institution. Build in periodic retreats with groups or a rhythm where the key strategic agenda can have more prominence. Some leaders focus every fourth meeting on strategy and extend it an hour. Reflect, learn and flag changes for long cycle processes so that you harvest learnings when they are fresh versus just before starting them again, when the standard ways of doing it will predominate—e.g., for board meetings, budget cycles, annual retreats, orientation, etc.

Align your time and attention to constituencies around a few carefully chosen critical agendas. Work from your outbox rather than your inbox. Bennis (1989) has written about the unconscious conspiracy, the “helpful” acts of others in bringing issues for your resolution that in aggregate keep you from being a strategic transformational force. The internal equivalent—“the internal saboteur” (Fairbain, 1952) is that part of yourself that keeps you in your comfort zone of old skills versus risking being less competent (e.g., fund raising) transitionally in new areas that are critical for the success of your strategy. Another variant is letting yourself be caught up in busyness to avoid thinking about the really difficult dilemmas in realizing your vision. Periodically do an analysis with your secretary or assistant and review how your calendar matches up with your strategic priorities and adjust your screening and scheduling criteria accordingly. Make changes transparent to key constituencies, for example as a formal fund drive goes public, tell people how much time that will take you away from the campus and authorize key others to take up aspects of institution’s operations.

Invest in the successful transitions of your key hires. A new leader will often be hiring for many key roles such as provost, chief of staff and deans. Just as boards often think their job is done with the hiring decision, so to can a president step away too quickly after a significant appointment. Think with these individuals what is the best way for them to enter successfully, perhaps giving them more time for the transition than your eagerness to have them start yesterday. Spend time with them early on to both help them and get their fresh perspectives on the issues you are taking up.

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