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PREVENTING PRESIDENTIAL DERAILMENT: THE 10 EARLY WARNING SIGNS

By
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INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, two of the co-authors of this paper wrote the book *Presidential Transitions: Its Not the Position, It's the Transition* (2009), and we learned a great deal from sitting presidents, provosts, and trustees about how to manage the complex transition process that occurs at the beginning and completion of college presidencies. Since that time, we have witnessed scores of presidential transitions and been asked to provide advice on these fragile passages. We have engaged other thought partners in an effort to better understand what goes right and wrong with these leadership transitions. Given that there are over 4500 colleges and universities in the United States and Canada, there are literally hundreds of presidential transitions every year. It is our intent to assist senior leaders throughout higher education in understanding the elements of a successful presidential transition, and most importantly why so many go wrong.

In the past year we have had many different conversations about presidential “derailments,” which are occurring more and more frequently. Some of these conversations were with board chairs, provosts, vice presidents of human resources, and even with two floundering new presidents asking for help. What was stunning to us was that although these conversations took place at very different types of institutions, cultures and contexts, when we discussed what went wrong, the warning signs of potential derailment were very similar. Also, these signs were apparent to many people rather early in the game, but they just couldn't stop the train wreck.

For this paper, we will use the definition of a presidential derailment as defined in Stephen Trachtenberg and his colleague's excellent book *Presidencies Derailed: Why University Leaders Fail and How to Prevent It* (2013), as a presidential “exit” of less than three years. Most of these exits create campus upheaval and leave stakeholders confused, anxious and wondering what comes next.

This informal paper will highlight some of the concrete “warning signs” that appear early on. We hope that aspiring and new presidents, as well as senior leadership team members, will find these helpful. By describing these situations, it is our hope that when they begin to appear, people can intervene and provide feedback and support for the new president and avoid the derailment.

Obviously, a struggling president may not exhibit all these derailment behaviors, but any two or more are real danger signs and need to be addressed directly and quickly. Some of these signs are subtle, many are not, but all can be damaging to a new president's first three years.

This paper describes some of the more “fatal” signs of derailment and offers a few stories about new presidents in trouble to illustrate these warning signs. We will also suggest some practical, yet somewhat risky, strategies to deal with a derailing president. When the “derailment train” starts moving, it can be hard to stop. It takes real effort and courage for a president to get back on the right track.

The most important thing for any new leader to remember, but especially a new president, is the value of authentic relationships with their campus stakeholders. This is an obvious and commonsensical idea, but strangely, derailing presidents often don’t understand how vital the relational capital they build is to their success as a president. Many of the “fatal flaws” in this paper are completely avoidable and in retrospect seem obvious, but arrogance, hubris and a lack of emotional intelligence can blind the derailing president, leaving them without an understanding of how important relationships are to their fragile transition. Never forget this, because if positive relationships aren’t built in the first year, there might not be a second year.

In the pages ahead, we will review:

- 10 early warning signs of derailment.
- The new president’s 2 biggest responsibilities (broadly speaking, derailment occurs when these are neglected).
- 4 steps to take when the warning signs appear.

10 EARLY WARNING SIGNS

1) THE NEW PRESIDENT IS A POOR LISTENER

This is a pervasive trait among ineffective leaders. People notice quickly whether the new president is a good listener or not. What happens when a president is seen lacking in this skill is that they lose credibility points quickly. The rumor mill will go into full gear and the new president's reputation of being a poor listener will precede them in meetings and other forums.

Example

We recently witnessed a series of transition mini-town hall meetings for a new president. Although the intention was for people to get to know the new leader, ask questions, and get a feel for the new president, the sessions turned into lectures about how the new president envisioned the future of the campus. The first town hall meeting had over 200 participants, but by the fifth monthly session there were only 15 people who attended. The signs of disinterest were apparent, and the provost was smart enough to ask for some help. The meetings were redesigned so that genuine conversations and discussions occurred going forward, and so that the new president actually listened to their people during these transition meetings.

When a leader really listens well, this conveys respect for others, and respected people feel valued. People who feel valued will share their wisdom, aspirations, and experience with the new leader, which quickly makes the leader much smarter. This is essential for a successful transition.

New presidents need to *listen and learn* carefully, especially in their first year. If they get the reputation of being a good listener, they will gain access to ideas and information that poor listeners never receive. An additional bonus is that the genuine engagement builds relational capital with campus stakeholders, which enables them to lead. This is especially important with faculty who are carefully watching how well a new president actually listens to them. They simply will not follow a bad listener.

The primary place that poor listening reveals itself is in senior leadership team meetings. The new president needs to engage their team in dialogues, not monologues. Encouraging debate and open discussion is key to creating a successful team, and only the new president can set the tone for this kind of team culture. Presidents need to be proactive in engaging their colleagues by asking questions, soliciting feedback, testing their thinking with them, and listening carefully to the team members' responses. If team members seem complacent or disengaged, this is a warning sign that the new president is not building the team. If team members aren't pushing back, sharing contrary opinions, and asking tough but collegial questions, the team members will become a stranded asset quickly.

2) THE PRESIDENT IS NOT REALLY OPEN TO FEEDBACK OR CONTRARY OPINIONS

This might be the most tragic leadership flaw of all. When a new president possesses this negative trait, the transition is in big trouble. Much like the trait of listening (discussed above), people know whether the new president is actually open to different perspectives, honest feedback, and pushback on their ideas. Unfortunately, if people sense the president is not open to hearing it, they simply stop providing good information, feedback, and perspective. Quickly the president is flying blind and is ill informed. This is not a good place to be for any leader—especially a new one, and especially if they don't realize it.

The first place this aversion to feedback appears is usually in the senior team meetings, quite early in the game. When people at this executive level feel that they are unable to provide honest feedback and perspective to their president, the powerful leverage a team approach brings to the table is lost.

Someone on the senior team (often the provost) needs to have the courage to broach this sensitive and delicate subject, and this will take great skill and courage. We have found that if a senior leader approaches this delicate discussion by asking how the new president “sees” the team's contribution,

this might open a conversation. Does the president see the team as a sounding board? A resource? A decision making group? An information vehicle? Bringing up the “role” of the senior team is a relatively safe way to broach the subject and help the president become aware that they might need to use the team differently. It is worth trying, as shutting down feedback is a sure sign of impending derailment.

3) THE PRESIDENT NEVER LEARNS THE BENEFITS OF “SMALL COURTESIES”

Small courtesies include the little thank you’s, the shows of appreciation, acknowledging contributions, taking time to visit campus offices, saying hello to staff, using handwritten notes to communicate respect and regard for people’s accomplishments. Although these are small signs, they are positive ways to connect with people, and each small gesture lets them know the president is paying attention and appreciates their contributions. Humility goes a long way in contributing to a new president’s success, and small courtesies convey that the president is here to serve the people who in turn serve the mission of the institution. This may well be the most important message to convey to followers.

When a new president doesn’t understand the positive power of these small gestures it shows a lack of both emotional self-awareness and humility, which is a very bad combination. People are closely watching the president all the time, and will notice these kindly gestures. They will also readily note when they don’t happen and they will talk about it with others, a lot.

Examples

We know of one president who yelled at the painting crew who were working to make the presidential residence more beautiful with a new color scheme. The union crew chief told the president that he would be the one person he should talk with about any concerns he had, and that the crew chief would convey this to his people. The president proceeded to blow up at the crew chief, reminding him that he was “the president” and would talk to anyone with whom he wanted to converse. This disrespectful altercation made it through the grapevine quickly, throughout the campus, and was embellished rapidly into mythic proportions. The presidential legend grew mightily, but not in a good way.

In another situation, a well-liked and successful former president offered to meet with the incoming president to review history, institutional traditions, board complexities, and to help in any way needed with the transition of the new president. Unfortunately, the new president didn't take advantage of the offer. He didn't feel it was necessary because he wanted to start with a "clean slate" and didn't want to "clutter" things up. This showed deep disrespect for the former president, and although the former president never mentioned it publicly, people knew that the incoming president hadn't taken advantage of his generous offer to help. People questioned why anyone would refuse such a positive proposal from the outgoing, well-respected president. Concerns began to spread in the early weeks of the new leader's transition about their lack of respect for the former president and the institution, as well as doubts about their emotional judgment. How could anyone refuse such a thoughtful offer?

4) THEY DO NOT FORM A STRONG CONNECTION TO THE BOARD CHAIR

Of all the early warning signs, this is one of the most critical—and yet is hidden from view. During the transition process the board often gives a new president a short “honeymoon” during which they each get to understand the way the other works. However, if the board chair and president do not quickly begin to prioritize goals for the first year and do not see issues and challenges in a similar light—in short, if they don't get “on the same page”—this often marks the quiet beginning to a derailed presidency. The disconnect can develop through a series of small misunderstandings, or it can be something very high profile.

Example

One new president came into the position with tacit plans to build a 100,000-seat football stadium, which would “elevate” the university in his view. At the same time, the board had been in negotiations with the Mayor to support the city by leasing the regional stadium in

town. The president quietly began to lobby individual trustees about his “exciting” idea, and it finally got to the board chair’s ear through the grapevine. An intense and disagreeable conversation ensued about institutional priorities and mostly about trust. Their relationship was damaged and fragile, and set the stage for the “derailment train” to make an eventual visit.

Shortly thereafter, the same president came to blows with the provost, and the board chair was astonished when the president dismissed the provost, who was an alumnus, faculty member, and former dean, and revered by many. The president and board chair had never discussed the apparently significant issues that led to the dismissal. The board chair felt ambushed once again, and moved quickly to oust the new president.

In another situation, a new president failed to do his due diligence in understanding the expectations and style of the chair. The chair was caustic and a severe micromanager. The president reported that all of his correspondence was to be reviewed and approved by the board Chair prior to its dispatch. Operational decisions were required to be vetted with the chair in advance of decisions being made. And while the new president was viewed as approachable and valued transparency, the board chair did not share the value of transparency and believed that “bad news” should be dealt with behind the scenes and not shared with the board. The new president derailed after two years because he did not do his homework on how the board functioned and he did not have the skills or experience to address the conflict.

5) THEY BELIEVE THAT THEY ARE *THE* CHANGE AGENT

We understand that higher education is dealing with a lot of change and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. We also know that boards have very high expectations for change when a new president is selected. But when a new president comes in with their “change plan” ready to go, several things happen rather quickly:

First, they show deep disrespect for the institution and its people, because they don’t even know the place and now they are going to change it! This does not go over well.

Second, constituents will have big reservations about the new president's discernment & judgment. How can you change something you *don't yet understand*? That haste will seem foolish and will cause a lot of anxiety around campus. When the new president actually comes on board, stakeholders across campus will wonder what the quality of their decisions will be. Will they have to live with the consequences of poor and ill-informed decisions by this leader?

Next, the campus community will not trust their intentions. They will ask many unsettling questions: Is there a hidden agenda? Is the new president a puppet of the board? What do they know that they aren't telling us? If their intentions are questionable, then people will not trust them from day one. Without trust (or at least openness to building trust), a new president will not be able to lead. This is another early warning sign of the derailment train and is *not* the way to start a new presidency.

Lastly, the pre-existing "change plan" subtly but powerfully communicates to campus stakeholders that all the good work that was accomplished by the former president, senior leadership team, and campus community just wasn't good enough. It undermines and throws the former leadership "under the bus" in full view of everyone, many of whom may have strong connections and affection for the former president and leadership. Campus leaders feel invested in the prior work, so it feels disrespectful (unless there is a severe crisis) to dismiss what took place before the new president's grand ideas arrived on campus.

While it is possible that there *might* be a *rare* instance where a dramatic "change plan" is needed because a campus is in deep trouble, it is an exceptional situation, not a common occurrence.

Examples

One of our colleagues, a provost at a large public institution, had one such president recently come to his campus. The new president revealed her rather dramatic change plan for the university in a town hall meeting with a couple of hundred attendees. What could have been a wonderful opportunity to make a positive impression at the beginning of her presidency turned out to be an awful event, as faculty and staff started to grumble and ask tough questions: Who is this person? Why does she want to change so much? What is the rationale for all of this? Is this the board's secret, political initiative? Why haven't we been involved or consulted? Who is she talking to about us? Where is she getting her information? How can she possibly know what needs changing—she is a stranger!

The legitimate reasons for resistance were endless. Bottom line, it simply did not make sense to people, and they resented it. The town hall was a disaster and became one of the legendary stories people will tell over and over on that campus, for decades to come. Unless the president throws out her ill-informed “plan” and learns to listen to her people, she will fail and derail rather quickly.

An example of a derailment averted happened to one of our presidential colleagues in the following way. Soon after he arrived, it became clear that the institution’s survival would require letting go of 35% of the workforce, including tenured faculty, cutting 50% of the academic program, and eliminating nearly \$4 million from the operating budget within six months. Now that’s a dramatic situation! The president was new and unknown. He quickly asked for help to create an inclusive process, successfully defined the reality the institution was facing, and then created a collaborative planning process that provided a credible preferred future and a way out of the crisis. The start of his presidency was successful because he involved stakeholders in crafting a shared strategic plan going forward.

6) THEIR PERSONAL LIVES BECOME THE INSTITUTION’S PRIORITY

We have witnessed several presidents recently whose personal lives have become paramount. Rather than actually leading their institution and dealing intelligently with the challenges the campus faces, they have let the personal details take center stage, forgetting why they were hired in the first place. These individuals were more interested in “being the president” than in “doing the presidency,” and were more interested in being served by the institution than in serving the institution.

Early warning signs included an inordinate amount of time voicing concerns about:

- Their presidential car (Is it new enough? Presidential enough?)
- Their residence (Is it beautiful enough? Updated?)
- Their office (Does the office look “presidential” enough? Is it warm? Welcome? Equal to their status?)

- Their spouse/partner's role (This a very important issue to them, because if there is not an agreed-upon position description, they will create a role for the spouse and it is usually the wrong one!)

Examples

We have witnessed several new presidents whose partner/spouse became a problem for the campus. In one case, the president's spouse let it be known throughout the college town that he was the president's husband and wanted a prestigious and meaningful role on the high-profile art community board. Another partner actually attended cabinet meetings because she was "trusted by the president," and this spouse wielded huge influence on decisions because she wanted to "protect" her husband. Still another kept reminding staff to make sure her husband was treated "presidentially." She made everyone around her nervous, because they couldn't quite figure out what she meant, specifically, by "presidentially."

These leaders fall in love with the prestige of the position, and their title becomes very important. They want to be treated in a "presidential" fashion, and they look for any miscues by others that convey anything less than the utmost respect for themselves. They spend a whole lot of time worried about the trappings of the position and how they are treated, rather than on doing the hard work of the presidency.

When this deep interest in all the *accouterments* of the presidency reveals itself, it also reveals the person, and the picture isn't a positive one. Their powerful self-interest conveys a message to campus stakeholders. Presidents are almost always treated very well, so attention to what really matters for the success of the institution should remain their focus, not the pretty little things.

We could tell stories few people would believe, but let us share a few of the "gentler" examples. Obviously these are exceptions, but they are illustrative.

Examples

In one situation, the president was a “late sleeper” and didn’t hold any meetings before 11:00 a.m. This allowed him to rise at a leisurely hour, exercise, and do his daily meditation. He also didn’t like evening meetings, because he needed his “balance” and “quiet” time. Therefore, not much presidential work got done after 4:00 p.m. He also took long, “healthy” lunches because his “life balance” was his priority, not the institutional issues and challenges his campus faced.

On another campus, the president had an automobile leased for personal and business use. Every two years a new vehicle appeared, and each one became successively larger and more luxurious. When the student newspaper ran a cartoon drawing of the latest car with a ladder so the president could climb in, the negative attention was a huge distraction, and the president conveyed a sense of entitlement that was not helpful in continuing conversations about institutional budget issues. It didn’t matter that the car was paid for through a gift from a trustee – the damage was done. Appearances matter.

On another campus, the president had a dog, Panda, that he absolutely loved, and brought the dog everywhere he went. We mean everywhere. Over time, there were a couple of “accidents” in people’s offices and meeting rooms, and each time, the rumor mill kicked into high gear about Panda’s latest incident. No other employees of the institution brought their pet to campus, but the president felt free to have Panda assist him with his duties. He was oblivious to the fact that a lot of people don’t really like dogs; some are allergic to them or some are actually afraid of them.

7) THEY NEVER ASK FOR HELP

New leaders aren’t the only ones that are guilty of this tragic leadership flaw; many experienced leaders never learn to ask for help, and they suffer because of it. When a new president comes to campus, their learning curve is very steep. That is just a fact. They need to learn people, facts,

figures, culture, and customs, and they need to learn all of this quickly. It doesn't mean that they aren't ready to be the leader, it's just that there is a whole lot to learn. So asking for help is a really smart thing to do.

Carefully reviewing the large briefing books that are provided is just a slice of the information a new leader needs. The wonderful thing about higher education is that there are a lot of really smart people who want to help and who want the new leader to be successful. But they have to be asked! It's amazing how many leaders never develop this skill. Many leaders are reluctant to ask for help because they fear it might convey that they aren't competent enough, or smart enough, or because they believe that "real" leaders never ask for help. Nothing could be further from the truth. It's a destructive myth that is far too prevalent in higher education.

For those "doubting Thomas's," there is a great article to read, "Smart People Ask for (MY) Advice: Seeking Advice Boosts Perception of Competence" (2014). Though this will be counterintuitive for many leaders, the article demonstrates that asking for advice and help makes a positive impression on people and makes you look smarter. Ask for help—your success depends on it.

One of the very early warning signs of this trait is that the new president either doesn't ask any questions or answers every question by quoting past experience and citing their former employer. This is a dangerous trait for any president, let alone a new one. In the face of the complex and adaptive challenges most campuses face, no one can claim to have all the answers. To assume that they do is the height of arrogance. A new president has to be an avid learner, and the very best way to do this is to ask other people about their ideas, aspirations, experience, hopes, and especially their ideas about the challenges their campus faces.

When a president doesn't ask questions, people begin not only to resent the arrogance but also begin to doubt deeply the discernment and judgment of the new leader. "She thinks she is the smartest person in the room; he thinks he has all the answers," they say to each other in the corridors and behind closed office doors. This leads to a lack of faith and begins to cast a shadow across the new leader's presence.

Asking questions conveys curiosity and interest, a winning combination—and, counterintuitively, it demonstrates to others that you are smart.

How to ask for help

We have used the following simple “inquiry” approach to help new presidents solicit feedback on their ideas and proposals proactively. This approach to smart inquiry entails 3 steps:

1. “This is my best current thinking about this decision/proposal/issue.” (The choice of words—*best current thinking*—clearly conveys that the leader has not yet made a final decision.)
2. “This is *how* I got to this current thinking...” (The leader shares the rationale for where they are in the decision process, as well as *how* they got there—what facts, data, experience, and wise counsel they used to get to this place. In practice, most leaders rarely share this information with followers, which leaves their people speculating about the “how.”)
3. “Now help me understand what I might be missing?” (This is the game changer, and conveys to others that the new president—or any leader asking this question—is actively soliciting feedback. It is an *invitation* for discussion and dialogue. It also conveys that the leader does not have all the answers and has some humility to boot!)

8) THEY BRING AN OUTSIDER FROM THEIR PREVIOUS JOB(S) WHO THEY KNOW WELL AND TRUST TO BE THEIR “CAMPUS CONFIDANT”

This is a natural inclination for lots of new presidents. They want to work closely with someone they are very familiar with. The intention is fine, but it almost always creates a negative dynamic with other people (particularly the senior team) who work closely with the president. We have seen several instances in the past couple of years where this has happened. In one instance, a former leadership coach became the planning consultant, and in another, a former colleague was brought in as the new chief of staff.

This rarely goes well, for several reasons:

First, the president who is new to the institution, and needs to learn a great deal, now has a thought partner who is also “new” and who also needs to learn a lot. Now you have two senior level “students” talking with each other instead of with people who understand the campus and its complexity. This is just not a smart thing to do early in the presidency.

Second, the “new” and trusted person sets up a strange dynamic where the senior team members wonder what the “newbies” are always talking about. What decisions are they making without their input? What level of influence and power does the newbie have? Can they push back on the newbie’s ideas without offending the president? (Probably not.)

Third, the new person has an inordinate amount of *unearned* power and influence. This access creates resentment among those who have earned their access to the president with years with hard work and contribution. Just because the new person was fortunate enough to know the president previously, they are (unfairly) given the same rights and privileges.

Example

A new first-time president brought in a close personal friend to fill an important cabinet position and elevated the position to the level of executive vice president. The president's friend was highly experienced, seasoned, and competent. However, all of those advantages were lost, because the community could not overlook the personal relationship. Other team members viewed the EVP as “the president’s guy,” and this hurt the credibility of both the president and the EVP. The board was supportive of the president, but questioned the effectiveness of the EVP. The president later learned that board members felt uncomfortable raising their concerns about the EVP to the president because of the personal relationship, which led to further dysfunction and distrust.

Lastly, when a new president brings someone external on staff from a previous job experience, “room” must be made for them (e.g., an office, a position, salary, staff support). This usually costs a lot of money and can even misplace other senior leaders. While each new president must work to

form their team, inserting a former colleague creates an awkward beginning and should be avoided. Although the new president will certainly need several confidants whom they deeply trust and with whom they can be honest and open, this can be accomplished by selecting a former president, a colleague from another campus, or even an external consultant. These individuals can be assets to the president without reporting directly to them.

9) THEY NEVER REALLY CONNECT WITH STUDENTS

Students are an important stakeholder group for any president, but new presidents especially need to build great relationships with their students. This means they need to be visible *and* accessible to them. You cannot connect with someone you never meet or interact with, so the president needs to be proactive in reaching out to students (well beyond the student government leaders).

They can do this in many ways: They can attend both athletic events and academic forums. We have several colleagues who make it a habit to have a weekly lunch with a group of diverse students and find it a great investment of time and attention. You could take a slow walk through the student center (without an entourage) and chat casually with students. The word will get around that you are available to talk, and students will actually seek you out for a conversation.

Example

Recently, one of the authors was on a campus with a very new president. We were having dinner and as he sat down with us, around 5:00, he mentioned that he had to leave the dinner by 6:45. We inquired why, and his reply was telling. "There is a solo music concert I need to attend, by one of our best music students who is playing the cello." We asked how many people might be at the cello concert that evening? He said that he was unsure, but estimated about 30 attendees. He was conveying that paying attention to student work by his actual presence was a primary value for him, regardless of the attendance numbers. We think that he will be quite successful with that presidential mindset.

Students have a very sensitive “baloney” meter, so the new president must connect with them *authentically*. If students think that they are an afterthought or that the president is just going through the motions, the word on the street will get out like lightning. The president will lose an important stakeholder group, and those stakeholders will also probably talk with their parents about the new president in unflattering ways.

Examples

The president of a large state university was ousted as a result of student protests because he was disengaged and failed to take seriously students voicing concern about the climate on campus. The students saw him as position of authority, rather than a person of caring who occupied a position of authority.

In another case, the president of a large state university was arbitrarily dismissed by the governing board. This president was highly engaged and known by students across campus. The students effectively mobilized and protested the firing. They got the attention of the governor. The president was reinstated and the board chair was replaced. This was a president who understood that her priority was the students, and the students knew they were a priority for their president.

10) THEY MUST BE INVOLVED IN EVERY DECISION, OR THEY NEVER CLARIFY THE “DECISION RULES”

Often, a new president gets involved in lots of small decisions that they should not even know about. A positive interpretation of this behavior is that the president is attempting to learn “how things are done around here.” A more destructive interpretation is that the new president has a tendency to micromanage their direct reports. This is a negative trait for any president, and *especially* a new one. We have had the misfortune of working with a few micromanagers, and it is an unpleasant experience. New presidents have to realize that almost always, they have inherited a competent senior staff who are talented and experienced. It is essential to a successful presidency to let them do their jobs.

Example

One new president was also new to higher education and came from a hierarchical environment. He did not take the time to understand the culture of the institution or the academy. He was insecure, did not trust his people, often treated them as incompetent or inferior, and micromanaged virtually every decision. He had to approve every color swatch and every office move. He routinely became upset when there was a decision made that he did not know about. The chilling effect on senior staff was serious, and the morale around campus deteriorated quickly.

One of our authors discusses this dynamic in depth in his paper “Micromanagement: An Incurable Management Style?” (Sanaghan, *Academic Impressions*, 2016).

We have also seen the other extreme where a new president is way too open to all opinions, information, and advice, and then is unable to sort through and effectively weigh the plethora of information they’ve received. They become trapped by information overload, and each succeeding conversation becomes a series of “What do you think?” exercises. This can result in delaying important decisions “until there is even more information available.” This leadership procrastination has a negative impact on the campus. People expect their leaders to actually make decisions, especially important ones. When there is a sense that the president can’t “pull the trigger,” constituents can lose faith in the new leader quickly.

It is important that the new leader clarify the decision making process. The new president needs to establish two things about decision making with their senior team/cabinet:

1. How will decisions be made as a team?

For example, will the senior leadership team members have some input, while the president makes final decisions? Or will the team have real influence and will they make decisions together with everyone having equal footing?

2. How does the president make decisions?

What is their “style?” Do they like lots of detailed data and information? Or do they prefer headlines, summaries and stories? Do they trust their instincts and intuition a great deal?

Bringing clarity to decision-making early in the presidency is important. People need to know *who* makes *which* decisions. Without clarity, there can be trouble ahead.

THE NEW PRESIDENT'S TWO BIGGEST RESPONSIBILITIES

We have identified 10 early warning signs that a new president may derail. More broadly, derailment occurs when a new president neglects their two major and most immediate responsibilities:

1) TO DEEPLY UNDERSTAND THE COMPLEXITY AND CULTURE OF THEIR NEW CAMPUS

This can only be done by interacting with lots of people, asking good questions and listening well—especially to the stories people tell about the history of the institution and what they are most proud of. Culture is the fabric that holds people together. Unless the new president understands “the way things are done around here,” they are ill informed and much more likely to derail.

This takes some real time and attention, on the new leader’s part, but is essential if they are to move the campus forward thoughtfully and not step in a lot of “mud pies” along the way, and if they are to avoid unintentional disrespect to the institution’s values and traditions.

2) THEY NEED TO BUILD THE “RELATIONAL CAPITAL” NECESSARY TO LEAD THE INSTITUTION

We mentioned the importance of relational capital briefly in the opening paragraphs of this paper, and it bears repeating. Campus constituencies, particularly the trustees, faculty, and senior leadership

team members, must have faith in the character and competence of the new president. They need to believe in their hearts that the new president is respectful of the institution and worthy of their trust. Without this trust, a new president simply cannot lead.

New leaders can build trust by:

- Listening well and reflecting what they are learning
- Clarifying their “decision rules”
- Asking for help and admitting when they don’t know something
- Showing appreciation
- Being visible and accessible
- Dealing with the tough issues

There is nothing especially new or brilliant about these suggestions, but they are often hard to do consistently over time.

Once the new leader understands the campus culture and builds trusting relationships, they can collaboratively create the strategic agenda that will move the institution forward.

4 STEPS TO TAKE WHEN THE WARNING SIGNS APPEAR

The following are some suggestions for consideration. None are easy to implement, because communicating to a new president that things are less than perfect can be risky and a career-limiting move. But these steps have worked with many presidential transitions we have advised.

1) ESTABLISH A GROUND RULE BETWEEN THE PRESIDENT AND THE PROVOST

Early on, the new president and provost should establish a working “ground rule” that clearly establishes that they will be open and honest with each other *at all times*. This conversation might also involve the board chair, to help “institutionalize” the agreement. If the provost has “difficult” information to share, they must do so, as quickly as possible. The last thing you want is a brave and honest provost getting in trouble with the new president (e.g. not being involved in the big decisions, or being disinvited to high-profile meetings) for speaking truth to power and telling it like it is.

2) ESTABLISH A TRANSITION TEAM WITH THE FOLLOWING RESPONSIBILITIES

A highly credible transition team made up of a cross section of campus constituencies can be tasked with providing concise issue summaries and constructing an introductory “tour” to connect the new president with the community. This transition team can “take the pulse” for a new president and report in during regularly scheduled quarterly meetings throughout the first year. Their insights about gaps in information and campus concerns can be enormously helpful, as they are delivered as part of an ongoing assessment and learning process.

3) CONDUCT A CONFIDENTIAL 60-DAY REVIEW

A confidential 60-day review of the new president's effectiveness is a helpful protocol. A select group of leaders (e.g., the senior team, the faculty senate president, the administrative council chair) can be identified up front, and asked if they would help provide *anonymous* feedback about the new president's effectiveness. Obviously, the new president needs to agree with this review (if they don't, this is a very bad sign) and needs to see it as a constructive process that will help them enhance their effectiveness.

This *anonymous* review should be conducted by the HR function—if HR has the ability and reputation to do it well. It could also be conducted by a former president from another campus, a credible external consultant, or a revered, retired board chair.

We also strongly suggest a comprehensive, confidential six-month follow up, so that any ineffective behaviors can be addressed quickly. Do not wait a year to do this; by then, it might be too late. By then, ineffective behaviors may have developed into bad, even intractable habits, and the damage has already been done.

4) ESTABLISH CLEARER EXPECTATIONS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The board chair and executive committee (or a presidential assessment committee) are really the only persons who can hold the president “accountable” at the end of the day. There are multiple stakeholders who can have great influence and even cause difficulty for a new president, but the board chair and executive committee are vital to the new president's success. They need to communicate in no uncertain terms that they expect a president to behave in a “presidential” and collaborative manner. This means:

- Communicating effectively and often
- Being transparent
- Listening well
- Making good decisions

- Building a strong senior team
- Asking for help
- Having constructive relationships with the faculty and students

The list is long and hard. The key is to communicate explicit expectations up front and reiterate them often. The entire board should be consulted about these expectations, and the board chair and executive committee should deliver the message in clear terms. This will ensure that behavioral expectations are clear and that the president will be held accountable for them over time. To this end, the trustees need to ensure and communicate that there is a credible and regular assessment process in place, not some informal or ad hoc procedures that lack rigor or discipline.

Setting these expectations early sets the table for an honest and supportive relationship with clear expectations for performance. The new president needs to understand that the board chair and executive leadership will trust them, pay attention to their progress (which is not the same as micromanaging them), and act as a real partner in leading the institution.

Cautionary note:

*At a few institutions, we have seen the 360-degree feedback process used as a “performance management” or evaluative tool for the president. This should **never** happen. The 360-degree feedback process is a developmental and learning process, not an evaluative one.*

CONCLUSION

The college and university presidency is difficult, demanding, and important work. Assuming the role of president, especially for the first time, requires deliberation, intention, planning, wise counsel, and regular feedback. Too often, presidential transitions are made haphazardly and lead to costly and avoidable derailments.

The intent of this paper is to help aspiring and new presidents and trustees identify early warning signs of presidential derailment and offer strategies for averting derailment. The leading causes of derailment have little to do with technical and operational competence. Derailment most often occurs because of unrealistic expectations, faulty assumptions, relational incompetence, and a lack of emotional intelligence. Fundamentally, leadership is about leading relationships and shaping culture. In today's environment, this requires a collaborative way of being and a commitment to service. Lacking these, new leaders are likely to find their presidential tenures hastened and their careers derailed.