



**Don't let your top administrators
fall from grace; have a solid game plan
for their successful retention.**

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Making the Marriage Last

By Barbara Kaufman, Ph.D.

A new president, academic officer, or other administrator arrives on campus with credentials that, on paper, seem closely aligned with the criteria established by the search committee. The candidate receives a comprehensive campus tour and meets colleagues and staff in a series of welcoming receptions. Yet, a year later, the honeymoon is over, and the campus wants a divorce.

How does this happen? How can universities increase their success rate in hiring and retaining senior administrators? The key lies in the design of comprehensive recruitment, selection, and leadership development processes within the broader context of succession planning, rather than within the limits of traditional hiring practices.

Nothing can go wrong...go wrong...

When a university sets out to hire an administrator, any number of things can go wrong, right off the bat. First, university officials frequently don't take the time to step back and rethink the vacant position in the context of the *current* leadership environment. The search committee moves ahead with an antiquated position description that survived one or more long-tenured predecessors, or a parade of interim administrators.

Then, once the committee completes its process, the hiring administrators interview the top candidates. But, instead of asking questions to ascertain institutional fit, hiring administrators often react to the urgency of filling the position, and use the interview process to "sell" the campus to the candidate. Once the candidate is sold on the university and campus welcoming rituals are complete, the newly appointed administrator's past experiences are magically expected to translate into an immediate understanding of the new campus's culture and, conversely, the campus's intuitive grasp of the new boss's desires. As the months progress, the honeymoon behavior is abandoned, others routinely critique the new leader's performance, and the rumors begin to fly.

When the match between the role and the leader is out of alignment, consequences range from unmet leadership challenges to wasted resources. One college president found that a new chief academic officer was unable to provide the support he had hoped for in achieving consensus on eliminating declining academic programs and slashing the budget. Having to address these challenges himself kept the president from his fundraising activities. Elsewhere, poor succession choices

have resulted in loss of public faith in the college, low morale, mirror-image hiring, and leaders who are retired-on-the-job. Searching for a replacement taxes a university's resources, as does the long-term process of reversing an administrator's behavioral patterns. But, with solid planning, it doesn't have to be this way.

Steps to a Better Fit

The following critical success factors can reduce the likelihood of costly succession mistakes.

Create a role profile. Hiring a replacement is an opportunity to a) re-evaluate and profile the leadership role, and b) identify core competencies and assess institutional needs in the context of the future leadership environment and the campus's strategic direction. Even where policy or politics discourages rewriting the job description, administrators can supplement that description by developing a "Cliffs Notes" document that identifies the changes to the constellation of roles the individual will play, and the related core competencies.

Become involved with the search committee before launching the recruitment process. Never delegate the job of translating needs to the search committee. There are ways to influence the committee without creating an adversarial relationship. For example, when a new university president had to replace a chief academic officer in office for over 20 years, she commissioned a report based in part on interviews with key constituents. It outlined the CAO's historical and future role, plus desired core competencies; it formed the foundation of a revised job profile, which was then presented to the search committee. Because the president was proactive in conducting a needs assessment *before* the recruitment process was under way, she was able to influence the committee in ways that resulted in a successful appointment.

Utilize behavioral/event-interviewing techniques. Instead of wooing a promising candidate based on a "vitae fit," ask about *specific* successes and failures in managing crises, budget cuts, and style differences in decision making/problem solving.

"I've recently raised the bar on my expectations at the point of entry," says Dr. Louanne Kennedy, Provost of **California State University, Northridge**. "In my interviews, I'm no longer selling the university to the candidate. Instead, I ask questions that address the individual's management style, experience, ability

to solve problems and resolve conflict, lessons learned from past difficulties, what he/she perceives as the greatest challenge entering the position, and the candidate's evaluation of the interview experience. I also ask questions designed to test how much effort the candidate has devoted to learning about the university."

Leveraging reference checks. Final reference checking is a waste of time unless it elicits information on "soft" characteristics, for the purpose of assuring institutional fit. When one president learned through a reference check of a candidate's preference for external fundraising activities, it raised a red flag because the vacant position was heavy on *internal* strategy implementation. Based on this and other fit factors, the president decided to select another, more suitable candidate. Importantly, final reference checking is best done by the hiring official, *not* by a member of the search committee. A president of other senior administrator of another university is more likely to be candid in answering questions regarding a candidate's experience, competencies, and style, when speaking with a peer.

Making the Honeymoon Last

With the new hire on board, the real leadership development begins.

"We do little management development as people move up," admits Kennedy. "Someone who does well in a position is promoted to the one above it, even though it may require an entirely different skill set." But development is *critical* to promotions and new hires.

"Competence and expertise in an academic discipline don't necessarily translate into leadership or management skills," says Dr. Bruce Heller, president of Strategic Leadership Solutions in Encino, CA. "Because in higher education, hiring decisions are often based on emotions rather than on analysis, there is a predisposition to look only for the positive in a new leader. This results in unreasonable expectations that set the individual up for failure. Even worse, the leader who is perceived as 'godlike' is unrealistically expected to impact change quickly."

Leadership orientation. In fact, when surveyed about the one thing they wished they had known when they first arrived on campus, university presidents in one state system stated they could have benefited most from a deeper understanding of campus and community culture. A leadership orientation process must go beyond introducing administrative policy and processes, to sharing tips about how things *really* get done on campus. Newly appointed leaders need to know about the realities of decision-making and problem-solving processes, conflict-management styles, and the potential landmines of unwritten behavioral norms on the campus. Take the example of one new CIO who believed that the president had delegated authority to move ahead with certain key technology initiatives. Within six weeks, he was at odds with constituents across the campus because he wasn't aware that he would need to build consensus for his decisions and actions—and he failed to do so. So many of his decisions were blocked by constituents that he was forced to leave six months later. At Cal State Northridge,

Kennedy is in the process of designing an orientation process for new deans that describes the institution's culture, the way the university operates, leadership expectations, the central issues facing the university, and the new dean's role as part of a team to resolve those issues. What's more, "We've asked our current deans to design a program they *wish* they'd had," says Kennedy—a terrific idea.

Coaching and mentoring. In addition to a leadership orientation, early coaching and informal mentoring are imperative. A mentor can create a safety zone in which the new leader is shown the ropes and can ask the "stupid" but relevant questions. Regular, developmental one-on-one feedback from the boss is invaluable, particularly in the first three months. Equally valuable is action coaching, in which boss and subordinate debrief around specific examples of conduct and discuss alternatives for handling particular situations. For example, a provost who was used to New York-style candor came to another part of the country where only private disagreement was acceptable. Action debriefing was key, early on in this case. The lesson learned? Never assume that a new administrator knows how to lead on your campus based on prior experience.

Planning for Success

A flawed recruitment process that ends in divorce is not only destabilizing for the university community, but it's expensive: Conservatively, it can cost an institution three or four times the departing administrator's annual salary. After the fact, campus leadership results suffer as the institution limps along trying to cope. A talent drain can also build momentum as other administrators who are forced to work harder jump ship. Take note of these final tips:

Be proactive before the need is urgent. Instead of beginning recruitment/selection efforts after an executive is promoted or retires, begin a more comprehensive succession-planning assessment at least 18 months before the opportunity arises to fill a key position.

Lead the assessment process, champion the leadership requirements, and stay involved to assure best institutional/behavioral fit.

Invest in ongoing leadership development. Sometimes it's useful to bring in an independent third party (not steeped in campus culture) to conduct the needs assessment, and assess existing leadership development support. Take advantage of such expertise, and utilize other tools and resources to assist in leadership development.

Your goal: to hire and retain the best possible talent for your IHE. With a well-constructed game plan, the objective is achievable. ■

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