



**Before the sparkles dance before  
their eyes, help your board prepare  
for a successful succession.**

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# Succession Planning Means Planning Ahead

By Barbara Kaufman, Ph.D.

**W**hen a board of trustees selects a president under crisis-driven circumstances, chances are the new leader will begin executing his or her role based on a set of expectations that are not applicable or ideal. That's why the time to rethink the requirements of the presidency is *before* there is a crisis. This includes evaluating the current president against a set of job expectations, as well as periodically revisiting organizational objectives to keep them aligned with evolving priorities and directions. In this way, when a leader retires or leaves to pursue another opportunity, the board can do a competent job of recruitment because it truly knows what the organization needs *at that point in time*.

## Succession Planning Begins With Assessment

According to Molly Broad, president of the **University of North Carolina**, "Universities benefit from continuity of leadership and suffer from significant disruptions. When leadership changes do occur, the responsibility of ensuring a smooth transition rests with the board. Self-assessment as a part of succession planning is vital because it reveals how the board's performance contributes to the long-term health and well-being of the institution."

In truth, systematic and periodic assessment of the institution and its leadership is a primary responsibility of the board. "All boards should reserve serious time to take a substantive look at how they're doing," says Tom Ingram, president of the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB). He points to AGB's Board Self-Study Workshop, which engages a written survey completed by all board members and the chief executive. "It is done anonymously and confidentially to maximize candor and honesty," he explains. "Many boards have found this survey to be a powerful way to raise the bar for the board, especially when done every three or four years. On that schedule, there is usually enough turnaround on the board to keep the process fresh and stimulating. But the key to board performance improvement is the combination of the written survey with the trained facilitators; boards need objective, third-party help with this."

Only when the board has revisited the mission statement,

identified challenges, opportunities and priorities—as well as evaluated the degree to which the institution is meeting customer or constituent needs through effective leadership—will it have a reasonable picture against which to measure a *current* leader's performance. Without this "snapshot," the board of trustees has no established precedent upon which to evaluate the core competencies needed in a new leader. The result in that case is that the board often relies on the job profile created during the last search or, worse, makes selections for all the wrong reasons (personal agendas, personality, the "halo effect," or personal references). It's no wonder such selections frequently backfire.

Although assessment-based recruitment and selection *should* be self-evident, it is simply (and unfortunately) not how many boards and search committees operate. One West Coast university we know of hired a president whose extraordinary vision generated great excitement. When the board finally realized that he lacked vital core competencies such as the patience to implement and the willingness to focus on fundraising, a vote of "no confidence" was not far away. Similarly, the board of an East Coast institution hired a highly creative, innovative president. Alas, she was extraordinarily impatient in a resource-scarce environment, and regularly overspent. If the board had realistically appraised budgetary realities and realized the need for a manager skilled in implementation, it could have avoided a painful five-year financial recovery once the president was fired.

## Know the Institution's Goals

"The average term of a public university board member is only four years," says Broad. "It is therefore essential that the leader and the board periodically review the institution's mission and goals so that new members can be informed about the role they play in the larger picture."

When goals are not revisited and updated periodically, it's certainly not surprising that a president will continue to work from an old set of expectations. For example, at a Midwest university, internal problems began mounting while the new president was delivering what the board had asked for: primarily

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external efforts. Instead of establishing a new set of internal goals, board members became hostile and contemplated firing the president. If board members had focused more on how they managed the relationship with the president and if they had systematically reexamined their priorities, they would have recognized the badly needed shift to an internal focus.

Sometimes the ideal candidate will be a counterintuitive choice, someone who does not meet any of the historical patterns of leadership expectations. "I am the first woman and the first non-North Carolinian to serve as president of the university," says Broad. "While I brought considerable knowledge and experience from a wide geographic area, it was a shock to the citizens of North Carolina that someone not born and raised here was serving in this important leadership position." The university's board understood that Broad had everything the organization needed at that point in time: a deep understanding of higher education, sensitivity to the organization's culture, and a global network which the institution desperately needed to make its mark in a global environment. As an economist, she was also the ideal president in a time of troubled budgets.

Looking at "counterintuitive" options is important, as is considering the possibility of promoting from within. "Unfortunately, in higher education we have an obsession with looking outside our institutions for successor talent," says Ingram. "The nature of leading a college or university is such that deserving people already on the management team often face uphill struggles in being taken seriously as candidates. The problem is, if they've been doing their jobs effectively, they've probably offended someone at some time. We seem to prefer bringing someone in from outside, about whom we know very little, rather than risk promoting someone from within who may not be totally acceptable to everyone but has proven abilities. Every governing board should give some time and attention to succession planning by strongly encouraging the chief executive to groom at least one possible successor the board can consider along with other candidates from a national search," he adds.

## Five Phases for Effective Leadership

Honoring cultural expectations and habitual patterns of thinking that may be out of alignment with the needs of the institution is a dated and ineffective strategy that can no longer be justified in today's dynamic leadership environment. Planning and evaluation is the beginning of a five-step process:

### **One — Planning**

- Evaluate institutional performance using a tool such as the Drucker Foundation (now the Leader to Leader Institute) Self-Assessment Tool ([www.pfdf.org/leaderbooks/sat/](http://www.pfdf.org/leaderbooks/sat/)), which focuses on five key questions related to mission, student, student values, results and implementation.
- Because a successful management team depends on an effective board, university boards can evaluate their own performance using the self-assessment tool published by the Association of Governing Boards ([www.agb.org](http://www.agb.org)). This comprehensive tool focuses on the effective execution of key leadership, management, and fiduciary responsibilities.

- Review the current job profile/position description and clarify current priorities.
- Evaluate the current president against organizational goals.
- Identify environmental conditions as compared with the last search, differences in role requirements (e.g., internal vs. external), budget issues, and student or constituent requirements.

### **Two — Recruitment**

- Don't allow the search committee to be hijacked by special interest groups—alumni council, community leaders, internal constituents, or board members. Make role requirements clear at the onset.

### **Three — Interviewing**

- Don't let a "shining star" candidate blind the board into neglecting the needed core competencies.
- Follow a formal protocol that treats every candidate equally.
- Use behaviorally based interviewing.
- Don't waste time selling the organization to the candidate. Focus on institutional fit.

### **Four — Selection**

- Resist the halo effect.
- Don't base selection on likeability.
- Match core competencies with real needs.
- Know what is needed and go for it. If it becomes necessary to adjust the ideal profile (e.g., because of salary requirements), do not shape the relationship with the new leader by thinking of him or her as the number three choice.

### **Five — Orientation**

- Spend at least as much time on orientation as on the search.
- Don't expect initial problems to correct themselves.
- Give early with the gift of performance feedback.
- Explain how decisions are *really* made. Identify cultural land mines and current expectations from group to group: the board, customers, special interest groups, etc.

## Making a Match

Reduced giving and budget cuts have created a resource-scarce environment for many IHEs. A candidate for president in such an institution will have a profile quite different from the ideal leader of a prosperous, public university. A solid match requires a well-planned recruitment-and-selection process that begins right *now*.

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