Before disillusionment has a chance to set in, begin professional development.

People & Politics: The First 100 Days
Don't set up your new leader for failure; here's how to ensure leadership success.

By Barbara Kaufman, Ph.D.

Pomp and circumstance, meet and greet, receptions with faculty and department chairs, formal visits with community leaders and a calendar packed with commitments... That's the way it's done in higher education when a new administrator arrives on campus. But what is the impact of those time-honored functions on the new leader? Could it be that all those well-intentioned activities and rituals of the first 100 days divert the individual from assessing the reality and priorities of the new role? The fact is, the new leader might be set up for failure.

When the Honeymoon Ends

"New presidents, chancellors, deans, and other administrators often run into major difficulties on a new campus despite a good record, background, and experience," says Dr. Jackie McClain, vice chancellor of Human Resources for the **California State University system**. "One of the reasons is that in the recruitment process, institutions don't usually make candidates aware of their problems." Unfortunately, that failure to air the dirty linen continues during the first 100 days. The campus community is on its best behavior, and no one wants to bring up the real issues facing the campus, the system, and the community. Lulled into a false sense of security by superficial cordiality and ritual, new leaders fail to maintain a healthy level of skepticism, ask for feedback, and/or read warning signs that become visible. At the same time, bosses and colleagues withhold performance feedback, missing opportunities to make early course corrections. Lacking feedback, the new leader cannot build credibility, which results in a failure to build coalitions for problem solving and decision making. Soon, the new leader's behavior is at odds with the institution or its culture.

In addition to time-consuming rituals and a predetermined calendar of activities, many institutions greet the new leader with short-fused crises that further divert him or her from assessing and establishing priorities. While these are legitimate distractions, they unfortunately become an excuse for not carving out time to think strategically about the new role.

Letting Leaders Crash and Burn

What are the reasons for the lack of performance feedback for a new administrator during the first 100 days and beyond? It begins with a flawed interview process. "The process by which leaders are chosen and brought to campus is inadequate," says Dr. Brenda Wilson, president and CEO of Nellie Mae Educational Foundation in Quincy, MA, and a former university president. "Searches don't reveal the culture of the institution, so incoming leaders don't understand whether they fit. Candidates assume they are being selected because of who they are and for the skills they can apply to institutions' needs. Therefore, they arrive with affirmations of their previous experience and views of leadership."

Administrators are often hired based on decades-old job descriptions, by search committees that may have lacked any guidance or communication from the president or provost, or by a board that hasn't done its homework.

During the interview, hiring officials sell the institution to the candidate instead of asking tough questions to assess institutional fit. Later, supervisors and peers hesitate to give feedback to the new leader (whom they hired based on a halo effect). Once they recognize an undesirable pattern of behavior in the new administrator, criticism becomes an even more unpleasant task and often leads to an attitude of "this too shall pass." The individual is left to crash and burn.

At the same time, new leaders fail to ask for performance feedback out of intellectual arrogance or believing their own press about past accomplishments. They fail to examine with a critical eye such vital issues as: their new constellation of roles, differences between institutional cultures, crises on the horizon, strategic initiatives, bosses' styles, factions, special-interest groups, etc. Further, lack of administrative leadership experience and lack of self-awareness may get in the way. It takes some time for a new leader to develop her personal vision for the institution and to know how to assess priorities accordingly. The same goes with evaluating the competencies and fit of an inherited leadership team. "It is the new leader's responsibility at the entry point to scope out and assess the institution's culture and environment and to create among her associates an

expectation that feedback will be offered, appreciated, and valued," says Wilson. "If leaders don't ask for feedback initially, it will be very difficult for them to get it later."

Preparing for Success

Once the first 100 days pass, it may not be too late for course corrections. However, the job will be much easier if it begins immediately. Therefore, during the first 100 days, the following activities are vital:

• *Conduct weekly meetings.* Establish face-to-face meetings between boss and subordinate to set expectations and develop a formal agenda. Establish criteria for how decisions *really* get made in the institution, and the degree and nature of the bosses' involvement in the process.

• *Establish goals.* Instead of exchanging pleasantries, arrive at a mutual understanding of the institution's mission and priorities. What is the institution really trying to accomplish? What are its challenges? Be prepared for surprises. The new leader may already have a list based on her perspective or experience at a previous institution. While the list may keep her in the comfort zone, those agenda items may not represent what *really* needs to be accomplished.

• *Provide informal mentoring.* Talk honestly about the institution's underbelly, beyond the technical aspects of the new leader's role. Provide a safety zone for the new administrator to ask "stupid" questions in confidence.

• *Leave the comfort zone.* Begin professional development immediately before disillusionment has a chance to set in. Encourage the new leader to examine differences in the new role rather than focusing on similarities with previous positions and past successes. "New administrators tend to focus on familiar issues," says McClain. "To be successful, a leader must move out of the comfort zone of things that are similar from institution to institution." Identifying what is different about the new environment helps a leader assess which skills, knowledge, capabilities, and past experience are applicable and which are not. Because new leaders often do not want to ask how to access leadership development support, it is up to their bosses to encourage them to seek such support.

• *Foster style flexibility.* A leader who is rigid in style and who expects the organization to adapt is doomed to failure. "Lack of style flexibility quickly results in frustration," says McClain. "Even if you have the right idea and the right direction, you must adapt to the way the organization accomplishes things, at least initially, even if it's not the most effective way." Coaching can help a new leader understand how others experience his style and how to develop alternative styles that are compatible with the style of the new boss and the campus culture.

• *Establish early warning systems.* For example, observe in group settings how the administrator is managing the new environment and constituent groups. Is he considering the audience? Is he a good politician? Observation from the boss can lead to feedback and mentoring on tactics appropriate to the campus. When it isn't done, unwanted behavior becomes a pattern that escalates into a crisis.

• *Develop a balanced checklist.* "The solution to being mired in crises is to develop a balanced checklist," says McClain. The crisis agenda, she suggests, would make up one side of the checklist. An effective way to deal with it would be to address the issues by committing resources and staff without investing personal time. The second agenda, says McClain, is the ongoing philosophical and operational direction for the administrator's areas of responsibility. That means identifying the current state of the institution, the major issues for the

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> —*Jackie McClain, **Cal State University***

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future, and the steps required to move forward.

• *Build strong teams.* Committees and teams are effective only when made up of people with different strengths and core competencies, not mirror images of each other. This begins with an assessment of core competencies and developmental needs of staff and committee resources. The leader may first need to clarify his or her definition of the word "team" and spell out the desired team behavior. This will prevent faulty assumptions and unnecessary misunderstandings on the part of staff members who are still operating on a previous boss's expectations.

• *Commit to meeting the team's needs.* "If you can identify what the other people's needs are, you can often achieve your own objectives much more quickly and effectively," says McClain. "To be effective, leaders must be both introspective and able to look outside of themselves." Real success includes everyone, not just the new administrator and the organization. If the new leader is to make a difference and move the institution forward, rather than just maintain the status quo, her talents must not only be leveraged, but also balanced by the strengths of others in areas where the new leader is weak or has inadequate experience.

Focus on the Future

While rituals and cordiality have their place in celebrating an institution's past and honoring a new administrator's past accomplishments on other campuses, they don't get the leadership job done. The focus during the first 100 days should be on the realities of the individual's role in today's dynamic environment of budget cuts and enrollment issues. This is the time to test assumptions about the institution's direction and identify how the new administrator's talents can best be leveraged to accomplish the institution's goals. ∎

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