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MOVING UP

Making the Team

One of the best legacies that a president can leave is a strong management team

By LEO I. HIGDON JR.

Uncertain economic times, decreasing endowments, declining state support for public universities, escalating regulatory burdens: It's easy to see why so many colleges and universities are being managed in a crisis mode.

Leaders in higher education are finding themselves questioned on everything from athletics and admissions policies to program choices and tuition costs. The environment becomes even more unpredictable when you consider the increasingly shortened tenure of university presidents, which recent studies estimate now to be five to seven years.

Having served as a dean, a college president, and a board member at several academic institutions, I know that presidential vision and leadership are crucial to institutional success. But as a president, I know that hiring and retaining the right senior managers is also crucial to moving the institution forward. In light of these shortened presidencies and tough economic times, it is the senior-management team, not the president alone, that will be indispensable. It is this team, along with the president, that will attract other top people who are committed to the institution's values and vision and that will provide continuity through the uncertain years to come.

But how do we create an effective, top-quality senior-management team? I've found that the process can be looked at as a series of careful, deliberate actions within three general steps that I've outlined below. Although these actions should ideally be taken within the first few years of a president's tenure, it is not a process to be rushed, but one that should be allowed to evolve at a pace specific to the needs of the institution.

Setting the Right Tone: With every change in university leadership, anxiety levels rise. People will ask: Do I want to work with this president? Will this president be successful? Does this institution have a future I want to be part of? What will the priorities be, and how do they relate to my interests? Most important, what kind of management style does this president have?

My own experience has taught me that, especially for new presidents, it's important to set the tone from the very beginning. The president's earliest actions often establish the most lasting impressions, so it's critical that those early impressions are favorable. Otherwise key people may decide to go elsewhere, and strong new candidates for senior-management positions may not be attracted to the institution.

Although there is no single correct management style, I've found that including people in the decision-making process, and making that process as transparent as possible, are extremely important elements when a president is trying to attract and retain top people. This collaborative leadership style makes it clear from the beginning that everyone has a role to play -- a message that often translates into effective teamwork.

Presidential visibility is another key factor in attracting and retaining top people. For example, when I began my business career on Wall Street, I worked at a firm where the managing partner believed in visibility, in "walking the floor." He regularly asked his employees for their input about the business and their current projects. By making this a regular habit, he was able to keep his finger on the pulse of the firm while evidencing an interest in each individual's work.

I learned a great deal from this practice and have applied it continually throughout my career. When I became a college president, I found visibility to be essential. To get a good sense of the institution -- and for the institution to get a good sense of me -- I had to get out of the office. Being accessible was a good way to earn the trust of the staff.

One of the side benefits of this practice is that it has allowed me to learn about the institution's culture, an understanding that goes well beyond learning the institution's mission or challenges. Understanding the culture means knowing the kind of people it attracts, finding out who is well thought of and why, and learning how success is measured and rewarded on the campus.

The organizational chart may show reporting lines and key job responsibilities, but it can't show how things are truly run. For example, I served at one institution that was steeped in history and tradition, and a large part of its culture was its cautious and carefully measured approach to change. In this situation, an organizational chart told me almost nothing; instead, I had to learn and respect the values of the institution before I could instigate any major management changes.

Assembling the Senior Team: Your early hiring decisions related to the senior-management team are an opportunity to send a message about direction, to reaffirm institutional values, and to affirm priorities. It's not necessarily the time to clean house.

Instead, I've found it important to have a blend of experienced individuals who have a long association with the institution and new people who will offer fresh perspectives. For example, another institution I served wanted diversity among its management and proclaimed it as a goal, but in reality the appointment of senior-level administrators from diverse backgrounds was unusual. Working with other senior managers, I appointed several very qualified individuals from different backgrounds to the management team, recruiting a number from outside. These appointments sent the message that a diverse community required an equally diverse leadership team, and brought fresh insights to an otherwise highly traditional group.

But whether senior managers are promoted from inside or hired from outside, I always look for certain characteristics. With rare exceptions, the first thing I look for is not skills or related experience, but whether the person's values will be a good match for the institution. Experience is certainly important, but so is the person's enthusiasm, passion for the job, sensitivity, integrity, and thirst for learning --

particularly given the uncertainty and complexity of higher education today.

I look at the candidate's career choices, and find out what those choices might tell me about that individual's motivations and judgment. Critical to me as well is whether the person, irrespective of his or her job, has had a record of success.

Turning Senior Managers Into a Team: Regardless of the blend of experience and talent you have assembled, an effective team mentality doesn't form automatically. It is the president's responsibility to build the group into a cohesive team and then lead it. To do this, the president needs to foster four essential and interdependent elements: trust, open communication, collaboration, and alignment.

Trust: Generally, trust builds over time as a natural result of working together. But if it doesn't build, or if it isn't maintained, the team can't be effective. The president must emphasize the importance of a team mentality in all senior-management actions, decisions, and communications. The team members should see their cooperation as essential to the good of the institution.

Open Communication: Trust can also be fostered by good communication, both between the president and the management team, and among team members. Again, this starts with the president. For example, presidents should make it clear when something is a group decision, or when it's a decision that the president must make, with the advice of senior managers.

Collaboration: Both successful communication as well as trust will help assure collaboration. Many decisions involve more than one office and department in a university, and many offices and departments have overlapping responsibilities. Once again, the president must set the tone by bringing all the right individuals and departments to the table.

Alignment: Team members have to speak with one voice and show a united front. This is crucial to the successful execution of key decisions and policies. A good team will debate and discuss an issue, but if the team comes to an impasse, it's time for the president to focus and guide the discussion until agreement is reached.

I've found that adhering to a general set of leadership guidelines and setting the example will slowly shape the individual members into an aligned, effective group. For example, when the team has a success, there is shared credit; when mistakes are made, there is shared accountability. The president must avoid micromanaging and let the senior managers make decisions under their purview. The president may guide, build, and hopefully instill his or her enthusiasm in the management group, but the aim is to have a united team committed to the goals that are central to the institution's future.

During discussions and disagreements, it's up to the president to keep the group focused on the issues at hand. The president must keep an open mind. Obviously, the group members can't function effectively as a team if they detect a difference in the weight that individual views carry. The genuine alignment that is essential to the successful management of the institution can't be forced.

With any luck, the senior team that you build will be there for the long haul. Even though every president puts his or her own stamp on an institution, each one builds on a predecessor's record. As an outgoing president, you want to leave the institution in good academic and financial shape, with all the

elements in place for the new president to move the institution forward. One of the best legacies a president can leave his or her successor is a strong management team.

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