New to the Administration

Everything new administrators need to know to be successful
The role of a college administrator requires many skills. You have to be a leader, but also appease the president and other higher-ups. You must set direction for the faculty, but also defer to them. You need to recruit allies, but avoid being ensnared in campus politics.

This collection of essays aims to help build those skills. It offers advice from experienced administrators for new administrators, whether they manage academics or other aspects of a college.

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After years of taking orders, you finally get to issue them in your first administrative role. You will have the freedom to make your own plans, set your own direction, and surround yourself with people who share your work ethic and point of view. Life is good!

The only problem? None of that is actually true — and it is especially untrue if you are leading an academic department.

It can be exhilarating to be tapped for a leadership role, but while you may consider yourself to be “the boss” now, there will still be a boss above you. That means you will have to satisfy both those above you and those below you on the organizational chart — and that could prove to be a mighty tight squeeze. Theoretically it’s possible that you will have the flexibility to choose who works with you. What’s far more probable: You will face barriers when it comes to picking and choosing people. In fact, you’re quite likely to be stuck with a team you inherited from your predecessor, and it will be up to you to make that team work.

I share that news not to depress you but to prepare you. New leaders are often surprised and disappointed by the realities of administrative life. So if you’re about to move into a leadership role — or are considering one in the future — here are 10 things I think you should know.

• You may not have been the people’s choice. It is quite possible that you were selected against the advice and wishes of the people who now report to you. They may have supported another candidate or simply wanted anyone but you. For them, the fact that you are in charge now may be a disappointment, and it is likely that they will be on a constant prowl for evidence to prove that you are the wrong person for the role. Try not to express exasperation when your qualifications are debated within earshot.

• The other finalist now reports to you, and he’s not happy. The person who wanted your job even more than you did is reminded daily that you got the role he wanted. While he may congratulate you in public, he is likely to be bitter and sarcastic, and may actively undermine you. Watch your back, and by no means take him to coffee to explain that you appreciate the difficulty of the situation — that will just make him feel worse.

• You may be lonely. The people you used to count as friends and happy-hour companions now report to you, and they know you are no longer one of them. While there might be occasional lunch gatherings, the sense of camaraderie you previously enjoyed is likely to dissipate. Your information sources will probably dry up, and you will need to find a new support network. This will feel sad and hard.

• Being the boss does not mean you get
to be bossy. It is easy to spot a newbie boss. She is the one who makes unreasonable requests, demands detailed updates, and micromanages every project. Seasoned leaders actually pay attention to the research on employee motivation and know that most of us are inspired by having a strong sense of purpose, a fair amount of autonomy, and the ability to demonstrate our personal strengths on a regular basis. Savvy leaders seek to energize and inspire people, not terrify them.

• Your people are probably smarter than you are. Need something done? By all means ask for a finished product, but don’t prescribe how every step of the process should look. Others probably have better ideas than you do. Don’t get in their way.

• Claim credit for other people’s ideas at your peril. The minute you take credit for someone else’s idea is the minute you will crush any future demonstrations of creative or intellectual expression. Phrases like “I have a great team” are insufficient to demonstrate recognition and appreciation. You must utter people’s names and thank them publicly and profusely.

• Leadership is a series of tough conversations. Being in charge means you have to be honest and direct. That doesn’t mean you have to be ruthless, however. Pick up a book like Radical Candor or Difficult Conversations to learn how to offer the gift of honest information. And if you’re in reading mode, check out Thanks for the Feedback for tips on how to accept feedback well yourself. When it comes to tough conversations, don’t hesitate or dither, because nothing good comes from delaying what needs to be said. If you’ve got something to say, say it.

• Don’t be afraid to demonstrate vulnerability. So many of us think that doing so will make us seem weaker, but the courage to admit mistakes and missteps actually makes us stronger. When we show vulnerability, we seem more human and real, and that makes us more relatable. It is far easier to forge an emotional connection with someone who is fallible than with someone who is perfect. If you fumble, own it.

• Your best people are likely to leave — and that’s OK. Good people leave. That’s not an indictment of your leadership; it’s just what happens when talented people are ready for something bigger. You can characterize their departures as betrayals and acts of abandonment, or you can pivot and express pride in your ability to “launch” outstanding people. And it is helpful to have supportive allies outside of your institution. Don’t be bitter when your best people venture off.

• You will have to work harder than anyone else if you want to be taken seriously. If you dare to work less than those who report to you, you will be labeled an entitled slacker. While you are allowed to establish boundaries, if you: (a) take more vacation than others in your group, or (b) come in later or leave earlier than they do — people will talk, and that talk will not be good. If you want work-life balance, make sure everyone else in your organization has it first.

The move from being one of the gang to the person in charge can be bumpy, and the isolation that can come from leaving the pack is often surprising and disorienting. Missteps are easy to make, and you can be assured everyone will be taking notes when you stumble. Your motives will be questioned, your decisions challenged, and your personal integrity called into question — over and over again.

If that sounds like something you can handle, then you are ready for your new leadership role.

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Two years ago, I was finishing up my final semester on the faculty at the University of Georgia. When I graded my last paper, I didn’t think I’d see a college campus again for a long time. Little did I know, after a year on the job market, I would soon return to university life in a position markedly different from the professorial life I left behind.

Teaching wasn’t bad. According to student reviews I was a decent teacher, and I actually enjoyed it, but the classroom wasn’t quite the right fit for me. I knew remaining in a career for which I lacked passion wasn’t fair to myself or to my students, so I decided to move on. I supported myself with freelance writing and odd jobs for about a year, but I missed campus life — the community, the thirst for knowledge, the excitement and energy. It didn’t take long before I was again searching for a way to return to that environment. But no more adjuncting. That part of my life was over.

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Lessons Learned by a First-Year Administrator

By JOSH BOLDT

Two years ago, I was finishing up my final semester on the faculty at the University of Georgia. When I graded my last paper, I didn’t think I’d see a college campus again for a long time. Little did I know, after a year on the job market, I would soon return to university life in a position markedly different from the professorial life I left behind.

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complete. Only this time I was on the administrative side of the university flowchart.

Now I’m a year into my new position, and I’ve learned a few things about the transition from faculty to staff. Anyone considering a similar leap may want to keep these thoughts in mind. Of course, experiences can vary, depending on the department and job description, but these tips should help.

BE WILLING TO COLLABORATE.

As an adjunct professor, I was more or less in charge of my own little world. I designed my syllabus, created paper prompts, and ran my classroom exactly the way I wanted to, without much input from others. That was pretty nice. I’ve always preferred working autonomously, and I’m fine with making my own decisions.

Unfortunately for me, that level of solitude is completely unrealistic as an administrator. Every day, I have to talk with my coworkers and collaborate on projects. People stop by my office. They send emails. They call on the phone. I can’t ignore them — even if I might, um, disagree with their ideas. It’s part of the job: Work well with others or risk being replaced. Almost every project has multiple collaborators, and I frequently can’t move forward with my work until someone else completes their bit.

If you lack patience or can’t stand group work, admin life will drive you nuts. I’m learning and getting better, little by little.

COMMIT TO A FIXED SCHEDULE AND WORK SPACE.

Gone are the work days spent in coffee shops and on couches. Do I miss being able to work from anywhere? Take a guess. Most of my week as a teacher required only about 12 hours of defined scheduling. Nowadays, I can be found in the same place during the same 45 hours every week.

That has taken some getting used to. I haven’t worked a traditional 40-hour schedule in almost a decade. All in all, I don’t mind. Sometimes it’s good for me to be forced to take a shower and get out of the house in the morning. (Don’t look at me like that. You know what I mean, Mr. Boxer Shorts and Ms. Yoga Pants.)

UNDERSTAND THE POWER POLITICS OF CAMPUS ADMINISTRATION.

Let me start by saying you don’t necessarily have to embrace the political machinations of campus life in order to be successful in an administration, but it sure doesn’t hurt. And if you hope to advance in your career as an administrator, it’s probably essential to understand how power dynamics influence decisions within the organization.

Within any institution, there are colleges, offices, departments, and units. They all operate independently, yet overlap in such a way that they need each other in order to succeed. Because of that interdependence, it’s rare for anyone in one sphere to place overt demands on someone in a different sphere. Politically, it’s too risky to blatantly challenge the autonomy of the other office or unit.

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Instead, people ask for assistance, or they might offer help first in hopes of a returned favor later. Frankly, it’s a lot like the way government operates, which makes sense considering the prevailing concept of shared governance on campus. As a result of these overlapping spheres, power flows around the university on more of a favor system at best, and on a passive-aggressive tug-of-war at worst.

Of course, it’s not all sycophancy, manipulation, and ego-stroking. Our motives aren’t always selfish. I’m only pointing out that university politics are a different animal. As an administrator, you will rarely dictate orders nor will they be dictated to you. I have had to get comfortable with this political system where we all coexist and help each other in order to be helped. It’s a lot different than working solo or acting as part of a traditional management hierarchy.

My first year as an administrator has been a learning experience. So far, so good. I’m on a campus again, but the work life is nothing like it was during my time as a faculty member. I look forward to sharing more thoughts here about my new role as I settle into it. I’m also interested in hearing from others who have made a similar transition. What lessons have you learned? How is your new job in administration different from your old one on the faculty?

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For nearly two-thirds of my 30-year career in higher education, I have served as a middle manager of one sort or another: department chair, dean, program director. For the other third, I have been middle-managed.

Of course, even as a low-level administrator, I had plenty of people above me telling me what to do. I also had people below me who, given the chance, gladly told me what to do.

The point is: I know what it’s like to be on both sides of that transaction. Specifically, I know first-hand how department chairs can make faculty lives easier, and I also know what they do (all too often) that makes faculty lives more difficult (dare I say “miserable”?). Accordingly, I’d like to identify — for the benefit of new and future department chairs especially — what I consider the five biggest morale killers for college faculty.

But first, a brief disclaimer: For this column, when I say “faculty,” I am referring either to: (a) full-time faculty on the tenure track; or (b) full-time faculty who are more or less permanently on the non-tenure-track (like lecturers). Adjuncts and other contingent faculty have their own set of morale killers — like low pay, lack of benefits, and poor-to-nonexistent job security. As full-timers, we should be grateful that we don’t have to deal with those issues. But that doesn’t mean we don’t face problems of our own, many of which begin and end with department chairs and deans who are guilty of the following:

MICROMANAGEMENT.

People don’t generally like to have someone looking over their shoulder and telling them what to do all the time, especially intelligent, highly trained professionals. But even among professionals, college professors are a special breed. We operate so autonomously, due to the nature of our work, that we can easily come to see ourselves as independent contractors rather than employees.

From an administrative point of view, that’s not always a good thing. And yet faculty members do require a certain amount of intellectual independence to do our best work. That notion is so widely understood that it is codified into policy and practice at most institutions; we call it “academic freedom.”

If, as an academic middle manager, you wish to destroy morale in your department, you can start by dictating to your faculty members exactly what to teach, how to teach it, which materials to use, and how to evaluate students.

TRUST ISSUES.

Faculty members interpret micromanagement as lack of trust. We assume that it means our leaders simply don’t have enough faith in our ability or enough of a commitment to allow us to do our work as we see fit. Few things are more insulting than that to academics. Most of us are deeply committed to our professions and our students — we’re sure as heck not in it for the money — and we likely know far more about our subject matter than the dean or chair.

Of course, trust is a two-way street. To be happy and productive, faculty need to feel trusted, but we also need to believe we can trust our leaders — to be open and honest, to follow through on promises, and to have the best interests of students and faculty at heart.

In my experience, a department or campus suffer-
Effective leaders try to create a workplace where people are comfortable and fulfilled, where they feel valued and believe what they’re doing has meaning.

HOGGING THE SPOTLIGHT.

The success of an organization is rarely attributable to any one person. And yet it’s natural for leaders to want to take much of the credit, for several reasons: They’re the ones in charge, after all, so the success must be due to their great leadership; they need such documented successes to solidify their positions, not to mention pave the way for future promotions; and they often take a disproportionate share of the blame when things go wrong, so why shouldn’t they take most of the credit when things go right?

Such thinking may be natural, but it is anathema to a smooth-running organization. There are several behaviors leaders must learn that don’t necessarily come naturally, and one of those is deflecting praise. Effective leaders know that when their organization succeeds, they have succeeded, and they are content to spread the credit around while taking little or none for themselves.

Ineffective leaders sabotage morale and create a toxic environment by taking most of the credit, whether they deserve any of it or not.

THE BLAME GAME.

Besides deflecting praise when things go right, leaders must also learn to accept the lion’s share of the blame when things go wrong.

That can be very difficult, especially if the failure really wasn’t their fault. Effective leaders understand, however, that just as they succeed when the organization succeeds, they also fail when the organization fails — whether or not the actual failure was their own. So they square their shoulders, accept the blame and accompanying criticism, and resolve to do better. (Note that “doing better” may well involve some very intense conversations with the people who were actually to blame. But those conversations should be kept, as much as possible, behind closed doors.)

Weak and ineffectual leaders, on the other hand, are always looking for someone else to blame. Nothing is ever their fault, even when it clearly is. I can’t think of a better recipe for destroying morale in any organization, especially an academic department.

BLATANT CAREERISM.

Finally, we come to one of my own personal pet peeves: Academic leaders whose sole ambition in life is to climb as high as possible on the administrative ladder and who are willing to do literally anything to achieve that ambition.

OK, maybe not “anything.” I’ve never known an academic leader who committed murder in order to get a promotion, although I’ve known a few who probably thought about it. But “anything,” in this case, can definitely include throwing people under the bus on their rise to power — i.e., pointing the finger at others when things go wrong in order to inoculate themselves against blame, and ratting people out for minor infractions in order to ingratiate themselves with the powers-that-be.

“Anything” can also include using the people under them as steppingstones — taking credit for other people’s achievements and/or giving them make-work assignments that do little more than enhance the leader’s own résumé. I once worked for a senior administrator, a real careerist, who was consistently guilty of this. I used to duck for cover anytime I heard that administrator coming because I knew any casual meeting would result in a new project for me, the only purpose of which was to make the boss look good.

That’s no way to build morale. Academic leaders who behave that way, in my experience, might enjoy some short-term success but will rarely succeed over the long term, partly because, fortunately, they don’t usually last that long.

Collectively, tenured professors are very powerful, as the former Mount Saint Mary’s University president Simon Newman and others have learned to their regret. Professors rarely use that power, but they are more likely to do so when working conditions become unbearable.

Of course, that’s not the only reason academic leaders should try to build morale rather than destroy it. Effective leaders try to create a workplace where people are comfortable and fulfilled, where they feel valued and believe what they’re doing has meaning. People who feel that way are likely to be more productive, making the organization a success and creating plenty of credit to go around — even for a leader determined to deflect as much of it as possible.

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Why Administrators Should Love Shared Governance

By ALLISON M. VAILLANCOURT

Each fall ahead of its annual meeting, the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources offers a workshop on “Understanding Higher Education.” Once again, I am co-facilitating the daylong session, which is designed for people new to academy. The program focuses on academic lingo, trends, and traditions, and on the one concept that tends to baffle newcomers the most: shared governance.

If past workshops are any indication, I can predict the responses we will receive when we meet in late September and ask our icebreaker question, “What has surprised you most?” Participants will say things like:

• “It takes forever to get things done.”

• “I can’t believe I have to check in with so many people.”

• “I’m used to writing a memo to announce changes, but that doesn’t seem to be an option now.”

• “I was hired to be a decision maker, why can’t I just decide?”

From there, the conversation could easily devolve into a rant about academic bureaucracy, the impossibility of pleasing multiple stakeholders, and the absurdity of letting faculty (“people with no business experience!”) have a significant say in running large, complex organizations.

But that won’t happen. That’s because we will quickly pivot into a spirited discussion of how shared governance can actually make an administrator’s life much easier.

My university takes shared governance seriously. When we’re making policy, for example, we have an established and methodical process for gathering and assessing campus opinion. It’s not unusual to receive a few hundred messages when we advance a new idea and many are quite helpful. Comments tend to be thoughtful and many are accompanied by relevant research studies or references to other models we ought to consider. I think of it as crowd sourcing our way to better administration.

Convincing newcomers of the value of shared governance is no easy task because this approach to managing organizations is not obviously sensible. When you are used to a hierarchical environment, it is easy to think that top-down decision making is practical and efficient, not to mention an important way to demonstrate who’s in charge. And we know that many onlookers, trustees, consultants, and corporate types argue that shared governance is inefficient: “Why are you asking everyone for their opinion? Decide already.”

But those who claim that shared governance impedes progress fail to appreciate the value of collective intelligence. Is a little extra time on the front-end to make sure everyone is on board smarter than weeks of cleanup after a program or policy has been adopted? I think so. It’s not that hard to create an efficient and effective structure for advancing and debating ideas, and the results are generally much better when an idea has been widely vetted.

In my experience, those who argue most vehemently against shared governance are people who lack a basic understanding of organizational politics, group dynamics, and the benefits of building trust-based relationships. So, to be perfectly blunt, if you’re an administrator having trouble getting things done, consider that the problem is you or your decision-making architecture, not your faculty senate.

Autocratic decision-making is inconsistent with leading large groups of smart people – or really any groups at all. Administrators who embrace shared governance understand that harnessing internal wisdom consistently produces better results.

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The mood before the meeting was tense, the news was surprising, and the group's reaction was far more negative than positive. As the meeting to announce a significant organizational change came to a close, one of the people who stood to benefit from the change mused philosophically, "People don't like change."

I find that kind of analysis troubling because it assumes that the people doing the objecting are unprogressive, inflexible, and lacking vision. Further, I think the "people don't like change" aphorism is factually incorrect. Most people like change just fine. What they don't like is loss.

Anyone who has ever visited a new restaurant, created a new syllabus, traveled to a new city, accepted a new job, started a new relationship, or downloaded a new app has embraced

We Like Change Just Fine

What's less popular? Loss.

By ALLISON M. VAILLANCOURT
change, so the assertion that most people want to keep things exactly the same is ridiculous. We like change as long as it is beneficial to us and the rationale for it makes sense.

And that takes me back to the meeting. It felt like many such sessions I have attended before — yet another example of a well-intentioned leader making a rational decision that seemed completely irrational to those most affected by it.

We like change as long as it is beneficial to us and the rationale for it makes sense.

the change. In this case, the leader viewed the situation in the context of national trends and knew that his decision was in line with what other universities were doing.

But here’s the thing: Most of the people who would be affected by the change have not been following national trends and have been protected from the financial data that influenced the original recommendations. To them, this new organizational design was a solution that emerged without an obvious problem.

So what lessons can we learn from this situation?

The first is to consult the research on organizational change before embarking on anything that might be considered transformational or even upsetting. No time or inclination to do that reading? Here’s a recipe for moving ideas forward that builds on several organizational change theories and on journalism’s six W’s.

1. **Why** is this change important? Before announcing a grand plan, expose people to data that show why change is necessary. These might include enrollment trends, students’ buying habits, or donor preferences. Make the need for reform obvious and urgent.

2. **How** should it be handled? Ask for advice about how to deal with the challenge. You will create a sense of engagement and you might discover that other people’s ideas are better than yours.

3. **Who** will help you? Enlist credible allies who agree that the status quo is no longer viable. Use them to signal that you are not the only one who thinks change is a good idea. Your allies can suss out the most vocal skeptics, and alert you to the factors that might imperil your plans.

4. **What** will it entail? Don’t leave room for interpretation and ruminating by keeping details vague. Be crystal clear about what the change will mean so that people can accurately assess how it will affect their status and way of life. Change is not just organizational; it is deeply personal.

5. **Where** will it hurt? Be honest about where the pain points will be. Pay cuts? Having to learn something new? More work? Fewer colleagues? Less autonomy? These issues will be apparent soon enough, so you might as well be honest.

6. **When** will it happen? Be explicit about deadlines and milestones so that people can track progress and make decisions about when they should leave, if they don’t want to be a part of the new world order.

Finally, it is worth mentioning a seventh W, the one that is likely to be texted: WTH? Be prepared for anger and name it. Once the change is announced, provide space and time for people to process it and then regroup to respond to questions and concerns.

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“Donna” called me last week. A senior administrator for more than a decade, she was excited about working with a new president, who had been hired with great fanfare and promise. It would be a chance to rejuvenate her career under a bold new leader. Donna had everything a new president might want: impeccable credentials, relevant leadership experience, goal-exceeding results. She had no reason to believe her job was not secure on the new leadership team.

Donna called me again this morning. The new president, wanting to start fresh, had created a team that did not include Donna. For the first time in her life, she was out of a job and never saw it coming. She was in shock: Was her career over?

As an executive recruiter in higher education for more than 25 years, I have had more than one of those calls. Higher education is no different than any other industry where, often, a new CEO decides that the existing management team is not the right fit, either with the
chief executive or with the strategic agenda moving forward.

Usually, it’s not you. Sometimes cleaning house is necessary for a host of reasons, such as setting a new tone or eliminating underperformers. Occasionally there are symbolic, budgetary, or political issues that can only be resolved with a change in senior management. Lastly, no matter how skilled or competent a senior VP or administrator might be, there are times when the chemistry is just not there. Through no fault of your own, experience and evidence of success are not enough to keep you in your job.

One administrator I have known for several years, “Diane” (as with Donna, not her real name), just went through this experience only to land on her feet in a new, exciting position. When we spoke, Diane said she had seen her firing coming although she was still chagrined when it happened.

She didn’t panic. It helped that her ouster was done with grace — and with a substantial exit package that gave her time to plan her next move. Within a few months she had two job offers to consider, partly based on strong recommendations from her former organization. “This situation opened doors that I’m not sure I would have pursued without the time to really think beyond my immediate pathway,” she wrote me in an email. “I didn’t let the situation get me down at all. It is very clear the issue was never about my performance or abilities. It was genuinely not a good fit anymore.”

**But it could happen to you.** I asked another senior administrator — I’ll call him “Ted” — in a similar situation to reflect on his experience. At first, he recalled, he was in shock. In hindsight, however, there were early signs and a “growing sense of doom,” he said.

This is not an uncommon situation, he noted. For better or worse, some presidents bring in a new management team as a matter of course. So be aware of your field’s turnover rate. And be prepared in the event of a presidential transition for the possibility that you will be asked to move on.

Ted is considering several job opportunities after some months of regrouping and getting his job search under way. There are things you can do in advance and after the fact to ensure that you are in a strong position after a transition. He recommends you play offense, not defense. Do not assume that the new CEO will accept the status quo or that your record speaks for itself.

Here is an example of what not to do: One long-tenured administrator I know took a one-month summer vacation a few weeks after the new president arrived. Bad idea: He lost his job soon after his return.

A new CEO’s history with you begins on the day he or she starts — not in your past, no matter how successful you have been. It is all about moving forward. Research the new hire and understand that you will be the one expected to adapt to this leader’s style, not the other way around. The new CEO may have a completely different management and leadership philosophy than you’re used to, may prefer daily briefings instead of weekly meetings, or may like brainstorming rather than decision-making meetings. If you cannot adapt to the change, you will need to formulate an exit strategy.

**Who makes the first move?** Maryanne Peabody and Larry Stybel, authors of a 2001 article in the *Harvard Business Review*, “The Right Way to Be Fired,” advise senior leaders to “watch the exit signs” and “consider volunteering to be terminated before it occurs.”

People who make assumptions that a long tenure will somehow guarantee them job security are missing an important aspect of organizational leadership, they write. Leaders are sometimes let go even though they haven’t failed — their skills, experience, and even leadership style may simply no longer align with the organization’s priorities.

If, after a new president starts, you find yourself being given less responsibility, getting left out of important meetings, or learning about decisions after the fact, those are possible signs that the new president is relying more on other people or preparing to make a change in your job.

Too often, people in that predicament wait for the ax to fall. Here are some thoughts about...
how to get ahead of the curve if the new president starts showing signs that the management team can do without you.

First, do no harm. You may well feel angry or betrayed. But both Ted and Diane learned that maintaining effective relationships with others in the organization — at the board and senior-leadership levels — is critical at this time. That does not mean you should lobby to keep your job, or do end runs around the new CEO. Keep delivering what you promise. Always do the right thing for the organization and communicate the accomplishments of the people in your department. That approach will redound to your benefit.

Keep your hands on the wheel. Do not overreact, but pay attention to your gut and the signals. If you know your days are numbered, don’t skulk. Make an appointment with your new boss and lay out the options. End on a positive note by offering a timeline for your departure and an exit plan. Also, be prepared for different outcomes, such as being asked to hand in your keys immediately.

Take the high road. Be gracious in public, work to effect a smooth transition, and never bash your institution. These people will be your references for your next job.

Take stock. As hard as this experience can be, you’ve got the chance for reflection and a new beginning. Think big. Ask people who know you well to offer their honest perspective and assessment. What are the job opportunities before you, and what strengths can you draw upon? What habits or behaviors — especially any that may have led you to this plight — do you want to change? A job transition can be transformative.

Talk to friends and allies. Maintain an active professional network both before and during a leadership transition so that you can tap into potential opportunities should the need arise. In the first few days after you get the bad news, try to be good to yourself. Take a break. Evaluate your financial situation so you know exactly how much time you can take to do your job search right. Breathe. Don’t panic or rush out and try to apply for every job. Most important, don’t contact recruiters or interview for other jobs until you have a plan and a spiel.

Craft your message. As a recruiter, I am attuned to job transitions on CVs and résumés that look odd — and search committees are, too. However, a strong career trajectory, broad and deep administrative experience, evidence of success, and leadership ability are valuable assets no matter what field of higher education. What you need is a reasonable and truthful explanation. A job loss after a new president comes in can be characterized effectively without disparaging your former employer or obfuscating. Examples include:

- “I was hired under the former president to complete a particular strategic agenda. With that success and a new president with a different agenda, I now have the opportunity to rethink/redirect my career.”

- “In this financial environment, the arrival of a new president is the ideal time to evaluate every position. Several senior leadership positions, including mine, were consolidated and reconfigured, though I had performed well.”

- “Our institution is changing direction. The new CEO and the board would like to have someone in the role I held whose primary experience is in [mergers/STEM/on-line/health-care/international/etc.], which differs from my background and experience. It makes sense for the organization to recruit someone with different expertise.”

- “The new president and I have different leadership and communication styles. I could see that we did not connect, so I offered to move on. I am now actively pursuing opportunities that [fill in the blank].”

There is no doubt that being left off a new president’s team is an emotional, professionally challenging experience. None of us like to be told we are no longer needed or wanted, and explaining the situation to others can be awkward at first. Know that being ousted from the team doesn’t mean you’ll never play again. There is another team just around the bend where you and your background will be the perfect fit.

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How to Spot the Real Power Players in the Room

By ALLISON M. VAILLANCOURT

When Amazon recently recommended I read Sarah Cooper's 100 Tricks to Appear Smart in Meetings: How to Get by Without Even Trying, I immediately added it to my shopping cart thinking I was ordering a serious book on upping my professional game. It was helpful, alright, but not quite in the way I expected.

That's because the advice offered by Cooper, formerly the design lead for Google Docs, is actually a comical list of tips and tricks that call out some of our smarmiest and most annoying colleagues. Do the book's strategies actually work? Yes, I have to admit many of them do. Will they keep working once more people have figured them all out? I certainly hope not. And something tells me Sarah Cooper is on a mission to make sure they don't.

Her advice — which includes the best way to make missing a meeting someone else's fault and how to shift power in a room by standing up to draw a senseless Venn diagram — reveals what slackers and wannabees have known for years: When one is short on substance or smarts, image is everything. So if you need advice about how to subtly claim credit for someone else's work, deftly deflect blame, or appear wise instead of vacuous, Cooper's tutorial is well worth the money.

As I read Cooper's 100 strategies, I was able to assign the names of people I know who practice many of the tactics:

• There is the copious note taker who breaks from scribbling only to say, "Ooh, now that is profound" — and thus encourage people to generate more suggestions that can be eventually co-opted and claimed as original ideas.

• There is the one who constantly says, "Let me play the role of provocateur here," when even the most banal subjects are up for discussion because he just wants to appear edgy and intellectual.

• And there is the one who responds to the small-talk question — "What's happening in your world?" — with, "So, so much, and I hope you understand that I'm not at liberty to talk about any of it right now."

Those of us who have been around for awhile, know who's got game and who's got nothing. But those less familiar with organizational politics may struggle to understand who is powerful and who is not. The uninformed may see Cooper's strategies in action and think they signal genuine status — much like the uninformed believe that organizational charts offer meaningful clues about actual levels of influence.
Here are three ways to tell who has real power and who is desperate to be considered a player.

**Watch where they sit.** Sitting next to the leader is a common trick used by people who want to signal insider status. It's done to suggest that there is a co-leading situation that will require in-the-meeting whispering and conferring. To make this work, it might seem like you'd have to arrive early to ensure the proper seat but that's not necessary or, apparently, a good use of precious time. One person I know regularly shows up late, and then moves an empty chair from a perfectly good spot around the table to the space next to the meeting leader — which, of course, requires the person already sitting next to the leader to scoot over. Another doesn't bother moving chairs and simply taps the person sitting next to the leader on the shoulder and points to an empty chair. “I’m the real one with power here” is the intended message, “and now the meeting can officially begin.”

**Listen for what they know.** People with real power tend to have self-confidence and they don’t feel a need to bluff when they don’t know everything. When they are asked to comment on something that is unfamiliar, they say things like, “I hadn’t heard that” or “Really? That is so surprising.” In contrast, people who want to appear powerful and in-the-know are likely to respond, “I’m not really comfortable sharing on that” or they may close their eyes and shake their heads as if to suggest they have deep and top-secret information that is troubling them greatly.

**Pay attention to how they make their points.** While there are exceptions, people who are confident about their power listen more than they talk. They tend to engage in inquiry rather than advocacy, expressing curiosity about other perspectives rather than attempting to wear down those with opposing points of view. They ask questions — often provocative ones — rather than make pronouncements and mini-speeches.

There is a fine line here, of course, between asking provocative questions to enrich a conversation and asking them to highlight your superior analysis skills.

I will admit to volleying, “Are we even asking the right question here?,” when I am bored with a conversation or craving attention. I hereby pledge to stop doing that because it is, admittedly, obnoxious.

Questions that signal a colleague is trying too hard include:

- “The trend line is compelling, but where is the regression analysis?”
- “I’ve said it before and I will say it again, what about the students?”
- “If Hannah Arendt and Ayn Rand were alive today, what would be their take on this?”
- “How do we know any of what we believe to be true is truly actually true?”

If you hear questions that seem nonsensical, it's likely that you are not the only one who thinks so. Consider responding with, “Is this the right question, or do we just think it is the right question?” or “Why Hannah Arendt and not Martin Heidegger?” The original questioner will be unable to offer an articulate response, and you will win the admiration of colleagues for quieting a blowhard.

No, I'm kidding. That will not happen. The blowhard will remain a blowhard and you will look like a jerk for attempting an even well-deserved takedown. Better to try, “Hannah Arendt and Ayn Rand? Now that is a study in contrasts,” or say nothing at all because even powerless people make for dangerous enemies.

The ability to make sense of organizational power dynamics is a valuable career skill. You must be a keen observer and a careful listener. You also must be able to learn from being burned, after crossing or trusting the wrong people. Building political savvy is hard and often painful work and there is no reliable manual or checklist that can help us navigate or obtain proficiency in organizational politics.

So what is one to do?

Well, definitely read Sarah Cooper’s new book and then redouble your efforts to listen more than talk and pay close attention to who’s getting things done and how. Perhaps the most important recommendation is to forge relationships with as many people as possible. Chances are, you will eventually discover, or be introduced, to truth tellers and smoke clearers who can serve as interpreters and navigators. They are wise and savvy souls who can respond reliably to the, “Is it just me, or did he just use a lot of words to say nothing at all?” questions that surface for many of us who work in even the healthiest of environments.

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Beyond the Survival Mind-Set

Why managers should focus on helping their colleges thrive, not just survive

By T. GREGORY DEWEY

At a recent retreat for senior administrators of the college where I am president, I decided to conduct a new exercise that I called “Surviving and Thriving.” It was an idea that came to me one day on a plane, and I was curious to see where it would lead.

In advance of the retreat, I asked each of our campus leaders to answer three questions:

• What do we need to do to survive?
• What do we need to do to thrive?
• How can your department contribute to both?

The intent was for everyone to view the college through a broad lens and gain a deeper appreciation of how each department and office contributes to the whole. We cannot survive without everyone’s top effort and likewise we cannot thrive without the same commitment. I hoped that the exercise would demonstrate how important it is for everyone to be on the same page.

As it turned out, this line of questioning revealed more than I had anticipated. It became apparent that, while most people understood what was needed for our college to survive, we all had very different notions of what would constitute thriving.

A “survivor mind-set” is certainly understandable. We all know these are challenging times in higher education. Rising operational costs, increasing student debt, a competitive financial-aid market, political pressures, and increased regulatory compliance are some of the many factors that have fostered a campus environment geared toward survival.

Perhaps that’s why some people at the retreat viewed thriving as “surviving but better.” For them, thriving was simply managing our current challenges in a more effective way such that we hardly worried about them anymore. Others took a longer-term view, seeing thriving as having the money to fulfill our mission and the vision to use that money wisely.

Surviving is inward-looking. It requires a drive toward efficiency that avoids budget deficits and keeps the doors open. Surviving has an immediacy that trumps everything, even long-term strategic goals. In contrast, thriving is forward-looking. It is driven not by efficiency but by vision.

The differences between the two mean that surviving, while a prerequisite, does not nec-
necessarily lead to thriving. Or to put it another way, the ability to survive does not assure the ability to thrive.

So how do surviving and thriving look when applied to a college’s various administrative offices?

**Enrollment management.** This is a top priority for most institutions. Too often, however, the conversation is about how to bring in enough students to balance the budget. The immediacy of getting students in the door often ignores issues of retention and progression.

But thriving enrollment is not about having lots of students apply. It is about having the ability to shape the class to fit the college’s academic profile, to ensure student success, and to respond to the institution’s mission and the needs of the population that it seeks to serve. A thriving institution has the analytics and knows how to use them to achieve its larger goals.

**Advancement and development.** Here, surviving typically centers on meeting the annual-fund goals so that operating expenses can be covered. That invariably leads to donor fatigue, for nothing is more demoralizing than having to raise money to cover a deficit or pay for some yet-to-be-determined operating expense.

Thriving, on the other hand, is about more than just surpassing your fund-raising targets. It involves raising money to support the creation of new programs and cultivating a community that is aligned with, and excited about, the academic vision and strategic direction of the institution. It is funding a vision of the future, not providing largesse for the status quo.

We took a step in that direction earlier this year on our campus when we replaced our Annual Fund with something we are calling the Innovation Fund. Instead of seeking unrestricted dollars to help fill gaps in the operating budget (an idea that appeals to fewer and fewer donors), we instead announced the creation of three new initiatives, each designed to expand hands-on learning opportunities for students. Time will tell how this approach will be received by donors, but we are confident it is the right thing to do for both our students and for the long-term interests of the college. We are committed to making it work.

**Academic affairs.** This branch of the college is, perhaps, the one most often caught in the operational dynamics of survival. Courses must be covered and classes scheduled in the most efficient ways possible. That may require hiring more adjuncts and teaching assistants, or moving more courses online.

A thriving institution deploys its faculty in a different manner. Faculty engage students not only in the classroom, but through research, scholarship, and leadership, creating a culture of inquiry. Thriving institutions have the resources to experiment with curricular innovation. Most important, thriving institutions are not afraid to fail.

By the end of the retreat, it became apparent that the thriving conversation is really a conversation about identity.

If money was not a pressing issue, what academic programs would we enhance? What would our ideal student population look like? What does a star faculty member worthy of an endowed chair look like? Crucially, what culture would we create? All of those questions get to the essence of who we are.

Our institution was founded in 1881 as Albany College of Pharmacy, one of a handful of historic, free-standing pharmacy schools. In 2008, the institution changed its name to Albany College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences, an acknowledgment that the days of free-standing professional schools are nearing an end. Despite the name change, we are still preoccupied with how to survive as a pharmacy school. To thrive, we have to move the conversation to a vision for an integrated health-sciences college. In short, the surviving-to-thriving conversation must be transformational.

Our challenges are not unique. Any campus with a historic mission — especially one that is restricted to a certain field of study or to a specific student population — will most likely be faced with similar survival issues.

Whether or not your institution is healthy or struggling financially, there is value in this exercise because it invites bold and unconventional thinking. Defining what thriving looks like — department by department, and office by office — can open up your institution to exciting new possibilities. To move from surviving to thriving will require conversations about identity. They can be difficult and risky, but if successful, will open the way to transformation.

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Administration 101: The Vision Thing

To present your vision, balance the quantitative with a human touch

By DAVID D. PERLMUTTER

The hiring profile for a campus-leadership position is often an elaborate, committee-drawn projection of myriad hopes and contradictory needs. Certain meta-qualities, however, tend to stand out as universally sought after, whether the opening is for a department chair or a president. Foremost among them is “vision.”

As in: “The university seeks a president who is a proven visionary.” Or: “The ideal provost candidate will develop an academic vision in which student success is a top priority.” Or: “The next chair of the department of English will have a vision of the humanities focused on growth in enrollment while maintaining academic rigor.”

During their campus interviews, finalists will be expected to express their vision across many documents, meetings, and meals, but most formally in an actual “vision presentation.” This column focuses on vision as the best vehicle for expressing your strengths for a position in campus administration.
Demonstrate your mastery of the basics. The focus of a vision presentation will vary considerably, depending on whether you are interviewing for director of a languages center at a small liberal-arts college or vice president for diversity at a Big 10 public research university. However, the vision you proffer must have certain basic aspects, whatever the job. The ideal leader will have a:

- Comprehensive vision of the global environment facing the type of institution or department doing the hiring.
- Diagnostic vision of the local issues.
- Prescriptive vision of how to achieve the employer’s stated goals.

In sum, finalists with a strong vision will project a big picture, a realistic assessment, and a narrow forecast.

Show the facts that support your vision. We live in the era of “big data,” or so say 1,000 headlines. I can testify that, as a dean, I spend a considerable part of my day preparing data about my college for reports in areas as diverse as risk management, federal funding, faculty productivity, sick-leave accumulation, budget allocation, and enrollment. Then I spend another part of my day analyzing reports and scrutinizing in-depth dashboards of accumulated stats.

The lesson: Do not go into administration unless you feel comfortable with quantitative data collection and analysis. Accordingly, your vision must be data-driven. While many in your audience will not welcome a full-on spreadsheet in your PowerPoint, neither will they appreciate vague slogans, catch phrases, or stock photos.

Having a quantitative basis for your vision also allows you to demonstrate that you’ve done your homework. For instance, a finalist for a deanship could offer a chart or infographic comparing the hiring college with its peers, both current and aspirational. Alternately, you might provide a simple list that shows the metrics the college would need to fulfill the “top 50” rank mentioned in its strategic plan.

Above all, calibrate the complexity and level of detail to the audience. The “numbers” expectations for a potential department head in actuarial science will be different from those for chair of a music department.

Humanize your vision. Even accounting departments do not desire a leader who is all stats and cannot think in terms of humans. Faculty members, for example, want to know that you can count beans, but they hope that numbers will not hypnotize you. In your vision talk, you should find ways to ensure that everyone understands you see the people and the ideals amid all the spreadsheets and dashboards.

For example, a candidate for dean at an arts college wanted to offer a bold vision and knew that the No. 1 expectation for the job was raising lots of money for new arts facilities. He was an experienced fundraiser, so he was able to project quantitative fund-raising goals, metrics, and strategies. But in his vision presentation, he went one step further: He connected each major gift he’d helped acquire in the past to a compelling human story behind it. His audience grew convinced that here was someone who “knew the numbers” but also could deftly work with people.

Know whether you need to create a vision or fulfill one. A friend at a Western public university described the major “vision fail” of a would-be provost. The candidate presented an ambitious and intoxicating vision of where the campus needed to go, along with a set of clear goals and plausible metrics. The catch — which sank her chances for the job — was that the university had just completed its strategic-planning process. It already had goals and metrics, which had resulted from two years of campus meetings. Moreover, the hiring profile had specifically stated, “The next provost will lead us to success through our newly announced strategic plan.”

Great vision. Wrong campus. No job offer.

Sometimes the original job ad will be unclear. Is the college yearning for someone to help discover a vision, or someone to make the existing one a reality? Ask the search firm or search committee, do some web research, and talk with local sources.

Don’t overpromise. An axiom of successful leadership: Do not promise what you cannot be sure to deliver. That presents finalists who are...
trying to convey their vision with a dilemma.

On the one hand, most reasonable professors, staff members, students, alumni, and administrators recognize that no department chair or vice president for research can be a Santa Claus who won’t say no to anything. I have never seen an ad for an academic-leadership position that reads: “We are looking for someone to hand out lots of money, because we are overfunded. Please help!” Even the choice position of founding dean of a newly endowed college will entail saying no to some beloved projects.

On the other hand, your audiences still seek a problem-solver, a goods-deliverer. A faculty friend in a STEM field put it this way: “I get that deans are not miracle workers, but no one wants a dean who can’t solve challenges.”

Making promises during your vision talk is, thus, both tempting and dangerous. Say, for example, that you are applying for a deanship at an arts-and-sciences college where the senior professors are up in arms over salary compression — new hires are making a lot more than long-time faculty members. Your vision includes a set of best practices on faculty retention and morale building. You thump the podium and swear to deliver big pay raises in your first year on the job.

The provost, with whom you speak later that day, might not appreciate your largess with money you may never get. In fact, not a few professors in the audience at the vision talk might question how you would pay the tab.

Be confident in your vision — just hold off giving away anything you do not yet have (and may never get). Or, to quote a wise Tolkien character, “Give with a free hand, but give only your own.”

I first wrote about leadership and vision more than two decades ago, in a book on the physical visualization (in art and photography) of warfare from prehistory to the close of the previous millennium. I devoted a chapter to wartime leaders and found many who owed their success to their ability to penetrate the fog of war with a clear vision of victory. Intriguingly, wartime leaders who failed had their own visions of victory, but those turned out to be delusionary.

Likewise, academic leaders can rally a department or a campus around a path to progress. Those most likely to fulfill a vision are realistic in their assessments and deliberate in their methods. Your vision presentation is an opportunity to express what the future may hold and your reasonable strategy to get there, if you are hired.

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