

Leaders Who Hit the Ground Stumbling

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Educators often speak of leaders who “hit the ground running” meaning that some leaders are so experienced or so well matched to a position they can take on the new challenge with confidence and immediate success. Such leaders do not generally require long orientations, training, or a honeymoon to learn the ropes; they are ready to take on responsibilities of the job from day one.

We do not speak as often about leaders who “hit the ground stumbling,” but these leaders may be much more common. A first-time president of a community college, by definition, has to learn by experience—often by stumbling. New leaders, however, can avoid the classic stumbles by heeding the advice of seasoned leaders who have been tempered in the fires of experience. Here is some practical advice from leaders who know about stumbling and running.

Never tell your new colleagues that the college is the best kept secret in town. This observation is the height of arrogance by a new president who has not been in office long enough to know whether it is true or not. Often meant by the new president as a kind of praise it is often viewed as pandering to seek approval. The great majority of faculty and staff who have worked at the college and lived in the community for twenty or thirty years are champions of the college and resent being told they have not done a good job as advocates of the college. The members of the governing board and the foundation board, with their special links to the community, might also take an exception to such a statement by the president.

If the college’s brand and marketing program need updating the new president should engage marketing staff and key leaders in conversations about goals, activities, and budgets. Market research should be conducted so that decisions can be based on evidence. And, if the brand and the program are at least adequate, attention should focus on other priorities. In any case, new presidents should avoid comments such as “the college is the best kept secret in town or the county.”

Do not refer to great ideas and innovations from your previous college. As tempting as this is, faculty and staff at the new college want their new president to embrace their college. A new president must learn the culture of a new college as quickly and completely as possible to assure the residents he or she cares about their values, their work, and who they are as individuals and leaders. Too many references to a president’s former college discourages bonding, affiliation, connections, and community. In a second marriage neither the bride or groom wants to hear how wonderful the former spouse was.

I learned a good lesson about this dynamic during my first year as CEO of the League for Innovation in the Community College. When I took the job in 1975 there were 12 League member colleges, and it was easy for me to visit all colleges in my first year. In addition to getting acquainted with the colleges and their leaders I thought I would be creative and useful so in each college I asked to meet with a special group of faculty to hear about their five or six most outstanding innovations. My plan was to take notes on these innovations and share them with the next college, thus gathering and spreading an accumulated list of descriptions of innovations across League colleges. I was going to be the Johnny Appleseed of innovations in League colleges. I tried this plan at the first four colleges I visited before abandoning it. I learned very quickly that faculty and staff leaders enjoyed talking about their innovations but except for a few could care less about the innovations at other colleges. I also learned that faculty and staff actually resented me sharing these innovations with them. The dynamic is certainly more complex than I am presenting it here, but my view was confirmed a few months after this series of visits by another experience.

Before I arrived at the League the founding CEO had created an Innovations Exchange by encouraging League colleges to prepare descriptions of outstanding innovations following a prescribed format. In the first few years of the Innovations Exchange member colleges submitted over 600 innovations. The primary purpose of the Exchange was to encourage members of the League to access the innovations from other colleges they wanted to explore. A careful record-keeping service was designed to track interest and use, and the Exchange was widely marketed to League colleges. The staff and I decided to do a study, and we were amazed to discover that of the 600 archived descriptions not one person had asked for information about any of the 600. We cancelled the Innovations Exchange, and I wrote an article, *On the Value of Reinventing the Wheel*, which attempted to capture the apparent need of many educators to do their own thing.

These early efforts by the League for Innovation to share innovations were ineffective and discouraged me about the interest of faculty and staff in the success of other colleagues and other colleges. In recent years that issue has been addressed by linking specific innovations to a variety of efforts to improve student success. And lists of High Impact Practices supported by research have been helpful in focusing faculty and staff interest on innovations that work. New presidents will have more success by sharing and championing these efforts and these lists endorsed by national organizations and research groups rather than risking resentment by referencing the same practices and innovations at their former college.

Wait for a reasonable amount of time (maybe a year) before hiring anyone from your former college. The job of the president is a very tough challenge in any circumstance, and every president understands the importance of securing a highly competent and compatible team to help lead the college. It is always tempting to bring along key members of the team from the former college—a loyal assistant to the president or an experienced vice president. They are known quantities who have established good working relationships with the president; who would not want these seasoned veterans on board in a new challenge.

Before new presidents begin to make changes in the culture at the new college they need to thoroughly understand that culture. This is particularly important in the matter of staffing. Administrators and faculty on special assignments are highly visible in a college; any changes in these appointments will create waves of satisfaction and dissatisfaction; a critical error can be

devastating for the president. Current staff should be kept in place and recognized for their work until the president can vet all key staff in terms of their value to the new effort. Faculty and staff (and the board) will expect changes and new approaches, but how these are communicated is a very delicate matter. Current staff should be given the opportunity to hold onto their positions or at least to apply for them; they have the advantage of a knowledge of practices, programs, and personnel, and their institutional memory can be an asset compared to new hires from outside the college.

Once a president has vetted current staff and decided on the kind of leadership team and organizational structure the college needs, the process for selecting new staff must be an absolutely transparent process. At this point the president can contact and encourage staff members from the former college to apply for positions, but these must be won on merit as judged by selection teams from the college. This is the textbook approach that many new presidents often ignore at their own peril.

Do not suggest or plan your own inauguration. If the new position is your first presidency you may desire a formal inauguration; you may want an inauguration even if it is your third presidency. But be very careful. This issue can be a major stumbling block that can wreck your presidency as is happening in one case right now where a new president is in contention with her board and faculty because she allegedly commissioned an expensive medallion as part of an inaugural celebration—apparently without approval.

A wise new president will remain absolutely neutral on this issue. If inaugurations are part of the traditions of the college then the plans can unfold in a timely fashion under the leadership of those who usually take on this role. If the college does not usually hold inaugurations leave the matter alone.

If the issue emerges as a question the president should recommend that the board appoint a committee with college wide representation to consider the pros and cons of holding an inauguration. Here are some examples of the pros and cons:

Reasons to Hold an Inauguration:

1. A visible opportunity for college employees, students, and community members to celebrate a milestone in the history of the college.
2. A sign of respect and admiration for the new president.
3. An opportunity to articulate the values, mission, and accomplishments of the college and the new president.
4. An event that can encourage and highlight community and connectedness across various constituencies in the college and the community.
5. An event that reminds various constituencies that the community college shares traditions with other sectors of higher education.

Reasons Not to Hold an Inauguration:

1. May be seen by some as a violation of egalitarian values incorporated in the culture of the college.
2. May not be a judicious expenditure of funds especially if there have been recent contentious issues regarding funding.

3. Some may argue that an inauguration focuses on one person too much when the college has been working on a culture of collaboration and equality.
4. May be seen by community leaders as unwarranted pomp and circumstance not in keeping with community values.

The president should stay out of this discussion except to declare neutrality and should graciously accept the decision of the committee. This is a time for great modesty.

Do Not Spend Funds on Activities that Might Create Concerns Among Constituencies

New presidents are often eager to make a splash or to initiate activities that will call attention to their presence as the new leader. Some may feel that they deserve special treatment and recognition.

As noted above, making plans for an inauguration without checking with the culture can be a critical stumbling block. The same holds true when a new leader decides to upgrade the decorations of the office of the president. Purchasing new furniture, new window treatments, and new carpet can be quite an expense when many faculty have to share cubicles and when adjunct faculty do not even have offices. Chances are that the existing office of the president is adequate and can be brightened by the new president to reflect personal style without raising contentious issues. At some point in the future redecorating the office might be appropriate. In some colleges community leaders have become donors for such projects in which case college employees know the funds have not been taken from the college budget.

Presidents should be cautious about sponsoring dinners in the area's best restaurants and should be very cautious about hosting cocktail parties. Most colleges have regulations about using the college budget—even the president's discretionary fund—to pay for alcohol. A new president must follow established guidelines to the letter, and in situations where the guidelines are not clear should avoid at all cost charging alcohol to the college. If the policy is unclear presidents should personally pay for alcohol they consume or consumed by their guests.

One of the most visible stumbling blocks for presidents occurs in travel and related expenses. More than one president has lost a job over using college funds to pay for first-class travel, overseas travel, expensive dinners and expensive hotels, limousine service, spouse expenses, and even something as minor as laundry services on the road. Unless the board has approved special circumstances for the president, the guidelines created for college staff and faculty should be followed religiously. And even where the guidelines are followed, too much travel can become an issue because of the expense and the time away from campus. Travel and related expenses is a black hole just waiting to capture the president in its pull—proceed with great caution.

These five practical suggestions on issues that most new community college presidents will face, if followed, will prevent some classic stumbles. There will be plenty of unexpected stumbles to deal with in the challenges and transitions of assuming a new office without compounding the agenda by not being prepared for these five. If you clear these hurdles and others you cannot prepare for, in your next job you may be ready “to hit the ground running.”

