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OPINION

Leadership Tips for College Presidents and CEOs

Think first, talk later. Listen to veteran employees. Answer nearly every message.

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Commencement season is drawing near, when college presidents and business leaders offer words of wisdom to graduates entering the "real world." But at a time when the college presidency has become a high-risk occupation and CEO turnover is accelerating, with 131 leaving their jobs in January alone, maybe they could benefit from some words of wisdom.

What makes someone successful in a leadership position? We offer the following list of helpful hints. Many we learned along the way, through our time in academia and serving on corporate boards. Some we discovered by failing to do them ourselves, and others we picked up from our mentors and colleagues.

1. *Think first, talk later.* Everything you say will be taken literally. An offhand comment or ill-considered joke, once it has made its way through the local gossip vine or the national blogs, is guaranteed to haunt you. Don't ever think you're "off the record."
2. *Talk less, listen more.* This is especially true for a new leader brought in from the outside. Folks will immediately ask for your "vision" for transforming the place. This is a test: No one can reasonably expect a detailed plan before you understand the place's idiosyncrasies. Do not offer a grand plan before one exists.
3. *Show up.* Every constituency wants you to be physically in the room on important occasions; they don't want your surrogate. What you actually do when you get there—offer a toast, introduce a speaker, tell a quick story to kick off an event—may be less important than your physical presence.
4. *Engage veteran employees.* Spend time with those who have devoted their lives to the place, leaving their mark on future generations. Take them to lunch and hear their stories. You want them on your side and you'll learn from them.
5. *Don't ignore the staff.* In companies, they are the face of the business. At colleges, members of the staff are educators as well, whether they work in dining services, the career center or in advising. They interact closely with students, who often adore them.
6. *Customers want to be consulted.* CEOs understand this better than many in higher education, but college presidents should realize: Students insist on being taken seriously. You don't always have to do

what customers want, but you do need to seek their input. It is better to tell someone you have thoughtfully considered his or her suggestion than to give the impression you don't care.

7. *Answer nearly all messages.* This relates to the previous point. When someone writes you because she read or heard something you or your organization purportedly said or did, sending a reply will save you trouble down the road. The reply can be brief, but a personal response is warranted unless the writer is abusive or seems dangerous.

8. *Use the board of trustees or directors.* Boards should never be patronized or kept in the dark. They can be your ally if you respect their time and efforts. College presidents sometimes struggle with boards because we rarely had to accept authority during our faculty days. The board is your boss, and if you don't like that, then keep your résumé up to date.

9. *Community relations matter.* Remind people that your organization is fortunate to be wherever it is located, and that locals are also fortunate to have your organization there. Bad relations with the local community can interfere with everything—building projects, programming, the provision of public services. All parties want to get along, and you generally will find that any effort you make will be graciously accepted and rewarded.

10. *Don't take things personally.* Many bad things are going to happen, and you will be blamed for most of them. Faculty, staff, students and alumni, and likewise, customers, employees, suppliers and regulators, can exercise amazingly bad judgment, imperiling themselves and the good name of your organization. Many of the most spirited attacks have more to do with the attacker than with you. Don't beat yourself up, and remember that things are never as bad as they look.

11. *Don't believe the hype.* Things aren't as good either. If you are tempted to trumpet your company's quarterly returns or latest, greatest product; your school's academic rankings, athletic record and fundraising success; or your own popularity, you are setting yourself up for a fall. Hying short-term success can undermine long-term progress.

12. *Don't neglect your health.* You will be fed constantly at meetings and events. If you eat everything in front of you, expect to gain much more than the "freshman 15." Reserve time to enjoy your life. If jogging is your thing, make time to run. If it is attending religious services, do so regularly. Some presidents wonder how they can find the time to do those sorts of things. The answer is simple: Act like a president and take control of your schedule.

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