

Land Mines AHEAD

Why Smart, Newly Appointed Leaders Derail

By Barbara Kaufman

SMART, HIGHLY EDUCATED, EXPERIENCED executives moving into a new role are expected to hit the ground running. Their calendars are already packed with appointments and tasks, and their bosses (e.g., the president, chancellor, provost, or board, depending on the person's role) have pressing goals that need to be achieved ASAP. After a promising start, the new leader's performance veers off track. If a course correction isn't made, it can lead to derailment. Why? The fact is, technical competencies, educational credentials, and experience in a comparable role are not necessarily predictors of success. Even seasoned administrators who accept new appointments tend to rely too heavily on what has worked in the past and can find themselves blindsided by the new environment.

Doing What Comes Naturally

"Derailment" has a static sound to it. However, in the context of performance, it's about movement—being thrown off balance. It can be subtle, too, a sense of being out of sync or out of favor with a boss or a key constituent group. New executives are speeding ahead, relying on one-track forward vision rather than peripheral vision to navigate the culture and politics of the institution. They roll strategies forward from one institution/role to another, assuming that replicating past successes will guarantee effectiveness.

"We attain higher-level positions because we've been successful at other institutions," says Jolene Koester, president of **California State University, Northridge**. "But while content knowledge may transfer easily, the same is not true of cultural ►



Land Mines AHEAD

elements such as leadership and interpersonal skills. Even leaders who were successful elsewhere have to achieve credibility, respect, and trust all over again.”

ACE President Molly Corbett Broad adds another dimension. “We frequently promote brilliant faculty members into administrative positions,” she says. “We assume that they will translate their superlative skills as solo performers into becoming symphony conductors who create organizational capacity by empowering a team. They may succeed, but many times they do not. Sometimes these individuals become micromanagers who intimidate others and undermine staff performance. This creates an unproductive environment and causes turnover and a downward spiral.”

Rather than “doing what comes naturally” based on past experience, executives must learn to avoid over-utilizing their strengths and consider what behaviors they should unlearn to navigate new terrain. For example:

- Take the time to build new relationships with key constituents. Don’t rely on content knowledge, expertise, and reputation to deliver desired outcomes.
- Appreciate the time, effort, and attention it takes to lead versus do. Resist the urge to “just get it done.” Understand how decision making occurs on the new campus, how shared problem-solving is defined, and which key constituents expect to be involved. Take the time to plant “seeds” so that others get involved and own solutions.
- Tune in to nonverbal signals that others are not on board (e.g., eye rolling, moving a chair away from the conference table, fidgeting).

I Did it My Way

New executives who don’t use peripheral vision to unearth clues about their new environment usually insist on “doing it my way.” Neglecting to assess their new climate, they’re not aligned with institutional culture and priorities. “When I arrived on campus, I heard many stories of new leaders who had failed to adapt their work and styles to the campus culture,” says Koester. “It also became clear that the campus made a judgment fairly quickly on new arrivals who, either by their manner or the substance of their work, didn’t show respect for the way things were done here.”

Tomás Morales, president of CUNY’s **College of Staten Island**, advises new leaders to assess their cabinet or team early on to determine if they’re aligned with the leader’s agenda and each other. “A new leader should assess who stays ‘on the bus,’ who should get ‘off the bus,’ and where seating on the bus should be rearranged,” he says, using Jim Collins’ *Good to Great* terminology. “As a new leader, you need to take the time to learn about the functional areas in your portfolio and the people you are inheriting. ... It’s never a given that you have to replace your entire team.”

While it’s tempting to “do it my way,” new executives need to learn to reach out to solicit the advice of others and to understand the history of the institution and the cultural norms. Here’s how:

- Collaborate and consult with others on alternative plans of action rather than move forward lone ranger-style based on experience.
- Practice strategic networking and cultivate “truth tellers” to develop a comprehensive understanding of the institution’s strategic direction, culture, and subcultures. “Solo performers often focus exclusively on the analytical and the rational. They view their leadership role as an extension of their academic knowledge and can be oblivious to matters that are important politically or symbolically to the culture of the university,” says Broad.
- Ask subtle questions to pick up the nuances of cultural norms and unwritten expectations.
- Assess issues through multiple frames. Also practice reframing.
- Curb the desire to “race to the finish line.” Rushing forward too

‘Even leaders who were successful elsewhere have to achieve credibility, respect, and trust all over again on a new campus.’

— Jolene Koester, president, California State University, Northridge

quickly projects an image of being disinterested in alternative approaches or compromises. Listen and ask for clarification.

Mistakes Were Made, but Not by Me

When executives make faulty, untested assumptions, they tend to react with defensive reasoning when something goes wrong. “You can learn from a poor decision you’ve made if you’re not defensive about it,” says Koester.

Cognitive blinders also lead to style inflexibility. Build a broad repertoire of approaches; don’t just rely on one comfortable style, advises Koester. “Leaders who are too enamored by the glamour of their position [may] attempt to use a power direct style. You really have to meet people where they are. You need to build trust and respect. As leaders, we have formal power, but formal power doesn’t accomplish a great deal. You can direct people to do all kinds of things and they can comply, but never really fulfill.”

It’s more important to demonstrate flexibility than to be right all the time. Newly appointed leaders should learn to actively listen to gather helpful insights and to hone influencing and collaborative skills before they resort to directing others. Here’s how:

- Ask questions and seek advice. Doing so is a sign of strength, not of weakness. It draws others into the leader’s sphere of influence. A leader does not have to be the most brilliant person in the room.
- Assess what behaviors need to be unlearned to be successful.
- Use a collaborative leadership style where possible and accept that it will take longer to produce results.

“I’ve placed a great value on collaboration among my cabinet-level colleagues, as well as those who work with them,” says Koester. “People coming in to work directly with me or in other positions can hear how important it is to me. However, acting on it has required real adjustments for some because it’s not always natural for administrators to collaborate rather than see the university in silos. A leader has to be very clear about the need for collaboration ►

Land Mines AHEAD

and continue to coach team members to follow the norms and values of the institution.”

Head of the Class

“Extraordinary solo performers, who have risen to administrative positions, tend to be perfectionists,” says Broad. “Sometimes leadership means delegating to others who can only do the job 80 percent as well as you can. The cumulative effect of being unwilling to delegate ... can be harmful not only to the individuals, but to the organization as a whole.” Being a perfectionist usually comes with the territory of being a leader. There’s nothing wrong with striving for excellence, as long as it’s not taken to an extreme. New leaders need to learn to rely on their own performance—and on the strengths and abilities of others. For example, they can benefit if they:

- Take control by giving up control. Using peripheral vision can uncover talented individuals who may be looking for an opportunity

‘Sometimes leadership means delegating to others who can only do the job 80 percent as well as you can.’

—Molly Corbett Broad, ACE

to play a more visible role and develop their portfolios. Eliminate commitments that are not directly aligned with strategic priorities.

- Delegate and let go. Not every project demands perfection; some only require a B or a C. Delegating contributes to empowerment and professional development opportunities for others.
- Avoid excessive multitasking. On the way up the career ladder, multitasking can be a great strength, but in a leadership position, it is no longer the primary path to sustained success. In fact, it can be a serious weakness because it prevents leaders from being present in the moment and focusing on issues that really matter. It keeps them managing at a task level rather than leading.
- Practice patience. Dig deeper into the details of complex issues and examine a range of options. After a less than perfect decision, a “blameless autopsy” (using Jim Collins’ term) can reveal what went wrong and what should be done differently in the future.
- Become a participant observer who uses peripheral vision to anticipate performance landmines. Interpersonal savvy is one of the most important leadership skills, and its foundation is understanding one’s impact on people and situations. That comes from careful observation, reflection, and learning from mistakes. Refrain from being hypercritical of the new campus, culture, or colleagues.

Start Off on the Right Foot

More effective leadership recruitment and a holistic approach to new role orientation are two ways to reduce performance derailment. First, search committees must know what kind of leader the campus really needs. “If you are searching for a vice president, for example, you have to understand what that leadership opportunity is and what skills sets you need to fit the portfolio of the position as well as align with the institutional culture,” says Morales. The

organization’s maturity, culture, history of faculty governance, staffing level, and strategic planning may come into play.

Once the exact need is established, the next challenge is to identify a candidate that really fits. “There are three distinct phases in the recruitment process,” says Broad. “The first is reviewing nominations and resumes, and the second is a face-to-face interview. The third phase, which is often overlooked, is due diligence. Phase three should be a deep exploration of the candidate’s managerial and leadership behaviors.” Here, behavioral event interviewing may help predict whether a candidate has the interpersonal skills to adapt quickly to a new role rather than trying to fit past success strategies to a completely different environment. Instead of talking with the candidate in generalities, form questions about real challenges or opportunities the campus has experienced or is currently experiencing, or issues on the horizon. Allow the candidate to lead the discussion around these real-life examples rather than “selling” the university or job.

Finally, even the most experienced leaders need orientation and coaching on a new campus. Brand-new leaders don’t yet know enough about the details of the organization to translate big-picture information into actual job performance, says Broad, adding that

the information should be repeated frequently. Morales encourages vice presidents to consider living on Staten Island and to make every effort to attend on- and off-campus activities to understand the culture of the campus and the area. He’s a big proponent of professional development and encourages his executive team to be part of the national higher education conversation. They attend conferences regularly and then share experiences and new ideas at cabinet meetings.

What can be done when, despite all best efforts, a new leader strays off track? “The first step is always honest, clear communication,” says Koester. “When indirection is ineffective, and direct communication becomes necessary, it’s sometimes more effective to bring in an outside consultant who, without being perceived as a threat, can gather feedback, openly discuss performance with the individual, and help them develop strategies to overcome the difficult circumstances. Other vice presidents can also be asked to give feedback to a new vice president and help him or her adjust.”

Focus on the Big Picture

Peripheral vision enables a strategic but more nuanced view that keeps individuals from succumbing to the stressors of day-to-day setbacks. Even when the need for a course correction arises, it’s less likely to cause a performance train wreck because the individual is more grounded in agreed-upon priorities and the campus leadership culture. Perhaps the most important lesson is that there are no perfect leaders, and each is a life-long work in progress. **U**

Barbara Kaufman is president of ROI Consulting Group, Inc. (www.roiconsultinggroup.com). An executive coach and educator, she specializes in leadership effectiveness and organizational development strategies for private and public sector leadership teams and boards. She can be reached at drbarbkaufman@earthlink.net.