

## The Importance of Collective Leadership: Building and Maintaining High-Performing Teams

*By Barbara Kaufman, PhD*

Today's presidents and chancellors are donning more hats than ever before to provide skilled, visionary leadership. Yet in a challenging academic environment in which financial and technological pressures are mounting and resources are scarce, achieving institutional goals alone can be overwhelming. Team support is essential to help communicate and reinforce the senior administrator's all-inclusive messages. This support becomes critical when initiatives such as reprioritizing resources and/or restructuring academic affairs are under consideration and when stakeholders are increasingly assertive.

### Changing leadership environment

Administrative leadership roles are more complex and challenging today. Yet expectations remain high that campus and system leaders will handle both internal and external responsibilities with finesse and success. These areas may include but are not limited to board relationships, new public-private partnerships, crisis management, shared governance challenges, and fundraising that secures alternative sources of revenue. This demanding balancing act is further complicated by pressure from parents and legislators not to raise tuition. At the same time, increases in student loans are expected and state funding for public universities continues to shrink. In addition, the push to offer massive open online courses (MOOCs) is facing resistance from faculty who are concerned about the impact of MOOCs on the quality of education and on their job security. Twenty-first-century students also expect a quality education that guarantees a job, increased accessibility to resources and professors, and schedule flexibility. As a result, leaders are faced with an insurmountable workload of strategic choices and decisions.

## Benefits of high-functioning team

The most effective leadership teams work together to communicate the need for change and the rationale for decisions and to seek critical buy-ins from diverse constituent groups.

By leveraging their individual expertise, high-performing teams help round out the strengths and weaknesses of the president's portfolio and present a strong collective leadership face to the campus community.

## Challenges

Individual style differences can create stumbling blocks to success. Here are just a few of these challenges:

1. **Conflicting sense of urgency.** A CFO might butt heads with a chief academic officer if they don't see eye to eye on how quickly to move ahead on an administrative restructuring.
2. **Individual style preferences prevent team members from recognizing the potential power that can be harnessed from their differences.** The cabinet member who processes quickly might have little patience with a colleague who prefers to table a decision until the next meeting.
3. **Resistance to change based on past assumptions.** Too often team members roll their success strategies forward from their prior role on a different campus or in a different sector rather than embracing their new campus culture.
4. **Reluctance to let go of assumptions and worldviews.** Entrenched in their own positions and ways of doing things, some team members may refuse to take advice from colleagues. Often this is intended to show others that they possess the leadership skills to do the job, but in fact this attitude makes collaboration next to impossible.
5. **Inconsistency on the president's part.** Unsure what the president wants, team members may sabotage the decision, disengage, or resort to coping mechanisms, such as vying for the leader's attention. As a result, there is no sense of shared responsibility or accountability for outcomes.

## Strategies

Campus communities and cultures vary widely, so no institutional goals are identical and no two teams are alike. Yet every team has the potential to be high-performing if leaders follow these critical paths to success:

- **Develop a successful onboarding process.** “You cannot assume high-performing individuals will automatically and independently become high-performing team members,” says Michele Nealon-Woods, PsyD, national president of the Chicago School of Professional Psychology. “Onboarding new senior administrators is an essential function of the CEO and one that requires dedicated time, careful planning, and the deliberate engagement of all members of the leadership team. When the CEO does not attend carefully to such onboarding, he or she opens up the team to not only unhealthy team dynamics but confusion in project and role execution.” To onboard successfully, provide a shared understanding of campus governance; indicate how decisions are really made and by whom; and describe the campus, system, and state political environments. Then state clearly any and all expectations. In addition, develop and consistently use an effective mentoring process.
- **Encourage team members to work together to accommodate differences.** Utilize an assessment tool to uncover individuals’ preferred operating styles and preferred ways of achieving goals. Determine to what degree these preferences align with or conflict with the way the rest of their colleagues on the senior leadership team work. Encourage the sharing of individual expertise and strengths within the group to help balance out the president’s portfolio.
- **Avoid solving issues between and among team members.** Encourage team members who are at odds with each other to work through their differences utilizing collaborative decision making and conflict management techniques. If there are clear and legitimate differences of opinion that cannot be resolved, only then, with both individuals in the room, should the leader serve as mediator.
- **Role-model collaboration across boundaries.** Communicate clear goals and responsibilities. Give and receive regular constructive feedback. Do not wait for the annual performance review. Give the team opportunities to make quick course corrections before bad habits start. High-functioning teams benefit from a shared understanding of role overlap across boundaries and the diversity of opinions.
- **Create an environment where “speaking truth to power” is encouraged.** Coined by the Quakers to address the issue of nonviolent ways to deal with conflict, this term in a broader sense invites team members to be candid in discussions with one another and the leader in order to avoid groupthink. Honest dialogue permits the exchange of vital information and innovative ideas crucial in the development and maintenance of high-functioning teams. Address key questions openly to provide a better sense of team ownership, role clarity, and challenges on the horizon. This will lay the groundwork for future success. For example, following a challenging discussion, immediately develop a few talking points before

everyone walks out the door. This will test the degree to which the team is on the same page and their ability to communicate decisions with fidelity.

- **Help new team members recognize that their new role may be very different from previous ones.** This can be a difficult adjustment, especially for those who held a similar position for decades or who have worked in diverse environments. Don't let assumptions about what the leader expects go unstated.
- **Demonstrate consistent behavior.** It is important for leaders to send consistent messages and to avoid even the appearance of flip-flopping in decision making. If there is new information that impacts a prior decision, say so. Then provide a context for changing the decision in a face-to-face meeting; emails can be misinterpreted. Follow up on commitments, and role-model the behavior expected of others.
- **Create a sense of not only individual but also shared accountability.** To avoid sending a mixed message about what behavior will be rewarded, ensure that performance management processes assess both individual and team contributions.
- **Keep in mind that succession is inevitable.** More often than not, team members will leave. A president should presume that even if they have selected all of their direct reports, the cabinet will have a shelf life ranging from three to seven years," says Mohammad H. Qayoumi, president of San Jose State University. "Even in those unusual circumstances when a cabinet remains together for the above duration, the president must seek ways to invigorate the team with new and audacious goals and directions so the team can rejuvenate and transmute itself. Otherwise, the cabinet will experience boredom, monotony, and disengagement that lead to a dysfunctional team. Therefore, recognizing the shelf life of a cabinet can help a president to always maintain a high-performing team."

## Turning vision into reality

A skilled senior leadership team that thrives in complex and less predictable environments is essential for achieving institutional goals. As the arc of leadership continues to evolve, team accountability and effectiveness are vital to the future of each institution. Certainly, challenges exist, especially as the composition of the team changes over time. Yet considering the benefits gained, investing the time and effort into building and maintaining high-performance teams is a workable and effective game plan that will continue to move institutions forward.

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