

## Starting a New Leadership Position

Recently, a colleague asked me for my thoughts regarding transitioning into a new position. This person had just accepted a CIO position at a fine institution and wanted to know what advice I could give.

First, I think that the key to making such a transition is to spend most of your time listening. It is critical to try to understand the culture and the history of the IT organization, the context for this unit, and its relationship to the rest of the institution. People will press you to unveil your “grand plans” for the organization; it is my feeling that you should strongly resist these pressures. You can certainly speak with very broad strokes, but until you know a lot more, it is best to avoid specifics. Listen to key opinion leaders, and take lots of notes. Likewise, many campuses will expect the development of a strategic plan, but as a newcomer, you need first to spend time listening. On the other hand, you cannot wait to show movement until all parts of a strategic plan have been pulled together. People will become impatient. As key steps forward become obvious, you need to roll these out in an incremental fashion. This will show steady and ongoing movement, which is also critical for long-term credibility.

Another challenge involves staffing. You have just inherited a staff, with one or more of them possibly having been candidates for your job. You have inherited a team, but they may not be *your* team. You need to carefully evaluate each of these folks, and that takes time. Don't fall into the trap of telling them that all of their jobs are secure and will continue to be defined as before: this could come

back to haunt you. Evaluate all of them, giving them chances to perform, guiding them when they fall short, and seeing if they learn. Keep your boss very informed of these impressions and evaluations, so that he or she has background information should some action become necessary.

Make a pattern of meeting with key opinion leaders and stakeholders. Develop a pattern of meeting with deans, department chairs, and leaders of key



related units such as the library, the registrar, the business office, and institutional research. Ask them what they would like to see and what opportunities for synergy they see as possible. All too many leaders of such units will expect this to be a one-time thing at the beginning of your tenure, but the key is to keep these discussions going. The meetings shouldn't be scheduled mechanically but instead as the situation calls for or as an opportunity presents itself, thus giving these folks “booster shots” of a vaccine that says you are interested, listening, and concerned about the whole institution.

In all likelihood, you will inherit an advisory board (or possibly several). Use them! Make the meetings meaningful. You need to share both successes and setbacks, being honest and candid. If the governing structure is problematic, supplement it with an unofficial kitchen cabinet of key faculty and other players who share your vision. However, never have this group meet as a whole, since that will be quickly picked up on and seen as subversive. Instead, meet with these folks one-on-one as colleagues. If there is no official group, form one and handpick it to the degree possible, including opinion leaders and people who will challenge you (not just ones who will rubber-stamp your efforts).

Finally, and perhaps most important, be yourself! No one can pretend very well or very long. You don't have to be totally candid about everything, but candor is disarming and can bond you with your new colleagues. Clearly, you need to be careful in staff situations. The old adage that it is “lonely at the top” is all too true. You are no longer colleagues with those at work: you are the boss. However, like everybody else, you will need to vent about the challenges and frustrations of the job. For these purposes, find trustworthy colleagues at other institutions.

A new job is both exciting and, on occasion, terrifying. A combination of these two emotions is healthy: if you are smug and not a bit anxious, you'll be heading for disaster. But the challenges of—and the sense of accomplishment that comes from—shaping an organization are well worth the effort and the angst.

Brian L. Hawkins is President of EDUCAUSE.