

IN HER OWN WORDS

Part II:

Lessons I Learned from the Search Process for University Presidents

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The ring of my home phone interrupts my early morning journaling. Calling is a good friend, who now has the opportunity to become a college president, for the first time in her administrative career. A well-respected counselor during my own similar quest, she now seems to have lost the footing that I had found so reassuring earlier.

She speaks of her upcoming interview with the headhunter, administrators, regents, faculty and distinguished alums. Doubtless they will gather at some distant airport, convenient to each but unfamiliar to all. There they will try to overcome the artificial surroundings, time pressures and distractions of their other duties in order to evaluate – in only 90 minutes – her ability to serve as the chief educational officer of a \$1 billion institution of higher education.

Having journaled throughout my candidacies for leadership positions in higher ed, I turn to those pages to prompt response to her consternations, this time not as she being counseled but as the counselor.

There I find the words that served as my best advice to myself: “The venues of the search process present the same challenges with which I was familiar as a leader – political resistance, short attention spans, hidden and conflicting agendas among the participants, healthy differences of opinion, unclear objectives, and ambiguous instructions. These are the same problems we as leaders overcome in order to gain consensus and commitment from groups of individuals. These are the same problems we will encounter as leaders of institutions responsible for achieving economic and social progress.”

The airport conference room – where vital search interviews with candidates for university leadership too often take place – is just another venue where leadership can be exercised. In my first airport interview, I naively refused to recognize the venue as a legitimate one; form eclipses content.

I decide to tell my friend that now is not the time to lament that process, but to understand it. Now is not the time to label it chronically flawed, but rather to prepare for a *conversation* by leader with leaders in the interest of leadership. After all, form eclipses content in many of the venues of university leadership.

What's the difference between participating in a search process for a new university president or a chancellor and participating in any process where a leader is attempting to advance the issue of progress?

Not much.

In the search process, your *career* seems so clearly on the line. But isn't *your career* on the line everyday you demonstrate the courage to make decisions that you and only you can make? At what point do these incremental decisions demonstrate either progress or failure?

Consider the leadership venues of my last six months as chancellor: the inaugural speech, regular meetings with faculty and students, testimony in front of the state legislature, the strategic planning process, monthly meetings with the Board of Governors, calls from the press on my unpopular decision to change basketball coaches, meetings with the executive committee for the capital campaign and wealthy but often disgruntled alumni, and the interview with a national magazine, where my role as a spokesperson for higher education put me in a position of great opportunity and risk.

I've learned that whenever a significant leadership opportunity is at hand, be it during the search process or after, certain principles must rule. I monitor, measure and discipline my leadership around five principles, which may help other candidates for top leadership on campus: *On average and in my experience, women are more skilled at two of these five and men are more skilled at one; the other two are a toss up. So use your advantages and develop your weaknesses whatever they are.*

'To thy own self be true'

This axiom has far less to do with helping the search committee understand you, and far more to do with following your own best instinct on whether or not you feel a real fit. A potential mismatch between the school and its leader is the real dilemma in the presidential search process.

Why? Because the process is so tedious, time consuming and full of bureaucratic and intellectual challenge that by the time you become a candidate who seems to have the edge on the assignment, you just don't want to confront the real possibility that the chemistry isn't right. This is when real courage is required: the courage to lead your own career, rather than believing in providence, fate or coincidence. If it doesn't feel right, don't do it!

Women tend to have real clarity about the question: "who am I and what am I up to in my

life". A strategy for me has always been to close an interview with the answer to that very question, for example, this is what you have if you have me for your leader..... People relate very positively to leaders with that level of clarity can make that kind of a statement originating from their core being.

Ironically, the group that reads your cover letter and resume and normally conducts the airport interview is not the group that decides whom to hire. Instead, the final decision-makers are members of the board. The convoluted process allows for a committee that has a different view of what is needed than the board, which I have experienced. Consequently, the ability to decide whether or not you want to work there with them unfolds slowly, and indeed can't be focused until the final stage.

Be clear about the desired outcomes

To keep your focus, I've found it enormously helpful to write down the desired outcomes before each stage of the process.

The desired outcome of **your first conversation** with the search firm might be to maximize the amount of information you obtain about the school, the search process, the search committee, the board and the community. For **your cover letter and resume**, the outcome is to connect with the committee such that they see you as accomplished in those arenas they are looking for. The desired outcome of **the airport interview** for me was to connect with the committee so that (1) they saw me as a leader, (2) they understood some of my vision, (3) they could see me as their leader, and (4) they reveal insights that will help me decide whether I want them.

For me, the desired outcome of **the entire process** was to find a university that would allow me to fulfill my vision: The university had to be the vehicle for expression of who I am.

Know and connect with your prospect

Do not write one word of a cover letter and do not assume that you have a ready-made resume without extensive research. Use every resource to learn about the institution, the search committee, and the Board: the institutional literature and website, your network, and most importantly the search firm. After my flawed airport interview, I have never gone to an airport interview without first walking the campus *incognito*,

even when the campus was in a different city than the airport interview.

In my experience, women are much likely to do their homework than men; nevertheless, as academics, we often have great resumes focused on scholarship, but generally poor in delineating our accomplishments as a leader. List accomplishments that are most relevant to the school where you're applying. My reading of cover letters suggests that 50% of applicants say "I want to apply and enclosed is my resume." Another 40% also tell you what they think the issues are. Only 10% relate their accomplishments to what you're trying to achieve. Only half of that 10% take time to understand your university and who you are. Now that I am president and hiring deans and VPs, this is the 5% I seek.

As you move through the later stages of the process, your research should begin to focus on the identification of disconnects. Study what the school stands for rhetorically and then compare its rhetoric to its behaviors. The committee says: "We stand for opportunity and encourage diversity," but you have walked the campus and seen the void, and you look around the room at the airport interview and see one minority face and two women. This is a disconnect.

It is a sensitive opportunity to show them how you will help them achieve the difference between what they say and what they want to be. You show them the kind of courage that helps them know you can help them get there. It is also an opportunity to talk with the search firm in order to push for more information about the reality of what you see as a disconnect.

Now for an aside about search firms. They are most valuable to you in this leadership discipline – knowing your "prospect". I smile as I say that my real ally in the process turned out to be the search firms. There was a time when I thought they were a hindrance. In truth, they provided me safe territory to talk about the lock that internal candidates often have on a position, about committees and personalities, about salary, about perceptions of single women, and about countless other sensitive issues. They are true experts at referencing. And, they gave me the signals about where I really stood; I only needed to listen.

- **'Be' the Leader**

Here is where it seems to me that men have the edge. This is form, more than substance.

Instead of talking about leadership, demonstrate your leadership in the written material and in the interviews. Do not hand them a menu; give them a taste of their terms. Cultivate their appetite for your

leadership by letting them see, feel, taste and savor it.

My coach calls this “Theater in the Workplace.” With substantial work and no small amount of discomfort, I changed my view of what it means to communicate effectively. I moved from telling my story, explaining the issues, and delineating my vision to listening and observing, connecting with the audience, engaging them in exploration, making them comfortable and establishing a relationship.

There would be no listening to me on their part unless we had a relationship. You simply interact as if you already are their leader. Interaction in writing or in person from the mindset of “I want to be your president” produces behaviors, body language and voice tones quite different from those of a mindset “I am your president and we are discussing the issues”.

- **Take Time for Reflection**

You can manage the exterior reality only if your interior reality is centered and well-focused. Keep good company with yourself. Let yourself feel the passion of leadership and let those emotions drive the passion rather than disrupt it.

For me, journaling is the most effective mechanism. Only when I free myself of emotions such as frustration or fear or anxiety can I engage my creativity and humor. The creative spirit – that magical combination of mind, body, and soul – emerges when I am disciplined about reflection as a leadership principle. That’s when it’s also the most fun.

The search process offers a rich and varied set of leadership venues. Identify the leadership principles that got you where you are now, and systematically apply them to each of those venues.

As you set off to explore your own principles and venues, remember that the opportunity to lead is also the obligation to serve: not just our board of directors, faculty, students or alumnus, but the society for whom we work on behalf of social progress. It is our ultimate legacy.

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