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Advice

The Internal Heir Apparent

By Dennis M. Barden

Succession planning — anticipating leadership change and dealing with it internally — is all the rage in corporate America. From senior executives duking it out to succeed Jack Welch at GE to Michael Eisner handpicking his successor to the throne of Disney, companies have figured out that planning an organized internal leadership transition can provide stability and confidence for their stakeholders. Customers know that the products will keep flowing. Shareholders know to hold onto their investments. Senior executives know whether or not to take that call from the search firm. Everyone remains calm and makes rational decisions.

That is true in the nonprofit sector, as well — at least in healthcare, where providers are working diligently to prepare for transitions across the executive spectrum. They understand that they, like their for-profit counterparts, have multiple stakeholders who thrive on minimizing the anxiety of the unknown. A veritable cottage industry in succession planning and consulting is growing like kudzu.

Why, then, has the succession-planning craze not extended to higher education?

Colleges and universities have multiple stakeholders who don't like uncertainty any more than corporate investors do. In fact, it is hard to think of a business more committed to the status quo than academe. Maybe Congress. Shouldn't colleges and universities lead the way in providing for the peace of mind that comes with knowing what will happen next?

Maybe they should, but they don't.

Colleges and universities are purposefully constructed to be stable, immune to fashion and trend — and thus resistant to change. As a result, one of the only ways they can make quantum progress at the executive level is to bring in leadership from outside the institution with different ideas, philosophies, and

methodologies. Those occasional opportunities for transfusions of new blood seem to trump the benefits of the known — i.e., the internally designated successor. For that and perhaps other reasons, colleges generally find their leadership walking the halls of some other educational institution.

Whither the Internal Candidate?

It happens all the time. From assistant to associate to full professor, from department head to dean to provost, you work your way up the ladder (or, from a faculty perspective, down it!). Skills are acquired, plans made and executed, alliances formed, trials and tribulations experienced, perspective gained, personal qualities galvanized.

Then the moment comes. A search is underway for the top job. Friends unfamiliar with the ways of academe think it a slam dunk — you will be the next president. You, however, knowing the vagaries of the search process, understand that not only is your appointment not a given, it isn't even necessarily likely.

Still, you want the job. You have the skills. Every search consultant who tries to talk you into a presidency somewhere else assures you that you merit serious consideration. Maybe you have even dabbled in the job market and know you are competitive. You want this job, though, at your own institution, the one to which you have committed — and contributed — so much.

How do you get it?

The first thing is not to tell anyone that you really do want the job. Don't confirm whether or not you are a candidate. Don't tell people that you are willing to submit your credentials for review. Don't even admit that you would accept it if offered.

Whatever you do, for heaven's sake, don't campaign for it by having your friends nominate you.

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The ways of academe can be strangely counterintuitive — wanting the job and being willing to work for it is almost always seen as a negative. Don't call in chits. Don't politic. Don't call trustees at home just to chat. Go through channels. Stick with the search process as prescribed by the search committee. Keep your candidacy as private and confidential as you would if you were a candidate at another institution — more, even.

Next, perform in your current job as you would if you were not a candidate. Don't feel that you are auditioning. That is particularly important if you are drafted to fill the job on an interim basis. (You will certainly have to serve if asked, notwithstanding whether or not it is a good idea to put an interim in place who may actually want the job — a subject for another time.)

Just stay in the moment and do the job the best way you know how. That is what you will have to do if you win the job, so start now. Make decisions on the merits. Build consensus. Take the heat. Show your mettle. People will notice.

The Price of Leadership

The hardest part of being the internal candidate is your association with the person you would replace if hired. If it is true that colleges and universities seek leadership from the outside as an evolutionary — or even revolutionary — strategy, how can you prove that you will provide that kind of leadership when you have always been a loyal member of the incumbent's team? How far can you push in talking about the changes that you would make, the opportunities that you would seize? Do you risk seeming disloyal? If the incumbent was unsuccessful, does that raise the question of why you didn't do those things before?

As is so often the case, tone is crucial. You are an educated and capable person who occupies a leadership position. Presumably, you have superior communication skills. If you want to be a president, you had better be able to put them on display.

In your cover letter — and, even more important, as you improvise your way through an interview — it is critical that you focus on the future. The degree to which you wish to acknowledge the past and the present is a judgment call, but the search committee will be focused on what you say about what comes next and whether

you can lead them to the ubiquitous “next level.”

Because you are an internal candidate, you are burdened by an intimate knowledge of the institution. Search committees can, and likely will, ask you questions and expect answers that they can't get from other candidates. That is a liability. As all great leaders do, you must turn that liability into an asset. Talk about what is around the corner for your institution and what you will do about it. Be specific.

If you are going to pay the price for being a prophet in your own land, take advantage by making accurate predictions.

Having made those predictions, your next challenge is to prescribe actions that position your institution for success. At least two pitfalls await you at this juncture. First, remember that this is not cocktail-party conversation with your cronies and pals about what you would do if you were the king of the forest. What you say will be remembered, and you will be expected to live up to it — or at least to try to live up to a lot of it. Your ideas must reflect not just bravado and imagination but probity, a mix of pragmatism and boldness, a dash of risk assessment, and at least some sense of cost.

The second pitfall is perhaps the most dangerous. It happened right in front of me recently. An internal candidate was sitting before a search committee that widely admired her for her dedication, her loyalty, and her passion for the institution. The committee members asked her the questions that they had asked each of the other candidates, and she chose to answer with great specificity: “We have problem X. The solution is to do Y.” Some on the committee ate it up. They were dazzled by her grasp of operations and the detail into which she could go to outline the next steps that the institution should take. She was impressive in her comprehensiveness.

Unfortunately, she was not impressive in the depth of her analysis. What the committee members realized immediately is that the candidate indeed did have an unsurpassed grasp — of tactics. Tactics are critically important, of course, but they are the province of operational rather than executive leadership.

This candidate had failed to transcend her current job — which

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was all about tactics — to the strategic level where executive leadership lives. She knew where to find every paper clip on the campus, but she did not know how to conceive or to articulate the broader challenges, the sweeping themes, and the intersecting multilayered initiatives that lurked in her institution's future.

She failed to prove that she could provide inspirational, visionary leadership. In short, she had no leadership strategies, and therefore she had no shot at the job.

If you want to succeed to the leadership of your home institution, then the idea is to do your job as if the top job was not available, to talk about the future, and to express vision instead of tactics while ensuring that the vision is practical and can become a reality.

If you can do all of those things, you will have demonstrated exactly the skills that you will need every day in the president's job. You will have succeeded, and your institution will have its line of succession in place, planned or not.

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