



5-2013

The Last 100 Days of a Presidency: What Boards Need to Know and Do

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Recommended Citation

Johnson, S. S., & Eckel, P. D. (2013). The Last 100 Days of a Presidency: What Boards Need to Know and Do. *Trusteeship Magazine*, Retrieved from https://repository.upenn.edu/gse_pubs/450

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Abstract

Takeaways

It is just as important for a board to plan the transition of the outgoing president as it is to plan the transition of the incoming president.

Boards should help departing presidents fashion a to-do list, as well as a not-to-do list.

Boards should recognize that the departure of the president can present significant procedural and emotional issues for senior staff members awaiting the arrival of the new president.

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The Last 100 Days of a Presidency: What Boards Need to Know and Do

BY SANDRA S. JOHNSON AND PETER ECKEL
MAY/JUNE 2013

TAKEAWAYS

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Many boards will find themselves hiring a new president in the near future, as higher education faces an unprecedented turnover in its top leaders: 58 percent of college and university presidents, at 61 or older, are approaching retirement. And not only must board members successfully manage the transition of a new president into the institution, but also—less obvious, but just as important—they must successfully manage the transition of the current president *out*. Even with the best of intentions and thoughtful planning, such transitions are challenging.

A presidential transition is like a relay race: When runners prepare to pass the baton, one slows down while the other speeds up. Leadership transitions can be some of the most disruptive—but also potentially enriching—times for a college or university, with emotions running high and stress

placed on every level of the institution. To ensure a successful handoff, boards must understand the dynamic of the sitting president's transition out of that post and the key roles boards can and should play.

One of us, Sandra S. Johnson, recently examined this complex process at eight liberal arts colleges and interviewed the departing presidents, key senior staff members, and one board chair. In each case, the president left on his or her own terms between June 2008 and August 2011. Five of the presidents retired, and three took positions at other institutions, inside and outside of higher education. As part of those discussions, the outgoing presidents, their senior leadership, and the board chair offered the following advice for boards.

Be intentional about the president's transition out. Governing boards can improve the transition process if they begin by assessing the state of the institution and any challenges it currently faces, especially as they apply to the presidency. Then boards should collaborate with the outgoing presidents to create a transition agenda and publicly support its completion. A jointly conceived agenda will ensure that the outgoing president and senior leaders direct their energies to issues relevant to the institution and the transition of leadership. The board's effectiveness will depend on its ability to set priorities and continually communicate its progress in addressing them.

Boards need to understand that an outgoing president's goal is, ideally, to leave his or her successor a desk devoid of crisis. Several outgoing presidents said they had constructed a transition agenda or a final to-do list. In some cases this was a short list of tasks, while in other cases outgoing presidents, concerned with how their presidency (and sometimes their careers) would be viewed in the future, created extensive, exhaustive lists. Boards need to understand that there are upsides and downsides to an outgoing president's desire to leave everything in order.

The challenge is to balance that presidential wish with the pressure of time. Identifying a realistic transition agenda and engaging senior leadership in its objectives is vital. Those senior staff reporting to the president must be involved, but shifting allegiances and the anxiety that a presidential transition can generate often make it difficult for staff to set priorities.

The board should work with the president before the last 100 days to determine specifically what needs to be accomplished before she or he leaves office, weighing the need to wrap up loose ends against the desire to avoid decisions that will tie the incoming president's hands. In one institution's case, the reality check for the outgoing president occurred during the last 100 days as the result of a process he termed "triaging the list," during which his transition agenda was split into two lists: the "to-do" list and the "not-going-to-get-done" list.

Because presidents, by nature, are overachievers, boards may have to help the president decide what should be put on the to-do list. The drive to get things done before leaving often means that presidents lose sight of what *needs* to be accomplished versus what they'd *like* to accomplish. One outgoing president acknowledged his tendency to add to the agenda even as the end of his tenure was nearing; his senior leadership saw it as a "let's-shoot-for-the-moon" list, instead of a strategic transition plan. Boards can play a crucial role by helping such presidents also create a *not-to-do* list and hold the president accountable for *not* promoting items on the list.

As one of the outgoing presidents remarked, "There were decisions I made—or didn't make—to ensure the new president had the level of input he needed to have once he came on board." Another faced a "Do I fix the problem now or wait?" dilemma when a member of her senior leadership team left several weeks before her own departure. In that case, the outgoing president knew that she could only put a Band-Aid on the matter, since the selection of a replacement would require the input of her successor.

Recognize the "lame duck" effect. Boards and outgoing presidents must also deal with the likelihood that the president will be viewed as a lame duck. Although formal authority remains in the office of the president, the outgoing presidents interviewed felt that their ability to make decisions was questioned by others in the institution and, eventually, even by themselves. In all cases, from the time of the public announcement through the last 100 days, the presidents perceived a decline in their authority, similar to a slow leak, and their leveraging power got steadily weaker.

Maintaining the college's momentum was a priority for all of the outgoing presidents, who found that making decisions in the context of decreased power was challenging. With the board's backing, the lame-duck effect can be reduced, however, through board members' publicly supporting the president and the agreed-upon transition agenda.

One of the greatest challenges for a board is to manage the multiple transitions that may occur during a presidential transition. While the outgoing and incoming leaders are at center stage, others—including board members—are also going through a change. For example, in one case the president was departing at the same time that the board chair's term was ending, which meant that the remaining board members had to oversee both a presidential transition and their own—to a new board chair. In addition, the board selected an interim president who had never served as a president and did not hold a leadership position at the institution but rather at a different institution. With several competing agendas at play—the outgoing president's, the new board chair's, and the interim president's—the transition can be unusually difficult.

Realize the implications for senior leadership. Boards need to remember that a presidential transition has profound implications for the senior leadership team. While vice presidents, deans, and other campus administrators can usually be relied on to attend to day-to-day operations, the board must be able to expand its attention beyond its usual role. In all of the cases studied, the senior leadership team desired

more direct communication and affirmation—from the governing board rather than the outgoing president—concerning the search process and their future roles at the institution. During presidential transitions, senior leaders’ loyalties and attention can be divided between the outgoing president’s agenda and that of their soon-to-be boss.

The board needs to be sensitive to these issues while ensuring decisions during the transition process do not hamstring the new president. At one institution, the outgoing president gave long-term contracts to all of his senior staff to ensure stability during the transition, alleviate their fears, and reward loyalty. What he and the board failed to realize was that this hampered the new president’s ability to assess people and make changes, even if changes ultimately seemed essential to effective campus leadership. Although striving for institutional stability, the board, on the strong recommendation of a popular outgoing president, put the new president at a disadvantage.

In six of the cases studied, the outgoing president directed his or her team to compile reports and assemble transitional materials.

According to the outgoing presidents, that was valuable not only because it documented for the new president the current state of the institution, but also because it served to help the remaining members of the leadership team to define their own priorities and communicate more effectively with the incoming president. For their part, senior leadership saw the value of these activities, but suggested that without feedback from the board or the incoming president, they were left to speculate as to how the reports were being received.

Thus, the board should acknowledge the influence it has—and doesn’t have—over senior staff members who naturally are anxious about the transition. By maintaining open and consistent communication, both one-on-one and as a group, board members can have a greater impact on staff members than can contractual incentives. Often, what is not said is what is “heard,” which makes clear and direct communication crucial for an effective transition.

Help manage the emotions of everyone involved. The transition of a departing president is not easy emotionally for the incumbent, the senior staff, the campus community, or the board. In fact, all of the outgoing presidents commented on the complexity of emotions felt by their senior administrators as their roles and relationships with one another began to shift. Each transitioning president spent considerable time speaking to the senior staff as a group and as individuals in an effort to maintain stability and attend to their emotional needs. Senior administrators had similar questions: What would happen to them when the new president arrived? To whom would they be accountable? What would their future look like? In addition, most wondered what the board’s perspective was on their value.

In the cases studied, the outgoing presidents’ final days also marked a major turning point in their professional identity: They were becoming ex-presidents. The departing president must move out of the president’s residence, find a new home, support family members, and, if the president is retiring, give up the benefits of being a president. The transitions out were largely shaped by what the person would be doing next—retiring or moving to a new position. Those preparing for retirement often became increasingly concerned about their post-presidency identity; those gearing up for a new job also experienced stress and anxiety.

Compounding the issues surrounding the outgoing presidents’ transitions was the realization that planning for the transition and managing it were more complex emotionally than the transition into the

presidency had been. All of the outgoing presidents studied commented that no institutionally initiated plan had been in place to assist them with the personal dimensions of the transition—which had been hard for them and often their families as well. Presidents invest a great deal of time and attention in the institution, and that sense of connection never goes away. For all of the presidents interviewed, letting go was not easy. For presidents entering retirement who intend to remain in the community, boards can help them plan time away at the beginning of their successor’s tenure, to the benefit of everyone.

Try to forge a bridge between the departing and the new president. Boards should realize that the new president may assume they have little use for the former president. In all of the cases studied, the departing president was strongly willing to support the incoming president, but was wary of being perceived as “directing” the new president. The successors to all of the presidents studied had come from outside the hiring institution and had limited knowledge of its organizational culture, norms, or traditions.

For the outgoing presidents studied who did spend time with their successors, the depth at which they discussed relevant institutional issues ranged from cordial conversations to comprehensive memoranda outlining the operational calendar, donor histories, and the political dimensions of college partnerships. Regardless of the personal dynamics, however, each of the outgoing presidents made it a priority to support his or her successor and to either involve them in or prepare them for any important decisions. In some cases, however, despite efforts by the outgoing president, his or her successor was not interested in developing a relationship beyond the exchange of pleasantries.

Still, boards should understand that by coordinating a transfer of knowledge between the departing or interim president and the new president—essentially a pre-transition—they can enhance the likelihood of an effective changeover. Facilitating a relationship between outgoing and incoming leaders can flatten the learning curve and preserve valuable institutional knowledge. Ideally, that can be accomplished in a collaborative atmosphere rather than by relying on a “memos as manuals” scenario, in which the outgoing president attempts to commit institutional knowledge to paper.

To avoid the challenges of forced relationships or half-hearted attempts at engagement, boards can make explicit the expectation that the departing leader will be involved and available, schedule meetings between the departing and incoming leaders, develop an agenda for discussion, and clearly outline areas of focus and responsibility during the transition period. The goal of advanced planning for a leadership transition is to ensure that the new president can concentrate on relationship building and important goals and challenges, not put out fires and struggle to set priorities. Stories from the institution’s past can be used effectively as a foundation for understanding its history, people, and culture. If both sides of the transition are thoughtfully organized, the board can enhance the likelihood of a successful beginning and a successful ending.

Communicate—often. Because the transition will require a shared vision and support from all constituencies, a communication plan that is clear and consistent and addresses the transition each step of the way is essential. The board should openly identify challenges, talk with various groups of stakeholders, and have an open-door policy that encourages constructive dialogue. Communicating the progress of plans for both the presidential transition out and the transition in is vital. That can occur in numerous ways, but direct, one-to-one communication between the board and the departing and incoming president and senior staff members is most effective.

Presidents embody the values and goals of the institution, and the presidency is the engine that positions the institution to maintain those values and meet those goals. The presidency is more than the president, however; it includes as key players the board members and senior leadership. Missed opportunities and their subsequent effects on the institution and its key stakeholders can be avoided with effective planning for all the transitions taking place simultaneously. An actively engaged board is crucial for a successful presidential transition because, in the end, this is a relay race that involves the entire institution.

A CAUTIONARY TALE

A retiring president with an admitted penchant for controlling things immediately contacted the successor to suggest meetings, conferences, and issues that had to be dealt with during the transition and before taking office. Without a sense of the priorities or knowledge of campus personnel, the president-elect quickly felt conflicted and confused. The board responded immediately by appointing a transition committee, with members representing a variety of constituencies and a board member as chair. All communications with the new president—including those with the retiring president—went through this committee. The board avoided a conflict between predecessor and successor, managed transition issues successfully, and enabled the president-elect to finish his last six months at his current institution without interruption.

—from A Complete Guide to Presidential Search for Universities and Colleges, by Joseph S. Johnston, Jr. and James P. Ferrare (AGB Press, 2013).

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