

THE CHRONICLE
of Higher Education

COMMENTARY

10 Steps to Lead College Presidents Away From the Edge

By *Liz DiMarco Weinmann* | APRIL 10, 2018



Michael F. McElroy for The Chronicle

H. Fred Walker, the former president of Edinboro U. of Pennsylvania, resigned last month after criticizing faculty members in public remarks.

Many readers who followed the *Chronicle* articles about the precipitous decline and fall of H. Fred Walker, now former president of Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, no doubt did so with a mixture of fascination and horror. They were thinking either, "There but for the grace of God go I," or "Been there, done that, never want to do that again." There is much, in fact, that higher-education leaders can learn from Walker's downfall.

Here are steps to help them avoid some of the problems that led to Walker's resignation:

1. Accept the fact that you may have to adjust your leadership style from what was effective in other situations. Management journals are full of stories about new executives who misread an established culture, refused to acknowledge, apologize, or adjust their style, and ultimately faced untimely departures.
2. Not every business challenge requires a turnaround strategy. New leaders who want to be perceived as decisive are often too eager to call for drastic turnaround measures. Unless there is irrefutable documentation indicating that your college lacks the capacity to survive, your situation is not a turnaround candidate.

3. Leaders of struggling colleges should first consider a realignment, which focuses on maximizing strengths and seizing opportunities to revitalize (not compromise) the institution. If the ultimate decision is to close underperforming programs, leaders should exercise empathic engagement, encourage collaboration and trust, and secure commitments to excellence from all levels of staff and faculty members.

4. Develop (or revise) your strategic plan and become its most enthusiastic champion. Leaders who want to increase engagement, excellence, and support must promote in a respectful manner the principles, critical success factors, and key performance indicators of the institution's strategic plan every single day. If there are explicit guiding principles in the plan about upholding reputation, maximizing resources, showing respect, and practicing diversity, you are duty-bound to personify those guiding principles in every interaction you have inside and outside your institution.

5. Marketing the institution is the job of everyone who works there. College presidents need to anticipate tough questions and must communicate honestly. Stifle the urge to blame. Listen more, acknowledge challenges, and use every opportunity to engage and mobilize advocates at all levels, not just the acolytes you perceive will parrot your gospel and enforce your mandates.

6. Never conduct pivotal meetings regarding your institution's finances alone with an external stakeholder. If you hold sensitive meetings alone with financial executives (or media), they might infer that you consider yourself the best ambassador for your college, and you have a weak bench; that you are an easy mark for shrewd investors (who never do deal meetings alone); or that your situation is so precarious that you did not want to include your team. What's more, anything you communicate verbally will be harder for you to substantiate, clarify, or refute.

7. Always be aware that anyone with a mobile device could initiate negative stories about you. Know that every email you send, every sensitive conversation you think is private, and — worse — the anger of every colleague or faculty member or student you might have wronged, implicitly or explicitly, can go viral. College presidents must comport themselves in a manner that is beyond reproach, as consummate people champions, collaborators in chief, and exemplars of excellence.

8. Don't invite reporters to internal meetings unless you are confident that the outcome will be favorable to your institution. In good times and in bad, a president must communicate thoughtfully with the press, so as to establish good rapport that will serve the needs of the community as well as the college. Never deliberately expose to the media or other public stakeholder any unresolved disputes or complaints you have with staff, faculty, trustees, or students. Rare are the leaders who win such public disputes.

9. Work closely with your marketing, fund-raising, and communications teams to strategize and rehearse for encounters with media representatives:

- Establish respectful protocols regarding media inquiries, even though they may be ignored.
- When a media inquiry comes directly to you, confer first with your communications team about how to work productively with the reporter.
- Do not conduct media interviews without competent staff present. Expunge "off the record" from your lexicon and that of your staff. Nothing is ever off the record.
- Don't stonewall, even in a crisis. At the very least, have a credible standby statement. In *The Chronicle's* update on Walker's troubled situation at Edinboro, the litany of university officials who declined to comment, refused interviews, and asserted others "will not comment" is unfortunate.
- While you cannot anticipate the trajectory of every media encounter, do envision the desired outcome of every media interview and focus on delivering messages to that result.
- Your communications team should prepare you for every media interview as well as videotaping and debriefing you before and after broadcast and web interviews.

10. And, finally, whenever you are speaking about your institution as president, it is the institution that should be the story, not you. Focus on the vision, mission, and values you are duty-bound to uphold, and acknowledge sincerely the dedication of all the people who expect and trust you will lead, empower, and champion them.

If you are dedicated to serving the noble purpose of higher education, the last thing you should want is to be left out in the cold, especially if you are out there alone.

Liz DiMarco Weinmann is an adviser to corporations and nonprofits on strategy, institutional advancement, and marketing.

Copyright © 2018 The Chronicle of Higher Education