

# Things Successful Presidents Do

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Michael Morgenstern for The Chronicle

It's been nearly three years since I was a fellow in the American Council on Education's flagship [leadership-training program](#), yet I still reflect on what I learned there.

A central benefit of the program is the opportunity to spend time with a cross section of senior administrators from a broad array of institutions. During my fellowship, I made a point of meeting presidents and chancellors who were widely regarded as successful. I met more than 40 such CEOs via the program, and they were as different as the institutions they led. But from our conversations, some key similarities emerged in how they succeed at their jobs. Here is my list of practices that successful leaders seem to follow:

**They convey a coherent vision.** Presidents and chancellors frequently have the opportunity — through speeches, op-eds, and other avenues — to talk about big issues with employees, students, alumni, and other groups. Successful CEOs use those opportunities to share their institution's vision. Bringing people together around a common vision is a core characteristic of effective leaders. Successful ones direct considerable time and energy to it.

**They are authentic.** Presidents and chancellors — due to the nature of the job — spend a lot of time with wildly different constituencies. It's not unusual for a higher education CEO to interact with professors, staff members, students, alumni, community leaders, and donors — all in a single day. A system president I met described the capacity to interact with diverse groups authentically — which he referred to as an ability to have "multiple personalities" — as essential but rare. Successful leaders are able to do that in ways that resonate while remaining true to who they are.

**They keep their own counsel.** One of the bigger surprises from my discussions with senior administrators was the number who tend to keep sensitive information to themselves. It's not that colleges and universities are full of unprincipled employees, it's that nearly everyone has a confidant. Before long, details of an issue thought to be held in confidence end up widely known.

Some presidents and chancellors confide in their significant others. Some turn to small networks of fellow CEOs — often outside their immediate professional circles — as the need arises for empathy and/or neutral perspectives. In general, however, a majority of those I met with had simply found it easier — and therefore better — to keep sensitive issues to themselves.

**They forge working relationships with journalists.** Different presidents deal with the media in different ways. Some readily hand out their cellphone numbers to reporters and make themselves available for impromptu interviews. Others require media inquiries to be filtered through the PR office, and only talk to reporters directly when absolutely necessary — such as in a crisis. Regardless of whether they prefer to be chummy or formal, successful presidents understand the importance of a productive relationship with the news media.

**They figure out how to cope with stress.** The high volume of demands on their time is an inherent part of the job. Many of the leaders I met with preserve blocks of free time — perhaps an hour every day or Friday afternoons — in their calendars to do things like exercise, ruminate, read, or write. Others travel periodically to recharge. In short, effective presidents find ways to manage the near-constant barrage of demands they experience.

**They continuously prioritize.** Successful presidents and chancellors tend to be very good at — to paraphrase Stephen R. Covey in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* — keeping the main thing the main thing, both for themselves and the people they lead. Many CEOs do so by monitoring key performance indicators — such as via analytics dashboards, regular updates from staffers, and/or by poking around. And they do it because they understand that keeping their institutions focused, and away from distractions, is a central aspect of their roles.

**They monitor their political capital.** Most of the CEOs I met with subscribe to the idea of political capital. It's an abstract currency built on the goodwill that leaders accumulate when their actions are perceived positively by various constituencies. The concept is especially valuable in gauging the timing of unpopular decisions and projects. Effective leaders often track — and purposely underestimate — their political capital to ensure they don't find themselves overdrawn.

**They understand their obligations to their governing boards.** Successful presidents and chancellors know they have to provide guidance and support to — while being managed by — their bosses. To that end, they ensure open channels of communication with board members, and use those channels regularly (e.g., weekly or daily) as issues and pet projects warrant. Sometimes trustees find their way into predicaments. Successful CEOs work hard to provide the information and/or assistance necessary to help trustees avoid getting themselves into hot water.

**They are mindful of fit.** As curious as it may seem, the biggest takeaway from my discussions with presidents and chancellors was a clear understanding of the importance of individual and institutional fit. In pursuing new career opportunities, people often become engrossed with getting hired by particular colleges or universities, institutions in certain geographical regions, and so on. However, a CEO's success ultimately comes down to this: Is this person right for this job and this institution, at this point in his or her career?

The tenure of many a president has been cut short by a poor individual-institutional fit. Successful CEOs in academe are almost always the beneficiaries of careful research on their prospective employers and sincere assessments of their own capacities to advance the institution.

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