

Thriving While Succeeding a Long-Serving Leader

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All transitions are difficult. But there is no doubt that following a long-serving leader brings particular challenges. We tend to focus on the brief administrations that so many leaders in higher education are serving right now. We've all witnessed such short tenures -- leaders moving on to other opportunities or unfortunately encountering difficulties that result in other people making that decision for them. But among the key transition issues discussed less often are the challenges that occur at the retirement of long-serving leaders -- in many cases, the "founding" deans or directors of key organizations or departments.

Change and the Very New Leader

I have had conversations recently with some HERS alumnae and faculty members who are moving into their second semesters succeeding incumbents of 15 or 20 years. One of the interesting issues they have all faced is dealing with the contradictory messages about change: "Everyone I met in the search process talked about the changes needed, but now no one seems ready to do anything new." Indeed, *new* seems to take on a special resonance in these situations. One person referred to herself as the "very new director."

It is vital to acknowledge the extent to which resistance to change and newness is about feelings -- usually unacknowledged. Each person who urged these "very new" leaders to prepare to change things was speaking from an awareness of the general conditions of higher education and the specific realities of the searches in which they were involved. It is not that they do not understand that new directions may be needed. It is just that anxiety about what change will mean for us personally is stored deep in our psyches. Those usually unspoken responses have to be recognized and taken into consideration as you move forward.

While all groups have gone through many changes in the last 20 years, it is hard not to feel that having had the same leader through it all has given the group a stability that has buffered it from the jolts of that period. Maybe so, maybe not. Indeed, maybe not having been jolted is the biggest problem the group must face. But that isn't how it may feel at first, certainly for the members of your department.

You should also be aware that other people on the campus may identify this change as unsettling for reasons that have little to do with you or the work of your department. The transition may mark "the old guard passing" -- the last of a group of leaders associated with another era, a better moment for the institution or for higher education generally. With all this going on, you have to recognize the need to manage this transition for yourself and others.

Change and You

I have some practical advice for you as the new leader. First, get used to being called the “new leader.” As a very new leader, it’s likely that people will call you that for a long time. It may be irritating, but it’s truly not where you want to spend your energy and goodwill. Just find your own version of “Happy to be here. Looking forward to working with this great department to create something new together.”

Second, get control of your calendar. Time is a very precious asset, especially in the beginning. You have to decide whether it is best to fill up your schedule and meet everyone right away or to pace appointments so you can make some quiet observations. This may not be easy because some individuals on campus may have gotten very used to the pace and priorities of your predecessor.

Third, use your calendar management to set at least one nonnegotiable expectation for your self-care plan. Come later or go earlier for exercise. Play music in your office. Find a spot on the campus that you can visit regularly for a getaway. Unsustainable expectations and nonstop pacing will wear you out.

Change and Your Hiring Officer

All the very new leaders with whom I spoke with had been hired with expectations from their senior officers that they would be leading changes to the department. In the best circumstances, understandings were clear about the areas in which a different course of action was needed, and the projected time frames in which to plan and achieve the new goals were realistic. If that was not the case in your situation, my first advice is: go back and seek more clarity and realism now. You know more than you did when you were in the search process, so you have important information and perspective to share with those responsible for your appointment and success. Update or refine the plan for the next year, including the resources available and the markers of achievement in the coming months.

Be alert to who is setting the expectations for the time frame. Even if you feel that you are clear about what results are expected, use the opportunity of reporting your current observations and progress to check out how flexible the pacing might be. You may find that the “high expectations” you are feeling -- meaning pressure for fast results -- may be coming only from you. You may put on yourself a goal of surpassing what has been asked of you in order to make a strong mark as the “no longer new person.” That is not unusual, but it is also not helpful. You want to be known for sustainable impact. You will not get that overnight.

Change and Your Faculty and Staff

With more certainty and confidence about what is expected, you can turn your attention to moving your department into action on the plan -- at a reasonable pace. You might bring the idea of pacing into your conversations with your department members.

Start with letting your staff and faculty members know that you are aware of the stress of this transition. You may want to frame it somewhat generally -- “so many things going on now” -- rather than give your label to what they may be experiencing differently. Acknowledge that you

are trying to take care of yourself and to prioritize how you are spending your time. Encourage them to do the same and to share any suggestions they have for how best to support the staff. Depending on the size and organization of the department, you may want to work with your direct reports about plans for others. At the same time, set a goal of making yourself known to as many people as possible.

You may experience some episodes of odd or unhelpful interaction with members of the department. You do not want to ignore those, but I suggest going slowly while you try to understand what is happening. Change is hard; something is always lost in transitions, regardless of the gains. Try to be patient while you learn what behavior matters enough to intervene. You may find two main issues that can prompt strong reactions: either acting out or shutting down.

The first of these is the issue of personal loyalty to the previous leader. Your presence signals newness. New means different, and some faculty or staff members may feel as if you are being critical of the past and present if you ask them to champion the new. You can run into that with any group facing change, but when we link it to a specific person's long tenure in the leadership role, it can seem to be something more personal.

The second is a fear among people of losing "mastery" of what they do. Change always involves the risk of losing your current reputation as competent in what you are doing. You know that you are feeling high expectations -- maybe pressure -- to make changes. Your staff knows those expectations are out there. Does this mean what they have been doing has already been dismissed as insufficient or "failing"? Even if they agree there are theoretically better ways of doing things, it is not clear that those asked to lead the change will necessarily get it right the first time. What scrutiny will they face as they go forward?

Change and the Past -- as Prelude to the Future

Happily, you can take at least one approach to help yourself and those who need to lead the changes get unstuck about these two issues. Start seeking and sharing stories of the department's past. Give people an opportunity to honor the times the department has faced challenges and achieved successes. Celebrating the accomplishments of the past is not a threat to you -- it can be a great resource. One of the great advantages of focusing on past accomplishments is that you will find examples of both new competences developed in the past and also models of experimentation and adjustments.

This is not a process of embracing the past as a way of not changing. The goal is to see how the department has previously identified new challenges and has acted to address them. Summon those skills to analyze the challenges that were identified during the search that brought you. Encourage staff members to identify what they see as opportunities to serve better or more broadly. Embrace the accomplishments of the past and use them to determine what to do next.

It is important to note the distinction here between “new” and “next.” New feels like a break with the past. Next is explicitly building on the past to achieve what is needed now and in the future. That is the feeling you want to generate about change.